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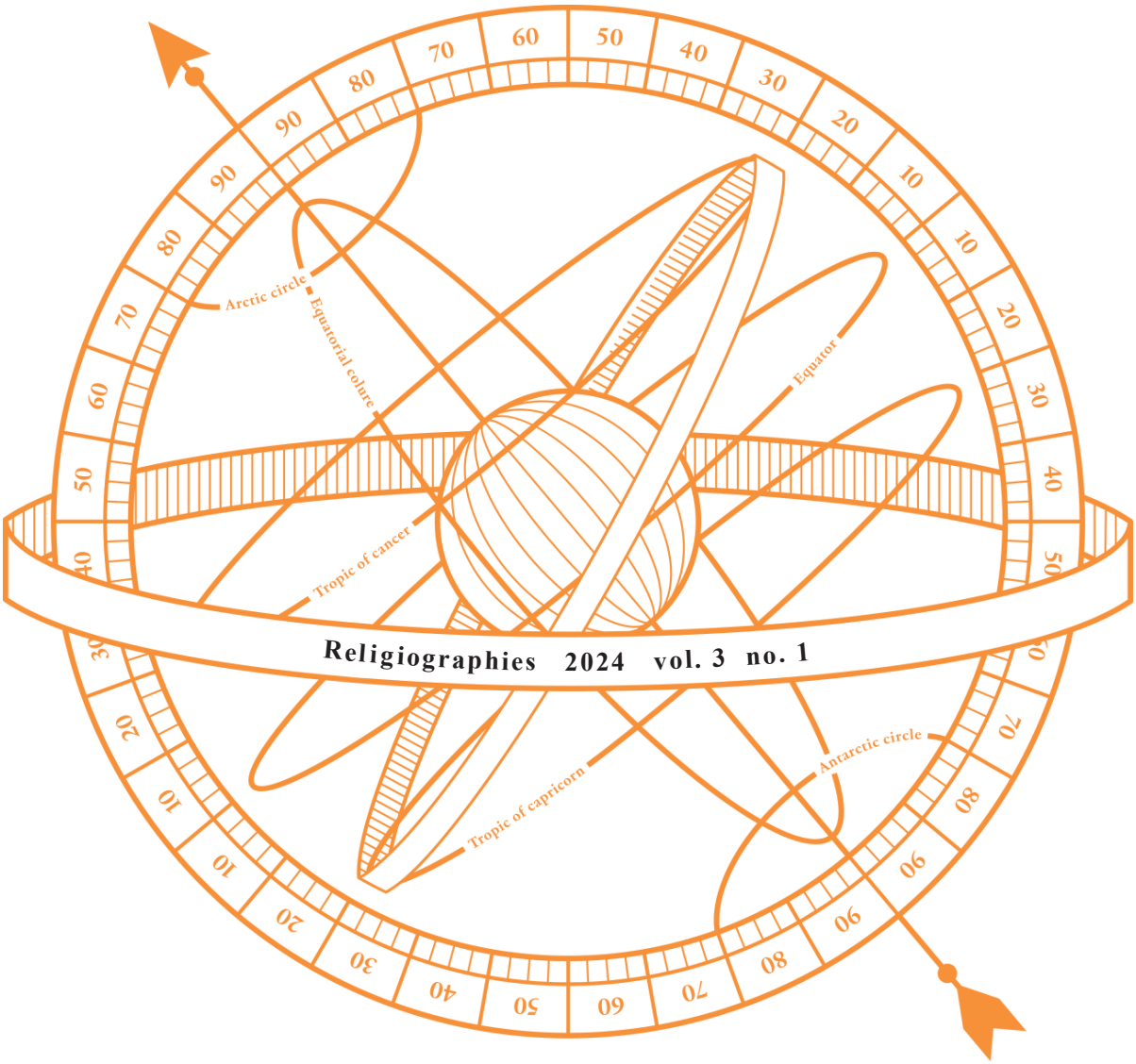

Special Issue
"Zoroastrian Esotericism"
edited by
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Editorial board

Table of Contents

Editorial:

New Perspectives on the Study of Esotericism and Zoroastrianism

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This special issue contributes to expanding the study of esotericism and spirituality beyond the borders of the Western frame by examining the interplay between Zoroastrianism and esotericism. For many years, esotericism has been considered as a Western phenomenon diffused globally in the modern era.[1] In the last decade, this perspective has been challenged by global historical and postcolonial approaches[2] and by the growth of research on esotericism beyond the West: in the Afro-American,[3] South American,[4] South Asian,[5] and Islamic contexts.[6]

This largely artificial separation was due to several factors. One was the lack of a global and postcolonial perspective in the study of esotericism which limited the focus to Europe, downplaying the crucial role of Non-Western actors in the development of their global interlocutors and counterparts as did the Theosophical Society and Aleister Crowley.[7] Another reason was probably the construction of knowledge in area studies, such as Zoroastrian studies, mainly focused on religious institutions with a text-based approach, which might have backgrounded more porous and hybridised phenomena such as spirituality, esotericism, and mysticism.

With this special issue, we do not intend to offer definitive definitions of Zoroastrianism or esotericism, but to explore two intertwined readings. On the one hand, describing the cultural transfers between global esoteric actors and Zoroastrianism, our authors studied the negotiations and appropriations, but also re-imaginations (see the articles of Rose, Eckerström, and Tessmann, and the heterography).[8] On the other hand, Zoroastrianism can be read through the lenses of esoteric studies (see the articles of Errichiello, Panaino, and Maurer). Both these readings imply a significant effort of transability among disciplines (philology, history, socio-anthropology) and among cultures and languages. This is important because it contributes to challenging our readymade narratives about modernity, society, East-West binaries, which limit our understandings of said phenomena.[9] This epistemological and methodological dialogue is precisely at the heart of the Centre of Comparative Studies of Civilizations and Spiritualties and its journal *Religiographies*.

Is There a Zoroastrian Esotericism?

Can Zoroastrian esotericism exist as a field of research? This is the main question that has inspired the edition of this special issue. The works of scholars who have explored esotericism in the context of the Zoroastrian religion, from antiquity to modernity, are scant, and often rely on historiographical models that privilege Western diffusionism and monodirectional cultural transfers, tending to marginalise the agency of Zoroastrians in the making of esotericism.

Through philological analysis, Gherardo Gnoli, the doyen of Iranian studies in Italy, proposed to interpret the Avestan term *maga-* as a state of trance actively pursued by Zoroastrian priests in ritual performance. In this vein, Antonio Panaino has significantly contributed to research on ritual symbolism by studying its inherent cosmological correspondences and priestly initiation.[10] Cogent publications by Panaino further advanced research on the esoteric aspects of the figures

1
Antoine Faivre, *Accès de l'ésotérisme occidental* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986); Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "The Globalization of Esotericism," *Correspondences* 3, no. 1 (2015): 55–91.

2
Egil Asprem, "Beyond the West Towards a New Comparativism in the Study of Esotericism," *Correspondances* 2, no.1 (2014): 3–33; Julian Strube, "Towards the Study of Esotericism without the 'Western': Esotericism from the Perspective of a Global Religious History," in *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprem and Julian Strube (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 45–66.

3
Stephen C. Finley, Margarita S. Guillory, and Hugh R. Page Jr., *The Continuing Quest to Map Secrecy, Concealment, and Revelatory Experiences in Africana Esoteric Discourse* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

4
Juan Pablo Bubello, *Historia del esoterismo en la Argentina: Prácticas, representaciones y persecuciones de curanderos, espiritistas, astrólogos y otros esoteristas* (Buenos Aires: Biblos Editorial, 2010).

5
Gordan Djurdjevic, *India and the Occult: The Influence of South Asian Spirituality on Modern Western Occultism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

6
Mark Sedgwick, *Western Sufism: From the Abbasids to the New Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Liana Saif, "What Is Islamic Esotericism?" *Correspondences* 7, no. 1 (2019): 1–59; Francesco Piraino, *Le soufisme en Europe: Islam, ésotérisme et New Age* (Tunis: IRMC; Paris: Karthala, 2023).

7
Keith Edward Cantú, *Like a Tree Universally Spread: Sri Sabhapati Swami and Śivarājayoga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023); Keith Cantú, " 'Don't Take Any Wooden Nickels': Western Esotericism, Yoga, and the Discourse of Authenticity," in *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, 109–26.

8
For a discussion on cultural transfers in esotericism, see Mark Sedgwick and Francesco Piraino, *Esoteric Transfers and Constructions Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (London: Palgrave, 2021).

9
Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Jason Ananda Josephson Storm, *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021).

10
Gnoli, Gherardo, "Lo stato di 'maga.' " *AION* 15 (1965): 105–17; Antonio Panaino, "Cosmologies

of the Magi and the Zoroastrian high priest of the third century, CE Kerdīr, and his heavenly journey.[11] Antonio Panaino and Simon Deschamps also shed light on the Parsis and their engagement with and support for Freemasonry.[12] Shaul Shaked and Joseph Naveh examined the presence of Zoroastrian elements in Aramaic magic amulets, bowls, and incantations from Late Antiquity.[13] Henry Corbin's interpretation of the relationship between Zoroastrian thought and Islamic esotericism suggested a significant impact of the Persian religion on Islam.[14]

Corbin's contributions have been criticised for the emphatic representation of esotericism in Shiʿism without adequate consideration of the social context. The lack of attention paid to the wider social domain and the tendency to look at esotericism and Zoroastrianism in isolation from broader debates is also a characteristic of the scholarship we discuss here. Aside from some exceptions, philological approaches and concerns significantly inform the works on esotericism and Zoroastrianism cited above. While the related findings have allowed us to consolidate a valuable scholarly tradition centred on textual studies since the eighteenth century, this approach has also reinforced the boundaries of a form of production that often struggles to go beyond the text and the ritual space and engage with broader questions of social meaning and embeddedness.

The contributions that attempted to answer the question of esotericism in Zoroastrianism in a more direct way are those of Shaul Shaked and James R. Russell. Shaked examined the question of whether elements of secrecy were attested in Sasanian religious literature. Such a characteristic element of Zoroastrian scriptures of Late Antiquity has also been explored more recently by Arash Zeini, who suggested that priests strategically used secrecy to regulate the dissemination of religious knowledge.[15] By contrast, Russell examined the presence of themes associated with non-ordinary experiences, acquisition of special knowledge, and emotional fulfilment.[16] However, both Shaked and Russell perform a sort of assessment *vis-à-vis* an idea of esotericism informed by the way Western esotericism was and is still largely conceptualised. Recent contributions by John Hinnells, Philip Kreyenbroek, Jesse Palsetia, Michael Stausberg, and Anna Tessmann[17] have advanced our understanding of esoteric currents in modern and contemporary Zoroastrianism.

In light of the academic landscape briefly summarised here, this special issue emphasises the way individuals understand, experience, celebrate, and make sense of esotericism in the context of Zoroastrianism.

Synopsis

The articles of this special issue span from ancient to contemporary times and engage with a multiplicity of sources through diverse methodological approaches. They contribute to the study of the textual, discursive, and social dimensions of Zoroastrianism, and propose novel and original perspectives to advance research on esotericism.

The first article of this special issue is a thorough survey of key esoteric themes in Zoroastrianism by Antonio Panaino. Through fo-

and Astrology," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism*, ed. Michael Stausberg and Yuhan S.-D. Vevaina with Anna Tessmann (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 235–57; Antonio Panaino, "Iniziazione e dimensione esoterica nella tradizione mazdaica," in *Sulla soglia del sacro: Esoterismo e iniziazione nelle grandi religioni e nella tradizione massonica*, ed. Antonio Panaino (Milano: Mimesis, 2002), 105–22; Antonio Panaino, *Le collège sacerdotal avestique et ses dieux: Aux origines indo-iraniennes d'une tradition mimétique* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2022); Antonio Panaino, "Aspects of the 'Interiorization' of the Sacrifice in the Zoroastrian Tradition," in *Zoroastrian Rituals in Context*, ed. Michael Stausberg (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 233–52; Antonio Panaino, "Magic i. Magical Elements in the Avesta and Nērang Literature," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, vol. 14, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (New York: Center for Iranian Studies, Columbia University, 2008).

11 Antonio Panaino, "The Esoteric Legacy of the Magi of Bethlehem in the Framework of the Iranian Speculations about Jesus, Zoroaster and His Posthumous Sons," in *Apocryphal and Esoteric Sources in the Development of Christianity and Judaism: The Eastern Mediterranean, the Near East and Beyond*, ed. Igor Dorfmann-Lazarev (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 368–82; Antonio Panaino, "The Ritual Drama of the High Priest Kirdēr," in *Afarin Nameh: Essays on the Archaeology of Iran in Honour of Mehdi Rahbar*, ed. Yousef Moradi (Tehran: The Research Institute of Cultural Heritage and Tourism, 2019), 179–88.

12 Antonio Panaino, "Zoroastrians and Freemasonry," in *Freemasonry and Religion: Many Faiths, One Brotherhood*, ed. Trevor Stewart (London: The Canonbury Papers, 2006), 51–67; Simon Deschamps, "Freemasonry and the Indian Parsi Community: A Late Meeting on the Level," *Journal for Research into Freemasonry and Fraternalism* 3, no. 1 (2012): 60–71.

13 Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls: Aramaic Incantations in Late Antiquity* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1985); Shaul Shaked, "Bagdāna, King of the Demons, and Other Iranian Terms in Babylonian Aramaic Magic," in *Papers in Honour of Professor Mary Boyce*, ed. Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1985), 510–25.

14 Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien: Aspects spirituels et philosophiques,* 4 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1971–1973); Daryush Shayegan, "En Islam iranien: aspects spirituels et philosophiques," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, vol. 8, no. 4, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (New York: Center for Iranian Studies, Columbia University, 1998), 422–24; Henry Corbin, *Les motifs zoroastriens dans la philosophie de Sohrawardî* (Tehran: Editions du Courrier, 1946); Henry Corbin, "On the Meaning of Music in Persian Mysticism," *Temenos* 13 (1992): 49–52; Henry Corbin, *Corps spirituel et terre céleste: De l'Iran mazdéen*

cusing on the performative dimension of the Zoroastrian liturgy, he discusses the initiatory character of the knowledge acquired by Zoroastrian priests, who perform rituals to access the sacred and maintain the cosmic order (*aṣa*). Through the analysis of the liminal role assumed by ritual enactments and symbolism, Panaino sheds light on the liturgical correspondences between the material and the spiritual world, introducing the concept of "ritual mimesis" to describe the spiritual synthesis generated by the symbolic ascension of humans to the supramundane realm and the corresponding descent of divinities to this world. Observations on the spiritual vision of Kerdīr, historical remarks about the representation of the Magi in Western esotericism's narratives, and reflections about Parsis and Freemasonry greatly enrich this contribution.

The first part of the article of Moritz Maurer examines Middle Persian narratives centred on the attainment of revelatory knowledge using ritual performance. The findings of the textual analysis and reflections on discourses of mediality lead the author to conceptualise "ritualistic knowledge claims" as a reconciliation between revelation and transmission of knowledge. The second part of the article delves into the references to Zoroastrianism in the development of Traditionalism and its heterogeneous esoteric discourses. Maurer's engagement with the question of Zoroastrian esotericism through the analysis of pre-modern and modern sources suggests the fallibility of strictly formulating esotericism as a bounded category, a limitation to be overcome by looking at the historical complexity and the intertwining of discourses.

The contribution of Jenny Rose explores the image of Zarathustra as constructed by the members of the Transcendental Club in Massachusetts in the second half of the nineteenth century. The author scrutinises the way Ralph Waldo Emerson, Amos Bronson Alcott, and Henry David Thoreau appropriated the figure of the prophet of Zoroastrianism as a model of enlightened thought for their intellectual and spiritual endeavours. By examining the intellectual exchanges and the literary production of the American Transcendentalists, Rose shows how the reception, interpretation, and re-arrangement of the *ābādī* text known as the *Dasātīr* significantly participated in the romanticisation of the figure of Zarathustra. Such a teleological orientation of the American Transcendentalists is analysed by Rose in the light of Emerson's broader understanding of humanity and Christianity.

The contribution of Mariano Errichiello (one of our co-editors) moves to modern India, where esotericism emerged in the context of Parsis' politics of authenticity at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The author interweaves archival research and the voices of contemporary Parsis who actively participate in the activities of Freemasonry, the Theosophical Society, and the Parsi esoteric group known as *Ilme kṣnum*. The scrutiny of how these organisations developed in India, Parsis' role in their formation and management, and the entanglements between the Western and Persianate worlds situates the Parsis' construction of "modern" Zoroastrianism in global religious history. By adopting an interdisciplinary approach and singling out the meaning conferred by some research participants to the term "esotericism," Errichiello advances a formulation of Parsi esotericism as an

à l'Iran shî'ite (Paris: Éditions Buchet-Chastel, 1979).

15
Arash Zeini, "The King in the Mirror of the Zand: Secrecy in Sasanian Iran," in *Sasanian Iran in the Context of Late Antiquity: The Bahari Lecture Series at the University of Oxford*, ed. Touraj Daryaee (Irvine: UCI Jordan Center for Persian Studies, 2018), 149–62.

16
James Russell, "On Mysticism and Esotericism among the Zoroastrians," *Iranian Studies* 26, no. 1–2 (1993): 73–94; Shaul Shaked, "Esoteric Trends in Zoroastrianism," *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 3 (1969): 175–222.

17
John R. Hinnells, "The Parsis," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism,* ed. Michael Stausberg and Yuhan S.-D. Vevaina with Anna Tessmann (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 168–69; Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Shehnaz N. Munshi, *Living Zoroastrianism: Urban Parsis Speak about their Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001), 231–75; Jesse S. Palsetia, *The Parsis of India: Preservation of Identity in Bombay City* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 264; Michael Stausberg, *Die Religion Zarathushtras: Geschichte, Gegenwart, Rituale*, vol. 2 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002), 123; Michael Stausberg and Anna Tessmann, "The Appropriation of a Religion: The Case of Zoroastrianism in Contemporary Russia," *Culture and Religion* 14, no. 4 (2013): 445–62; Anna Tessmann, *On the Good Faith: A Fourfold Discursive Construction of Zoroastrianism in Contemporary Russia* (Huddinge: Södertörns högskola, 2012); Michael Stausberg, "Para-Zoroastrianisms: Memetic Transmissions and Appropriations," in *Parsis in India and the Diaspora*, ed. John R. Hinnells and Alan Williams (London: Routledge, 2007), 236–54.

expression of the hermeneutical polyphony that emerged in colonial times and reflects on its ontological implications.

Anna Tessmann combines anthropological methods and discourse analysis to examine Zoroastrian communities in the post-Soviet space. In particular, the author focuses on the community of St Petersburg. Tessmann proposes an overview of key themes and concepts in the study of esotericism and scrutinises the scholarly trajectory that characterises the study of Zoroastrianism. By holding esotericism as a discursive analytical unit, the author contextualises the emergence of post-Soviet Zoroastrian communities and places them in their sociocultural milieu. Tessmann brings her research findings into dialogue with broader trends of alternative modernities, such as the New Age movement and the practice of astrology. The article concludes with a critical analysis of the possibility of establishing Zoroastrian esotericism as a field of research in its own right.

The article of Pasqualina Eckerström delves into music, esotericism, and politics. It looks at Zoroastrian esoteric elements as a source of inspiration for the composition of Black metal music by two Iranian refugees in Europe. This contribution examines how the combination of music and esotericism, together with a fascination for Zoroastrianism as a pre-Islamic religion, become an assertion of opposition to the social norms imposed by the Islamic Republic in Iran. Eckerström's methodology, based on narrative interviews, brings to light the emic perspective of two artists who hold Black metal as a sacred form of expression. By engaging with scholarship on esotericism, religion, and popular culture, the author shows how music revives spiritual heritage and grants individual agency in defiance of coercive societal normativism.

In the heterography section, dedicated to artists, we publish the visual experiment "Zoroaster Superstar" by the creative duo ARTOLDO (Sara Ferro & Chris Weil). This work is a virtual reality show, based on a jaunty representation of Zarathustra and his pop-cultural reincarnations, such as David Bowie, Freddy Mercury, and Casanova. This work is based on a stream of consciousness, braiding both historical and fictional Zoroastrian references in popular culture.

Reflections on Future Avenues of Inquiry

The editors realised that, through the contributions of these articles, the authors looked at Zoroastrian communities and esoteric elements of Zoroastrianism from different points of view, raising the question of what being a Zoroastrian means and what adhering to Zoroastrianism implies. Do the esoteric themes of the Zoroastrian liturgy examined by Panaino make sense for those diasporic communities that do not practise in fire temples? Does the astrology practised by post-Soviet Zoroastrians relate to the divinatory use Parsis made of the Zoroastrian text known as the Jāmāspi?[18] To what extent does the romantic representation of Zoroastrianism advanced by the American Transcendentalists echo the revivalism of pre-Islamic Iran by Black metal musicians?

Although the articles published here show that the way individuals self-identify as Zoroastrians, understand Zoroastrianism, or practise or

18 For further details on the Jāmāspi and its divinatory use, see Domenico Agostini, "Rediscovering the Jāmāspi: A Walk in Four Steps," *Iranian Studies* 45, no. 2 (2012): 169–80; Jivanji Jamshedji Modi, "Translation of a Passage in the Jāmāspi or Jāmāsp-Nāmeh Relating to Plague and Famine," in *The K. R. Cama Memorial Volume: Essays on Iranian Subjects Written by Various Scholars in Honour of Mr. Kharshedji Rustamji Cama*, ed. Jivanji Jamshedji Modi (Bombay: Fort Printing Press, 1900), 231–34.

celebrate their religion or heritage is context-bound, the forms of esotericism with which the authors engage retain some common traits, turning it into a floating[19] concept. The use of the term "floating" is inspired by the work of the political theorist and philosopher Ernesto Laclau (1935–2014) who adopted it to qualify a signifier (i.e., a floating signifier) whose semiotic arrangement enables subjects to construct meaning by using a given concept in different contexts and, in this way, preserving its semantic function. Though inspired by it, our conceptualisation differs from Julian Strube's classification of esotericism as an "empty signifier" inasmuch as we identified the presence of shared elements in the different articulations of Zoroastrian esotericism.[20] A floating signifier differs from an empty signifier since the conceptual boundaries and functions of the latter can vary according to the context, and its semantic value tends to dilute or be diluted. Such a heterogeneous landscape cautions us against conceptualising "Zoroastrian esotericism" as a fixed and bounded category that is universally applicable. However, the findings of this special issue do not impede the identification of those common characteristics that inform such a floatability of esotericism.

From an epistemological point of view, the articles of Panaino and Maurer bring to the fore the relational role that esotericism plays between the subject and the object of knowledge. The concepts of "ritual mimesis" and "revelatory knowledge claims" are informed by a characteristic liturgical and social intermediation. Instead, Rose and Eckerström look at esotericism as an enabler of representations of Zoroastrianism, at times romanticised, at times revivalist. In this vein, Errichiello holds Parsi esotericism as a hermeneutical enterprise where the same object of knowledge can be interpreted in a variety of forms by different subjects. Tessmann then reflects on esotericism as an element that mediates the formation of new identities in the post-Soviet era. It is thus evident that "mediality" intended as the condition of mediating between different meanings, disparate representations, and distinctive identities emerges as an epistemological constituent of all forms of esotericism discussed in this special issue.

Common to all the contributions of this special issue is the performativity of esotericism as a social practice. Esotericism sets the pace for identity transitions among post-Soviet Zoroastrians and informs beliefs, practices, and urbanisation of modern Parsis. It enables Middle Persian theologians, American Transcendentalists, and Traditionalists to gain spiritual legitimacy in their communities. Esotericism also allows Iranian refugees to articulate their political antinomy and Zoroastrian priests to (re-)establish societal order in line with their modernist understandings of pre-modern Zoroastrian cosmologies.

The findings of this publication encourage the editors to conceptualise esotericism as a floating heuristic characterised by epistemological mediality and social performativity. We find it useful to qualify a category such as "Zoroastrian" only when this category is contextualised. In fact, Zoroastrianism, like all religions, is subject to a plurality of interpretations and a high semantic variability according to period and geography. Further research on the variety of expressions of esotericism that can be qualified as "Zoroastrian" is called for in that it triggers reflections on the more fundamental question: What is Zoroastrianism?

19
For further details, see Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005).

20
See Julian Strube, "Towards the Study of Esotericism without the 'Western': Esotericism from the Perspective of a Global Religious History," in *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, 45–66.

The Mazdean Esoteric Dimension between Ritual and Theology

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Zoroastrian liturgy, Mazdean theology, Initiation, Esotericism, Cosmology, Time, Afterlife, Yasna.

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Abstract

Zoroastrianism, as one of the oldest living religions in the world, presents a number of strictly archaic and initiatory characters, which emphasized the foundational role of the priestly college, specialized in the performative exercise of sacred oral poetry and its ritual use, and contemporarily charged with the mental and technical means to interplay with the gods in the daily and solemn sacrifices. The liturgy was the actual means through which it was possible not only to enter in direct connection with the gods invited to take part in the ritual, but also to promote the human sacerdotal college up to a higher dimension out of the mixed dimension of historical time. The power of the ritual thus elevated the priestly staff into an anticipation of the liberated time of the afterlife. The way through which the priests interplayed with the gods and on some occasions eventually represented and embodied them during the solemn liturgies, to which only strictly qualified members were admitted was, per se, hyper-esoteric. A number of Mazdean speculative categories created the theological framework for the philosophy of the liturgy. This was conceived as an uninterrupted chain of sacrificial events underpinning the order and the structure of the world and the teleology of time, thus protecting the life and the pillars of the positive creation against the anti-cosmic disorder of Ahreman, the evil spirit. The Zoroastrian tradition in its millennial history inevitably went through various phases in which some of its theological doctrines changed or engaged in adaptations, and apart from the decay suffered after the collapse of the Sasanian Empire (224–651 CE), it assumed new lines of development, which marked the history of a (now) minoritarian, sometimes even persecuted, community living within the framework of mainly Islamic- and Hindu-dominated societies. This socio-religious situation eventually produced some profound changes, but it did not destroy various basic elements of continuity underpinning its ancestral background. In modern times, mostly the Parsis and the Indian Zoroastrian community experienced new intellectual and spiritual trends in dialogue with modern western Esoteric movements in both the colonial and post-colonial eras.

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Introduction

Any theoretical attempt at description concerning the "esoteric" dimension proper of Zoroastrianism must include at least two strictly interconnected aspects, firstly the pragmatic and performative one and, secondly, its connections with the mythological and spiritual dimension. However, it would be sterile here to focus on the problem of the priority between myth and rite, or refresh the discussion about the meaninglessness of the rituals,[1] all issues that are very important, but which would divert the main scope of this contribution into abstractions, while it is possible to address all these matters directly by discussing the actual manifestation of the Mazdean image of the access to the sacred dimension and to a higher level of reality. As a necessary premise, I will consider "esoteric" as what concerns a "restricted" knowledge of spiritual matters, whose access needs a previous initiation, potentially including various steps or levels.[2] In this respect, all the mandatory training imposed upon the Indo-Iranian active members of the priestly class is *per se* restricted, and includes initiatory rituals, as an indispensable turning point. Non-initiated and lay persons were typically not given deeper access into the innermost doctrines of the faith.[3] Furthermore, the priest must preserve his fitness for the rituals, and despite his relevant qualifications, he is obliged to follow some compulsory rules or he could lose his ritual power, becoming unfitting or inadequate for the liturgies. All these aspects, plus some other specifically sacerdotal activities connected with the sacrificial practice, mark the esoteric dimensions of the Zoroastrian religion, which preserves a number of very sophisticated pragmatic and theoretical characteristics that distinguish its tradition, and which I will try to discuss here.

The Priests

As already remarked, the priestly role was and is not accessible to every Zoroastrian and was not conceived of as just a vocational social function; on the contrary, this privilege belonged to a restricted social group, whose descendants, only if born from priestly parents, are worthy of the sacerdotal training and priestly initiation. This final step presupposes the normal initiation into the religions[4] (*nawjot*), which is offered to all the full members of the community, but which has, hitherto, typically not been open to converts.[5] In this respect, the Zoroastrian priests were (and are) a most selected social group within a (nominally) strictly endogamic community, where ethnic admixture was not impossible, but relatively rare, and in any case not particularly supported, at least at the highest social levels, if for political reasons alone. Even some aspects of the Zoroastrian doctrine concerning the justification of the *xwēdōdah*, or "the marriage within the family," with all its subtle implications, contains a number of deep esoteric motivations, such as the desire for interrupting the time of the mixed condition of humanity (*gumēzišn*) by means of the reproduction of a divine hierogamy, the explicit acquisition of a higher knowledge, and the sole possession of an intrinsic anti-demonic force.[6] In other words, this peculiar matrimonial custom cannot be studied as proof an intrinsic social deviance or as widespread manifestation of mental disease

*[Adopted Abbreviations: O.Ir. = Old Iranian; Av. = Avestan; M.P. = Middle Persian; Pahl = Pahlavi; *Y*. = *Yasna*; *Yt*. = *Yašt*.]

1 Frits Staal, "The Meaninglessness of Ritual," *Numen* 26, no. 1 (1979): 2–22.

2 The variety of meanings associated with "esotericism" and currently employed in academic discourse emerged in nineteenth century Europe. Among them, Kocku von Stuckrad defines esotericism as a discourse claiming higher knowledge in a rhetoric of secrecy, also intended as specialized knowledge (K. von Stuckrad, "Western Esotericism: Towards an Integrative Model of Interpretation," *Religion* 35, no. 2 [2005]: 78–97).

3 Shaul Shaked, "Esoteric Trends in Zoroastrianism," *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 3 (1969): 175–222.

4 Antonio Panaino, "Iniziazione e dimensione esoterica nella tradizione mazdaica," in *Sulla soglia del sacro: Esoterismo e iniziazione nelle grandi religioni e nella tradizione massonica*; *Florence, dal 1° al 3 marzo 2002*, *Atti del convegno di studi*, ed. Antonio Panaino (Milano: Mimesis, 2002), 105–22.

5 Although the number of priests willing to perform the *nawjot* ceremony for children not descending from Zoroastrian parents has recently increased, this theological position still represents a minority, particularly in India amongst Parsis.

6 Maria Macuch, "Inzest im vorislamischer Iran," *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran* 24 (1991): 141–54; Antonio Panaino, "The Liturgical Daēnā: Speculative Aspects of the Next-of-Kin Unions," in *A Thousand Judgements: Festschrift for Maria Macuch*, ed. Almut Hintze, Desmond Durkin-Meisterernst, and Claudius Naumann (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2019), 331–44.

(an unacceptable solution, which has been usually adopted by Muslim authorities in order to criminalize the Zoroastrian social background). Instead, it should be framed within a complex speculative elaboration of the human soul appearing under its dual, complementary aspects, one male and one female. Practically, these two metaphysical components will be recomposed in the afterlife through a highly symbolic theatrical meeting. It is important to observe that these are male and female parts of the soul, and that this duality does not concern the sexual gender of the dead persons, so that in the afterlife the meeting is the same for men and women.[7] The existence of clearly esoteric rituals anticipating the vision of the afterlife, such as the one concerning the High Priest Kerdīr[8] (see below), shows that the symbolic game, which occurs in the meeting between the *uruuan-* (Pahlavi *ruwān*) and the *daēnā-*[9] (Pahlavi *dēn*), i.e., the male and female souls, corresponds to a doctrine of the human transfiguration within a process of "spiritual" (in the sense of an event concerning the soul) re-composition. The mirroring process occurring in the union between these two innermost components of the soul is a sort of perfect reconstitution of the individual ipseity overcoming an alienation (in the sense of "separation") of the masculine and feminine aspects of the human being. Thus, the union of these two spiritual elements has been fittingly interpreted by Kellens[10] as a hierogamy, in which the process of reconstitution of the individual being is the precondition for the final access to an eschatological liberation. The present doctrine is intrinsically linked with the idea that even Ahura Mazdā possesses his own *daēnā-*, which was offered to Yima as his own double or twin, and that Yima refuses to join in order to postpone his transfiguration before the fulfilment of the earth's triplication and the construction of the *vara-*,[11] the mythical stronghold of primitive humanity. In other words, my interpretation of Yima's behavior assumes that Yima was not rejecting the Mazdean religion (*daēnā-*), a wrong explanation because Ahura Mazdā gives him the magic power of enlarging the earth instead of killing him immediately, but created a sort of initiatory challenge, in which the provisory refusal of the *daēnā-* was the precondition for assuming the challenging duty to be performed by him. In addition, the "eye" of the *dēn* was attributed some solar qualities, which emphasizes the power of her gaze in the meeting with her masculine counterpart.[12]

The Zoroastrian specialization of the priestly class through a long process of education, memorization of the texts and of the rituals, but also by means of a severe discipline in the preservation of ritual purity, possessed and tested to preserve through the centuries a mass of initiatory knowledge, considered indispensable for contributing to the maintenance of the Cosmic Order (*aša*), and the defense of the orderly cycle of life against the disruptive actions of Aŋra Mainiiu (Pahl. Ahreman) and the demons. The texts of *Yt.* 4.9 and *Yt.* 14.46,[13] within the framework of a patently magical performance against the demons, contain a clear reference to the restricted transmission of these secret competences within the inner circle of the family, from father to son or from brother to brother, or from teaching priest to his pupil. The same *Yasna* should have been kept secret, as stated in the 2nd chapter of the *Zand ī Wahman Yasn*.[14] The need to control and reserve the access to a too specialized religious knowledge emerged in the sixth century CE,

7
Antonio Panaino, "The Souls of Women in the Zoroastrian Afterlife," in *Studi iranici ravennati,* vol. 2, ed. Antonio Panaino, Andrea Piras, and Paolo Ognibene, Indo-Iranica et Orientalia: Series Lazur 14 (Milano: Mimesis, 2017), 293–306.

8
Antonio Panaino, "Apocalittica, escatologia e sciamanismo nell'opera iranologica di Ph. Gignoux con una nota sulla 'visione' del mago Kirdēr," in *Rabbo l 'olmyn: Florilège offert à Philippe Gignoux pour son 80e anniversaire (Maître pour l'éternité)*, ed. Rika Gyselen and Christelle Jullien, Studia Iranica: Cahier 43 (Paris: Association pour l'avancement des études iraniennes, 2011), 205–43; Antonio Panaino, "The Ritual Drama of the High Priest Kirdēr," in *Afarin Nameh: Essays on the Archaeology of Iran in Honour of Mehdi Rahbar*, ed. Yousef Moradi (Tehran: The Research Institute of Cultural Heritage and Tourism, 2019), 179–88.

9
Jean Kellens, "L'âme entre le cadavre et le paradis," *Journal asiatique* 283 (1995): 19–56.

10
Jean Kellens, 19–56.

11
Antonio Panaino, "Mortality and Immortality: Yama's / Yima's Choice and the Primordial Incest," in *Disputationes Iranologicae Vindobonenses*, vol. 2, ed. Velizar Sadovski and Antonio Panaino, Mythologica Indo-Iranica 1, Sitzungsberichte der ÖAW: Philosophisch-historische Klasse 845, Veröffentlichungen zur Iranistik 65 (Wien: Osterreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2013), 47-221; Antonio Panaino, "Yima ed il 'rifiuto' della *daēnā-*: Ovvero dell'incestualità, della beatitudine e della morte tra ambigui ostacoli e seducenti trasparenze," in *Démons iraniens: Actes du colloque international organisé à l'Université de Liège les 5 et 6 février 2009 à l'occasion des 65 ans de Jean Kellens*, ed. Philippe Swennen (Liège: Presses universitaires de Liège, 2015), 98–123.

12
Antonio Panaino, "The Solar 'Eye' of the Dēn," in *Kratér: Corpi di luce; Trasfigurazioni e altri fotismi nelle tradizioni mistiche dell'Eurasia*, ed. Alessandro Grossato (Verucchio: Pazzini, 2022), 49–65; Samra Azarnouche and Olivia Ramble, "La vision zoroastrienne, les yeux dans les yeux: Commentaire sur la dēn selon Dēnkard III.225," *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 237, no. 3 (2020): 331–95.

13
Antonio Panaino, "Some remarks upon the initiatic transmission in Later Avesta," in *Ātaš-e Dorun: The Fire Within; Jamshid Soroush Sourushian Memorial Volume,* vol. 2, *Assembled Papers on History and Culture of Ancient Iran in Commemoration of the Life of Jamshid Soroush Sourushian 1914–1999,* ed. Carlo Giovanni Cereti and Farrokh Vajifdar (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2003), 333–42.

under the kingdom of Xusraw I, in particular after the socially subversive Mazdakite revolt, and this political decision produced a strong restriction of the direct knowledge of the texts and rituals by non-priests and non-highly initiated persons.

Thus, the rituals and their interconnected enactment, eventually recurring in terms of an expansion of the ceremonial complexity allowing for the creation of longer and more solemn liturgies, represented a weapon against evil, whose basic core was attributed to the combination of the *mąθra-* (= Vedic *mantra-*) of the priests (each one acting as a living embodiment of the prayers), and the performance of a series of ceremonies around the fire (*ātar-*), as the most important means of intermediation between humans and divinities. Of course, not only were the priests considered capable of speaking with the gods, because the *pater familias* was attributed some domestic ceremonies, and even female priests were potentially allowed to support the rituals, but the main power of the (male) priests was placed in their high qualification to enact and perform the main ceremonies indispensable for the community and the individuals. They had the whole package of secret knowledge allowing the access to another, higher level of reality, the one accessed through the ritual, in which, at a certain moment, it was possible not only to stay in the presence of the divinities, but also to behave as them. Connected with the power of the *mąθra-* is the importance conferred upon the oral dimension, which distinguished the liturgy, whose performance was historically conducted without the support of books[15] thanks to a special mastery of the oral competence in the recitation of long texts, a kind of competence, which has progressively decayed. Presently, the priests, during the performance of longer or special liturgies, read the sacred texts from books, sometimes even in Gujarati characters.

Other kinds of rituals can be mentioned, such as the one performed by Ardā Wirāz[16] in order to journey into the afterlife, implying a state of trance and certain shamanic abilities. We cannot exclude the presence of ritual esoteric traditions performed by Zoroastrian members of other social functions, in particular by the warriors. One case concerns the special self-sacrifice of Ǝrəxša, whose traces can be detected in later sources,[17] and whose death is directly connected with the salvific shot of the arrow that rescued Aryan independence from the Turanians.[18] Another example concerning the performance of magical actions concerning the use of throwing weapons is attested within the cycle of Spandiad.[19]

The Magi

The clergy of the Magi (O.P. *magu-*) was responsible for the ritual within the Western Achaemenid space,[20] although their presence in the Avestan liturgical texts is debated, and if attested, was perhaps negative. In any case this community gained a strong role, and in the Sasanian period the main denomination of the priests was that of *moγ/mow*, *mobad*.[21] This fact confirms a certain continuous interaction between the Zoroastrian clergy and other religious communities. The suggestion[22] that the Mazdean Achaemenid clergy was involved in a mixed liturgy, with Iranian and Elamite cults, is based on administrati-

14
Carlo Giovanni Cereti, *The Zand ī Wahman Yasn: A Zoroastrian Apoocalypse*, Serie Orientale Roma 75 (Rome: Istituto italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1995), 133–34, 150; Kianoosh Rezania, "Mazdakism and the Canonisation of Pahlavi Translations of the Avestan Texts," in *The Transmission of the Avesta*, ed. Alberto Cantera, Iranica 20 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2012), 479–94; Maria Macuch, "Mazdakite Heresy and Esotericism within the Framework of the Late Zoroastrian Tradition," in *Dādestān ī Dēnīg: Festschrift for Mahmoud Jaafaru-Dehaghi*, ed. Amin Shayeste Doust (Tehran: Farhang-i Muʿāṣir, 2022), 215–63.

15
Antonio Panaino "Books without Ritual-Ritual without Books: The Mazdean Approach to the Divine Liturgy between Literacy and Orality; A Reversed History of Avestan and Sasanian Scholarship," in *Sasanian Iran in the context of Late Antiquity*: *The Bahari Lecture Series at the University of Oxford*, ed. Touraj Daryaee, Ancient Iran Series 6 (Irvine: UCI Jordan Center for Persian studies, 2018), 79–106.

16
Philippe Gignoux, *Le livre d'Ardā Vīrāz: Translittération, transcription et traduction du texte pehlevi,* Bibliothèque iranienne 30, Recherche sur les civilisations: Cahiers 14 (Paris: Editions recherche sur les civilisations, 1984).

17
Antonio Panaino, "Ǝrəxša's self-sacrifice: Tradition or Innovation?," *Historia i Świat* 10, no. 1 (2021): 15–42.

18
Antonio Panaino, *Philobiblos: Scritti in onore di Giovanni Geraci*, ed. Alice Bencivenni et al., Antiquitas: Saggi 4 (Milano: Jouvence, 2019), 19–66.

19
Andrea Piras, "Spandyad's lance and Message: Some Remarks about the Imagery of Shooting Weapons," in *Studi iranici ravennati 2*, ed. Antonio Panaino and Andrea Piras, Indo-Iranica et Orientalia: Series Lazura (Milano: Mimesis, 2018), 231–42. For the interaction with other magical traditions see Antonio Panaino, "Magic i. Magical Elements in the Avesta and Nērang Literature," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater, accessed April 14, 2024, https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/magic-i-magical-elements-in-the-avesta-and-nerang-literature.

20
Antonio Panaino, "Erodoto, i Magi e la storia religiosa iranica," in *Herodot und das Persische Weltreich (Herodotus and the Persian Empire)*, ed. Robert Rollinger, Birgitte Truschnegg, and Reinhold Bichker, Classica et Orientalia 3 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011), 343–70; Bruce Lincoln, "From Ritual Practice to Esoteric Knowledge: The Problem of the Magi," in *Religion, Culture, and Politics in Pre-Islamic Iran:*

ve data coming from Persepolis, which do not preserve any ceremonial documentation, and whose relevance is, per se, irrelevant for such a bold solution which assumes a new synthetic cult of which no witness survives in the later period.[23] The Magi played an enormous role in intercultural relations with Western cultures, and their role is frequently mentioned in Classical literature,[24] where Zoroaster became a member of their clergy. Thanks to this reception, which emphasized both positive and negative characters of the Magi,[25] a group of them (most frequently three, but also twelve in some Oriental sources) appear in the Christian nativity at Bethlehem, where, according to some Greek and Arabic sources, they were sent by Cyrus the Great to worship Jesus (see below). Western speculations about the Magi and their art of magic, contributed to maintaining a long focus on them and Zoroaster till the Renaissance and beyond, creating some further references in Western esotericism (see below). Ritual and esoteric traditions were kept by the western Zoroastrian clergy, and they are still visible in some documents concerning the Sasanian High Priest Kerdīr (see below).

The Esoteric Dimension of the Liturgy

In this section there is no need to describe in its particular aspects the fine articulations of the Mazdean ceremonies, but it would be important to emphasize their intrinsic esoteric character.[26] First of all, the access to the ritual was (and is) restricted, only to the initiated priests who can stay within the (small) ritual space in the presence of the burning consecrated fire. Although, in early times, and within the context of official ceremonies of political relevance in Sasanian times, we cannot exclude public performances with a great number not only of priests but also of authorities and other (initiated) people. In early times, rituals on the peaks of mountains were common.[27] The *Yasna*, which was the basic (and relatively most simple) ceremony, is anticipated by some introductory rituals, such as the *paragra* or *paragṇā*. This ritual concerns the preparation of the *parahaōma* (i.e., a liquid obtained by pressing small branches of *haōma-* crushed with pomegranate leaves, infused, and then strained through the fur of a sacrificial ox, sometimes also mixed with water (*zaōθra-*; Pahl. *abzohr*) but without milk) and then that of the proper *haōma-*, whose functions derive from a pre-Zoroastrian, i.e., an Indo-Iranian ancestral tradition (cf. Vedic *soma-*). These preparations also include the collection of other implements and tools for the main ceremony. We may recall that there is not only a second preparation of the *haōma*-juice, which takes place from *Y.* 22 and continues until 27.12, but there is also a third pressing which starts at *Y.* 33.4.

The *Yasna* includes a series of formulations, which correspond to the Vedic *nividas-*, i.e., the invocations (cf. Av. *niuuaēdaiieimi*) to the divinities to take part in the ritual banquet,[28] and which survive also in the Sogdian tradition (*nw'yδ*, "to invite"). The ceremony thus included an archaic invitation to come "down" (*ni*°) in order to "see" (*vid-*), although extended only to some gods, whilst excluding the demons and other dangerous and malevolent powers. The center of the ritual lies in the recitation of the Gāθic sections and in particular of the *Yasna Haptaŋhāiti*, during whose performance, it was possible, at least according

Collected Essays, Ancient Iran Series 14 (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 321–42.

21
Antonio Panaino, "Parthian *moγ* and Middle Persian *moγ/mow* in Light of Earlier Eastern and Western Iranian Sources," *Iran and the Caucasus* 25, no. 3 (2021): 252–71.

22
Wouter Henkelman, *The Other Gods who are: Studies in Elamite-Iranian Acculturation Based on the Persepolis Fortification Texts* (Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 2008).

23
Antonio Panaino, "I Magi secondo G. Messina e H. Lommel nella riflessione critica di R. Pettazzoni: Nota in margine ad un'antica discussione," in *Il mistero che rivelato ci divide e sofferto ci unisce: Studi pettazzoniani in onore di Mario Gandini*, ed. Gian Pietro Basello, Paolo Ognibene, and Antonio Panaino, Indo-Iranica et Orientalia: Series Lazur 6, Supplemento speciale a *Strada maestra* (Milano: Mimesis, 2012), 365–86.

24
Joseph Bidez and Franz Cumont, *Les mages hellénisés: Zoroastre, Ostanès et Hystaspe d'après la tradition grecque,* 2 vols. (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1938).

25
Antonio Panaino, "Aspetti della complessità degli influssi interculturali tra Grecia e Iran," in *Grecia Maggiore: Intrecci culturali con l'Asia nel periodo arcaico; Atti del simposio in occasione del 75 anniversario di Walter Burkert,* ed. Christoph Riedweg (*Graecia Maior: Kulturaustausch mit Asien in der archaischen Periode; Akten des Symposions aus Anlass des 75. Geburtstages*, ed. Walter Burkert), Bibliotheca Helvetica Romana 30 (Basel: Schwabe, 2009), 19–53.

26
It would be useful to clarify that this is a reconstruction based on the study of texts and on the knowledge of the rituals still preserved today in the living Zoroastrian tradition, but we must remark that, nowadays, some of the liturgies are not performed in the earlier extended forms, or in the same way as they were even a few decades prior.

27
Antonio Panaino, "Sacertà delle montagne e metafisica della luce nella cosmografia iranica mazdaica," in *La Montagna cosmica*, ed. Alessandro Grossato (Milano: Medusa, 2010), 43–67.

28
Antonio Panaino, *Rite, parole et pensée dans l'Avesta ancien et récent: Quatre leçons au Collège de France (Paris, 7, 14, 21, 18 mai 2001),* édité par Velizar Sadovski avec la collaboration rédactionnelle de Sara Circassia, Sitzungsberichte der philosophisch-historischen Klasse 716 (Wien: Osterreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften,

to the direction preserved in the *Nērangestān* (47.19), to put to sleep the sacrificial animal. This action was the special duty of a single priest, named *pasuuāzah*-, "the (priest) who must accompany the animal (to the sacrifice)," who was installed with the formula *pasuuāzaŋhəm āstaiia*: "I ritually install the *pasuuāzah*-priest." Certainly, the idea of offering something of the living, such as the breath of the animal to the invited divinities, was one relevant aspect of this divine meeting, although it was possible to substitute the atonement of the animal by means of symbolic offerings of meat or vegetables to the fire, which maintains its central role, as a powerful divinity, considered the son of Ahura Mazdā himself. The sacrificial violence, in any case, was controlled and moderated. The Zoroastrians of Iran, as those of India, are no vegetarians, so that the killing of animals must be consecrated, according to the tradition. We may underline the fact that there is no evidence that the Zoroastrians refused or abolished the sacrifice of animals,[29] but simply moderated its violence and ritual practice. The animal consecration, for instance, was and is necessary also for other kinds of food by means of the *čāsnī* ritual, concerning the partaking of the liturgical bread, named in Pahlavi *drōn* or later *darun*.[30] Furthermore, we must register a contrite attitude toward the treatment of animals, not only in the way of atonement and putting them to sleep (which was very carefully done in order to avoid excessive pain), but through the act of giving them a kiss of sorrow on their left cheek, just as the ancient Indians tried to "humanize" the act of killing.[31] The relevance of the bread and its particular arrangement and preparation seems to find a certain echo in the sixth column of the Papyrus of Derveni, a very intriguing Greek text probably belonging to the fifth century BC, where the Μάγοι were apparently involved.[32] In this text, the preparation of ceremonial cakes full of bumps is prescribed, and some scholars, such as Russell[33] and Tsantsanoglou,[34] have compared these cakes with the Mazdean ritual bread known as *drōn*.

2004), 45–47.

29
Alberto de Jong, "Animal Sacrifice in Ancient Zoroastrianism: A Ritual and its Interpretations," in *Sacrifice in Religious Experience*, ed. Albert I. Baumgartner (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 127–48.

30
J. J. Modi, *The Religious Ceremonies and the Customs of the Parsees* (Bombay: British India Press, 1922), 298–99.

31
Antonio Panaino, "*aētasə.tē ātarə zaōθrå̊*: On the Mazdean Animal and Symbolic Sacrifices; Their Problems, Timing and Restrictions," in *Aux sources des liturgies indo-iraniennes*, ed. Céline Redard et al. (Liège: Presses universitaires de Liège, 2020), 119–63.

32
Walter Burkert, *Babylon, Memphis, Persepolis: Eastern Contexts of Greek Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 170n78; Antonio Panaino, "Aspetti della complessità degli influssi interculturali tra Grecia e Iran," 19–53, 37–38.

33
James Russell, "The Magi in the Derveni Papyrus," *Nāme-ye Irān-e Bāstān* 1, no. 1 (2001): 49–59, 54–55.

34
Kyriakos Tsantsanoglou, "The first Columns of the Derveni papyrus and their Religious Significance," in *Studies on the Derveni Papyrus*, ed. André Laks and Glenn Most (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 93–128, 114–115.

The Fire and the Divine World

The sacrificial fire is a transcendental force, whose power is activated and multiplied during the ritual within a process of liturgical empowerment, particularly relevant in the context of the *Yasna Haptāŋhaiti*, where the divine and the earthly fire join together, while this form of assimilation decreases before the conclusion of the *yasna*. Certainly, the ritual maintains its central meaning as the axis of the world around which the liturgy rotates. Noteworthy is the fact that the fire is named in *Y.* 36.2 *nąmišta*-, "most honorable," an epithet whose deep meaning can be explained again within the framework of an earlier Indo-Iranian ritual doctrine, where the fire, called in the Vedic tradition *agni-yájiṣṭha*-, "the best sacrificial fire," assumed the role of high priest, the *hótr̥-puróhita*-. This observation, originally expressed by Theodor Baunack[35] and later developed by Helmut Humbach,[36] states that the fire can assume at the same time a priestly and divine function, active and passive, a solution that fits into a conceptual scheme, in which the human ritual is a liturgy where the gods are actively present, because they are not only represented by the priests or by the ingredients of the sacrifice (such as fire itself, *haōma*-, etc.), but where also the priests'

35
Theodor Baunack, "Der Yasna Haptaŋhāiti," in *Studien auf dem Gebiete des griechischen und der arischen Sprachen*, ed. Johann Baunack and Theodor Baunack (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1886–1888), 303–463, 365.

36
Helmut Humbach, "Gathisch-awestischen Verbalformen," *Münchener Studien zur Sprachwissenschaft* 9 (1956): 66–78, 77.

bodies are, in turn, inhabited by the gods to which they correspond. So, the relation between the visible, physical fire, which is very close, practically at hand in the sacrifice, and the *mainiiu- spāništa-*, "the most incremental spirit," does not only represent an incarnation of the divine fire in the ritual one, but is also another demonstration of the double articulation of reality and existence, probably expressed in a very archaic way: the fire of the sacrifice is the fire of Ahura Mazdā himself, and it is hot, red, and dangerous, if one is unworthy of him; it is physical, but it also represents the *mainiiu- spāništa-* of the god, his visible form in the ritual.[37] The living reality has thus been finally re-united with the active mental one, and the distinction between these different levels does not exist either. At this point, the ritual has achieved its goal. In conclusion, we can affirm that the fire in this process of identification with the *mainiiu- spāništa-*, but also in its close relationship with the *manah-*, "the mind," which is intrinsically *vohu-*, "good," (see *Y.* 46.7), confirms the particularity of the Mazdean speculative vision of the liturgical sacred space and its ritual functions. This is a space in which reality gives access to a different, higher dimension, which is opened just when the gods come to the sacrifice, and the priests become the gods whom they represent. Life and existence in reality share the physical world (or "the one which has bones," [OAv. *astuuaṇt-*; YAv. *gaēiθiiauua-*; Pahlavi *gētīg*]) and that which is referred to as "of the thought, mental" (OAv. *manahiia-*; Yav. *mainiiauua-*; Pahlavi *mēnōg*). The sacrifice becomes the moment of reunification, of synthesis, between these two dimensions. There, the fire, which is physical, but obviously has no bones, is the visible manifestation of Ahura Mazdā's thought-force and wrath. He is alive as material fire, but his materiality can be evidently perceived as divine, or better, as the wrath of god.[38] It is also clear that this is not a form of idolatry of the fire, but with a speculative ritual[39] in which the fire is the divine mediator between two worlds—the corporeal and the mental.

The meeting with Ahura Mazdā and the other divine forces is activated thanks to the enactment of a correct ceremonial performance, without procedural mistakes of practice and of an oral nature, so that the priest who makes serious mistakes corrupting the efficacy of the ceremony can be severely disqualified. The idea of the ritual as a sort of active force field, which can be pierced and penetrated by evil antagonists, is common to the Indo-Iranian world, and special priests such as the Vedic *adhvaryu-* or the Avestan *sraōšauuarəza-*, within the framework of the solemn liturgies, were responsible for the control of the correct development of the liturgy and for the immediate enactment of magic reparations against mistakes. Recent studies confirm the importance of this priest,[40] particularly within the framework of the long liturgy, where he had special recitative duties. We must also consider that, if any sacrifice or ceremony contributes to the inner solidity of the natural development of life and the world, it can be damaged or even destroyed by demonic actions, particularly if the priests are not sufficiently qualified and prepared, and especially if they make mistakes, or celebrate in erroneous conditions or times. For instance, nocturnal rituals were particularly risky, because the darkness enforced negative and demonic forces, so that Avestan texts, such as *Yt.* 5.94-95 insist on the fact that the libations offered to Anāhitā after sunset do not sa-

37
Antonio Panaino, "Le Feu dans la littérature vieil-avestique," in *Cours et travaux du Collège de France: Résumé 2011–2012*, Annuaire du Collège de France 112 (Paris: Collège de France, 2013), 861–64.

38
Antonio Panaino, "Le Feu dans la littérature vieil-avestique," 861–64.

39
Clarisse Herrenschmidt and Jean Kellens, "La question du rituel dans le mazdéisme ancien et achéménide," *Archives de Sciences sociales des Religions* 85 (1994): 45–67.

40
Alberto Cantera, "The *sraōšāuuarəza*-priest and the Usage of the *srōš-barišnīh* in the Greater Long Liturgy," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 3rd ser., 31, no. 3, (2021): 479–514.

tisfy the goddess, but gratify the demons (*daēuua*s). These nocturnal offerings probably constituted a daēvic practice, as it results from the Avestan and Pahlavi text of *V.* 7.79.[41] A condition of impurity[42] or any pollution disables the powers of priests, and they must be liturgically re-qualified with a purification ritual, named *Baršnūmgāh*, which follows some complex rules, full of triadic esoteric symbolism, and takes nine days and nights.[43]

Partial view of the disposition of the *Baršnūmgāh*, according to the present performance of the ceremony, in the Cama Baug Fire Temple of Bombay. Visual access to this space was granted thanks to the kind permission of the High Priest Vada Dastur Keki Ravji Meherjirana. Photograph @ A. Panaino, January 21, 2024.

We should also consider that some mental operations enforcing the vision of the Cinuuaṯ̃ Bridge ("the Bridge of the accumulator," which becomes manifest only in the afterlife) and the union with the *daēnā-* of the sacrificers must take place in the emerging light of the sun or after sunrise, in particular towards the end of the nocturnal *Widēwdād-sāde* ceremony. If we also consider that this liturgy had extraordinary importance during the ceremonies in favor of the souls of the departed, such as those celebrated after the third day following death, we may

41
Antonio Panaino, "*aētasə.tē ātarə zaōθrå̊*: On the Mazdean Animal and Symbolic Sacrifices," 119–63.

42
Jamsheed K. Choksy, *Purity and Pollution in Zoroastrianism: Triumph over Evil* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989).

43
Antonio Panaino, "The Triadic Symbolism of Yima's *vara-* and Related Structures and Patterns," in *Yama/Yima: Variations indo-iraniennes sur le geste mythique (Variations on the Indo-Iranian Myth of Yama/Yima)*, ed. Samra Azarnouche and Céline Redard, Collège de France: Publications de l'Institut de civilisation indienne 81 (Paris: Édition-Diffusion De Boccard, 2012), 111–30.

better appreciate the rich symbolic implications of these rituals. With a special function connected with the rising of the sun and the support of the soul marching toward the Cinuuaṯ Bridge, a special role was attributed to the *sraōšauuarəza*-priest, whose sacred animal was the cock, and whose crow announces a new day and summons the diligent priest to resume his sacerdotal works. In the course of funerary ceremonies, such as the *čaharōm* (the ritual accompanying the souls of the departed after the third day of mourning in his/her final journey to the Cinuuaṯ Bridge), these priests probably assumed special functions, and in the Central Asiatic iconography on funeral monuments (such as that of Xi'an), bird-priests were engraved, their appearance mixing human characteristics with bird wings and claws.[44]

One of the most speculative moments of the sacrifice can be identified not only in the idea that the ritual opens a path along which gods and humans meet around the ritual fire and take part in a spiritual banquet, but also in the doctrine that the priests in this way have access to a superior vision and have the privilege to experience a brief, but intense, moment of liberation from the mixed dimension of the historical world, in which good and bad forces violently struggle. Within the categorization of the double dimension of existence, between *mēnōg* and *gētīg* (two dimensions which are not in opposition, but are complementary), the liturgy offers to a "living" being, as the priest is, the opportunity to obtain a provisory access to a condition of liberation, which will become permanent only in the afterlife and with the final liberation of the evil from the world. In this respect, the ritual does not only create a proper time, but at a certain point gets out from the historical continuum, and enters in a different supermundane dimension, without recurring towards a loss of conscience, but by means of an enforcement of the "mental sight" (*mēnōg-wēnišnīh*; see below). Very interesting is also the Indo-Iranian concept of ritual interiorization,[45] in which the priest (cf. even Zoroaster in *Y.* 33.14) offers his own *uruuan-* or other parts of his soul or body (such as the *uštăna-*, "the animation," the *frauuaṣi-*, "the (pre-existing) chosing forth soul," the *ast-*, "the bones"), in a way that can be compared with the tradition of the *ātmayajña-*, "self-sacrifice,"[46] through which the sacrificing priest offers as a gift his own body or his soul in order to create a new celestial body, worthy of the presence of the gods.

A debated subject, which is strictly related to the esoteric dimension, concerns the interpretation of the state of *maga-*, m. (but cf. Vedic *maghá-*, n.), a semantically tantalizing Avestan stem, whose interpretation remains most controversial and debated,[47] and which Gherardo Gnoli[48] interpreted as a technical term referring to a particular mental state of the officiating priest, in which he obtains through the ritual performance a separation of the psychic and spiritual part of his own self from the physical one. His is a sort of mystic visionary sight (but without loss of conscience), conferred on the priests in their quality of *magavan-* (cf. Vedic *maghávan-*), so that they promote their own "mental" force and can make a direct experience of the new existence liberated from evil, as if they were in the final *frašgird*. This explanation has been criticized by Hanns-Peter Schmidt,[49] who prefers to remain within the limits of the exchange of gifts between priests and divinities. The discussion is very complex, and it cannot be resumed

44
Frantz Grenet, Penelope Riboud, and Yang Junkai, "Zoroastrian Scenes on a Newly Discovered Sogdian Tomb in Xi'an, Northern China," *Studia Iranica* 33, no. 2 (2004): 273–84; Antonio Panaino, "Mimesis e rito: I preti alati del cerimoniale mazdaico," *Bizantinistica* 16 (2014–2015): 41–61.

45
Antonio Panaino, *Rite, parole et pensée dans l'Avesta ancien et récent*; Antonio Panaino, "Aspects of the 'Interiorization' of the Sacrifice in the Zoroastrian Tradition," in *Zoroastrian Rituals in Context*, ed. Michael Stausberg, Studies in History of the Religions 102 (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 233–52.

46
Madeleine Biardeau and Charles Malamoud, *Le sacrifice dans l'Inde ancienne* (Louvain: Peeters, 1996), 57-58. Charles Malamoud, *Cuire le monde: Rite et pensée dans l'Inde ancienne* (Paris: La decouverte, 1989), 60–65.

47
Ilya Gershevitch, "A Helping Hand from Central Asia," in *La Persia e l'Asia Centrale da Alessandro al X secolo* (Rome: Accademia nazionale dei Lincei, 1996), 49–75.

48
Gherardo Gnoli, "Lo stato di 'maga,' " *Annali dell'Istituto universitario orientale di Napoli*, n.s., 15 (1965): 105–17.

49
Hanns-Peter Schmidt, "Gathic *maga* and Vedic *maghá*," in *K. R. Cama Oriental Institute International Congress Proceedings: 5th to 8th January, 1989* (Bombay: K. R. Cama Oriental Institute, 1991), 220–39.

here in detail: we can recall Gykiō Itō's[50] hypothesis that the basic meaning of this word could be "divine power," which does not seem to me to be too far-fetched, and the fresh studies by Almut Hintze,[51] who has carefully analyzed the triangular exchange between gods, priests, and the patron of the ritual.

The esoteric character of the ritual is also emphasized from the evidence, well underlined by Jean Kellens,[52] that with the end of the recitation of the *frauuarānē* in *Y.* 12, the priest who assumes the function of *zaōtar-* actually "constitutes" his own *daēnā-*, while the members of the priestly order eventually cooperating in the realization of the ceremony, all become with him *saōšiianṭ-*s ("the ones who are destined to swell"), and then can take part in a (provisory) transfiguration. The basic idea seems to be the assumption that the *daēnā-*s of the *saōšiianṭ-*s (here corresponding to the priests officiating in the liturgy) journey along the ritual path (*paθ-/aduuan-*), their purposes being that of the possession of the *mižda-*, n., "reward," or "the price of victory." Thus, the symbolic mirroring game imagined for the afterlife meeting of the *uruuan-* and his corresponding *daēnā-* is clearly anticipated in the speculative dimension of the ritual, where the priests have the privilege of activating their own *daēnā-* within the ceremony. The transformation of the priests into an *alter ego* of the eschatological *saōšiianṭ-*, the third posthumous son of Zoroaster, the one named *Astuuaṯ.ərəta* (*Yt.* 19.92), with his companions (*Yt.* 19.95), is one of the most important potential aspects of the ritual. He is expected to perform the main *frašō.kərəti-,* i.e., "the act of making excellent (the creation)," and to install the great sacrifice of the world transfiguration. He will also start the process of human resurrection (*Yt.* 19.89-90). In this case, we can observe that a mythological scenario concerning the final turn of the human existence is strictly connected with a ritual performance that can be repeated each time during the ceremonies, whose role props up the columns of the world order. As will be easier to see below, the performers of the liturgies (i.e., the priests) play a foundational role, which does not only contribute to the maintenance of life and its roots, but who interplay with the divinities in a mimetic correspondence of interactions, whose final result will be concretized in the final *apokatastasis*. We must note that the order of birth of the three posthumous sons of Zoroaster is reversed with respect to the prophet's emission of his sperm (in the water of the Kąsaoya sea) during the sexual intercourse with his third wife. It is possible that this sexual union, although mythological, was conceived as a kind of ritual ceremony, because the emission and deposition of the seed was not due to a mistake, but, rather, followed a rule and a specific eschatological purpose. If not a proper ritual, there was at least an idea behind it.

The Ritual Mimesis

The installation of the ritual priestly college with its seven assistants directed by their ritual leader, i.e., the *zaōtar-*, corresponding to the Vedic *hotṛ̥-*, constitutes one of the highest moments of the ceremonial complexity of the archaic Mazdean rituals, whose performance shows some impressive theatrical aspects. It is important to observe that some Zoroastrian ceremonies, after the earlier fusion of the Gāθic ma-

50
Gikiō Itō, "On Yasna 51:16," *Orient* 23 (1987): 1–21.

51
Almut Hintze, *Lohn im Indoiranischen: Eine Semantische Studie Des Rigveda und Avesta*, Beiträge zur Iranistik Band 20 (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2000); Almut Hintze, " 'Do ut des': Patterns of Exchange in Zoroastrianism; A Memorial Lecture for Ilya Gershevitch," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 3rd ser., 14, no. 1 (2004): 27–45.

52
Jean Kellens, Résumé of the lecture delivered by Jean Kellens on the 20th January 2012, on the website of the Collège de France (2012).

terials, which was reasonably older (at least from the linguistic point of view) and the so-called Young (or Later) Avestan sections of the *Yasna*, include a number of liturgical extensions, specifically adopted in certain calendrically fitting occasions or under some special conditions. These solemn ceremonies, which can be equally denominated as Solemn Liturgies, are not simply added to the end of the basic *Yasna*, as an entire separated corpus, but are intercalated within its divisions (in particular among the sections of the individual *Gāθā*s) in order to create a sort of sandwiched structure in which some chapters of the *Yasna* are followed by a chapter of the *Wisprad*, followed by the *Fragard*s (sections) of the *Widēwdād*. These special sequences can be easily deduced from the liturgical (*sāde* "pure") manuscripts, where the textual development of the ceremony is fully presented (with the additions of some ritual directions) in its performative course.[53] Originally, these ceremonies compellingly prescribed the presence and the cooperation of a larger sacerdotal staff, basically with the eight participating ritual actors mentioned earlier. These assistant priests should be installed within a ceremony starting with the intercalation of *Wisprad* 3.1-2 [= *VrS*. 11.9-12], which occurs just after *Yasna* 11 (more precisely, *Wisp.* 3.1-5 is intercalated between *Yasna* 11.8 and *Yasna* 11.9). A leading priest, probably corresponding to the *zaōtar*-, or to another of the priests who were previously consecrated in an immediately preceding *Yasna*, assumed the duty of installing these assistants, who, one after the other must come to the ritual place and declare they are ready to accept their own ritual functions. The authority of the installing priest was probably connected with the idea, preserved in the later Parsi sacerdotal speculations, about the ritual power. Amongst the more recent Zoroastrian priesthood we find concepts such as those of *mōṭ ī khūb*, "great ritual power," which is retained for three days and nights, while the *nānī khūb*, "small ritual power" is active only up to the dawn of the following day.[54] Certainly, the priest responsible for the installation had to possess the powerful qualifications for the proper installation of the full sacerdotal college.

The following assistants were installed:[55]

(*zōṯ*) *hāuuanānəm āstāiia*	"I install the *hāuuanān*- (the pressing-*haōma*-priest)."
(*rāspī*) *azəm vīsāi*	"I am ready!"
(*zōṯ*) *ātrauuaxšəm āstāiia*	"I install the *ātrauuaxša*- (the fire-lighting-priest)."
(*rāspī*) *azəm vīsāi*	"I am ready!"
(*zōṯ*) *frabərətārəm āstāiia*	"I install the *frabərətar*- (the priest presenting [the offering])."
(*rāspī*) *azəm vīsāi*	"I am ready!"
(*zōṯ*) *ābərətəm āstāiia*	"I install the *ābərət*- (the [water]-bringing-priest)."
(*rāspī*) *azəm vīsāi*	"I am ready!"
(*zōṯ*) *āsnatārəm āstāiia*	"I install the *āsnātar*- (the washer-priest)."
(*rāspī*) *azəm vīsāi*	"I am ready!"
(*zōṯ*) *raēϑβiškarəm āstāiia*	"I install the *raēϑβiškara*- (the mingler-priest)."
(*rāspī*) *azəm vīsāi*	"I am ready!"
(*zōṯ*) *sraōšāuuarəzəm āstāiia dąhištəm aršuuacastəməm*	"I install the *sraōšāuuarəza*- (the priest who practices the obedience), the most talented one, having the most correct words."
(*rāspī*) *azəm vīsāi*	"I am ready!"

53
Alberto Cantera, *Vers une édition de la liturgie longue zoroastrienne: Pensées et travaux préliminaires*, Studia Iranica: Cahier 51 (Paris: Association pour l'avancement des Etudes Iraniennes, 2014); Alberto Cantera, "A Substantial Change in the Approach to the Zoroastrian Long Liturgy: About J. Kellens' Études avestiques et mazdéennes," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 59, no.2 (2016): 139–85.

54
J. J. Modi, *The religious Ceremonies and the Customs of the Parsees*, 91, 120, 140; Firoze M. Kotwal and James W. Boyd, *A Persian Offering: The Yasna*, Studia Iranica: Cahier 8 (Paris: Association pour l'avancement des études iraniennes, 1991), 63-64n6, 85n68.

55
Antonio Panaino, *Le collège sacerdotal avestique et ses dieux: Aux origines indo-iraniennes d'une tradition mimétique; Mythologica Indo-Iranica 2*, Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études: Sciences Religieuses 164 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2022).

These assistants play the following actions:[56]

1) the *hāuuanān-* must squeeze the *haōma-* and handle the pestle in a downward motion (*N*. 54.3);

2) the *ātrauuaxša-* must kindle the fire, purify its three sides, and respond to the *zaōtar-* (*N*. 55.1-2);

3) the *frabərətar-* must purify the remaining side of the fire, bring the *barəsman-* and approach the fire with it according to the requirements of the liturgy and still pronounce the *Yasna* (*N*. 56.1-2);

4) the *āsnātar-* must wash the *haōma-* and filter it (*N*. 57.1-2);

5) the *raēϑβiškara-* must mix the *haōma-* with milk and distribute it (*N*. 58.1);

6) the *ābərət-* (also called **dānuzuuaza-* "the carrier (of water) of the river" in *N*. 64.3) must bring water (*N*. 59.1);

7) finally, the *sraōšāuuarəza-* must supervise all these activities (*N*. 59.1).

The present articulation of the solemn priestly college in eight plus one priest has an earlier background, because it finds a parallel functional structure in the Vedic ritual tradition, where we find seven priests cooperating under the direction of the *hotr̥-*. As shown by Hertha Krick,[57] they were the *hótr̥-*, the *pótr̥-*, the *néṣṭr̥-*, the *agnīdh-*, the *praśāstr̥-* / *upavaktr̥-*, the *adhvaryú-*, and the *brahman-*. But what is more striking concerns the fact that we find in Iran and in India a similar correlation between the sacerdotal functions and some divinities in the pantheon, as we will see later. It should be noted that the recitation of the text of *Wisprad* 3.1, which follows, presents today (and going back several centuries) a simple bipartition of roles, now embodied during solemn rituals only by two priests: the *zōt* and the *rāspīg*, instead of the original seven in addition to their chief (the *zaōtar-* > *zōt*), as fully confirmed, even by many drawings appearing in certain medieval manuscripts.[58] A number of reasons have determined this bold reduction of the officiating priests, probably connected with the collapse of the sacerdotal organization of the official state-sponsored Mazdean Religious Authority after the Islamic conquest of Iran, although other trends aiming at a simplification of the ceremonies could have independently occurred. Notably, the priestly college invites Ahura Mazdā and his divine fellows to descend into the sacrificial space, so that the highest god accompanied by the six Aməṣa Spəṇtas plus Sraōša are expected guests. This divine college finds a direct symmetry among the attending priests, and this speculative mimetic process, in which every divinity corresponds to a single assistant priest, while Ohrmazd finds his alter ego in the *zaōtar-*, is explicitly offered in the Pahlavi text of the *Anthology* of Zādspram 35.16-17:

> 16) "Sōšans will establish himself in Xwanirah on the seat of the *zōt*, likewise the six agents of Renewal in the six regions, such as the *hāwanān*, the *ātarwaxš*, the *fraburdār*, the *āburd*, the *āsnadār* and the *rehwiškar*."
>
> 17) "And the seven Amahraspandān will take place in the minds of the seven Agents of Renovation, Ohrmazd the *zōt* with Sōšans, Wahman, the *hāwanān*, with Rōšn-čašm, Ardwahišt, the *ātarwaxš*, whose sign is fire with Xwar-čašm, Šahrewar, the *fraburdār*, with

56
Antonio Panaino, *Le collège sacerdotal avestique et ses dieux.*

57
Hertha Krick, *Das Ritual der Feuergründung (Agnyādheya)*, ed. Gerhard Oberhammer, ÖAW Philosophische-Historische Klasse: Sitzungsberichte 399, Band Veröffentlichungen der Kommission für Sprachen und Kulturen Südasiens 16 (Wien: Osterreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1982), 417n1126.

58
Alberto Cantera, *Vers une édition de la liturgie longue zoroastrienne*; Antonio Panaino, *Le collège sacerdotal avestique et ses dieux*.

> Frādat-xwarrah, Spandarmad, the *āburd*, with Wīdat-xwarrah, Hordād, the *āsnadār*, with Worunēm, Amurdad, the *rehwiškar*, with Worusūd, each in his region, because of the common will of the seven Amahraspandān, what one thinks, then all will know, what one says, all will recite, what one does, all will see."

This doctrine, repeated in other sources, such as the Persian *Rivāyat* of Kāmdin Šāpur (A.Y. 928/1558);[59] develops a very esoteric spiritual conception of the liturgy and of the priestly function. In this way, the six Amahraspandān correspond to the priests involved in the final eschatological renovation, each one located in one of the six continents (*kišwar*), Ohrmazd being in the central *kišwar* (*Xwanirah*) together with Sōšans. The preeminent role of the *zaōtar-* symbolically reinforces not only the superior position of Ohrmazd, but also the eschatological role of the Saōšiianṭs/Sōšans, showing another aspect of the speculative character of the ritual as an instrument for forecasting the last Renovation, which can be obtained by means of the *cišti-* and the *mēnōg-wēnišnīh*, "the mental sight." This Pahlavi text is apparently defective in the single case of the omission of the seventh priest, the *srōšāwarz* (Av. *sraōšāuuarəza-*), who should correspond to Sraōša, but this absence can be explained by the desire to obtain a direct parallelism between the sacerdotal places within the sacrificial area and the divine distribution over the seven climates of the world, without excluding Ohrmazd (who is the supreme *zōt*). Certainly, the presence of a human fellow, who accompanies each divine priest, confirms the hypothesis that other assistants could also be involved in the ritual, in relation to other deities. Thus, the ritual microcosm corresponds to a celestial macrocosm, while the divine world and the human world coexist, or even become one and the same reality. Within the framework of the liturgy, humans and gods not only correspond to each other, but perform the same functions, as if the two dimensions had been homologized. In this context, the human college ascends, while the divine one descends, and both groups of entities inter-penetrate each other within a new spiritual synthesis. This is one of the most relevant aspects of the Mazdean metaphysics of the liturgical mimesis.

As stated before, it should be equally noted that some of the Avestan priests display characteristics which find significant parallels in the Vedic tradition: for example, the *ātrauuaxša-* corresponds to the Vedic *āgnīdhra-* or *aghnīdh-*, who is actually responsible for lighting the fire. Victor Henry[60] compared the office of the *frabərətar-* (as well as that of the *ābərət-*) to that of the Vedic *néṣṭṛ-*, while Hermann Oldenberg[61] connected the functions of the fifth assistant, the *āsnātar-*, to those of the Vedic *pótṛ-*, "the purifier." Martin Haug[62] for his part compared the *sraōšāuuarəza-* to the Vedic *pratiprasthātar-*, a collaborator of the *adhvaryú-*. In particular, it is noteworthy that the old Indian *pratiprasthātar-* held in his hand a wooden sword, a weapon which can be compared with the club attributed to the Avestan god of obedience, Sraōša. These Indo-Iranian comparisons are important and numerous. What seems particularly interesting, however, is the idea of a direct correlation between the priestly college and the pantheon. This correlation is also present in the *Ṛgveda*. We may recall that in the *Agniṣṭoma* ritual, any priest was individually and directly linked to

59 B. N. Dhabhar, *The Persian Rivayats of Hormazyar Framarz and others: Their Version with Introduction and Notes* (Bombay: K. R. Cama Oriental Institute, 1932), 424.

60 Willem Caland and Victor Henry, *L'Agniṣṭoma: Description complète de la forme normale du sacrifice de soma dans le culte védique,* vol. 1 (Paris: Leroux, 1906), 479.

61 Hermann Oldenberg, *Die Religion des Veda*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Hertz, 1917), 386.

62 Martin Haug, *Essays on the Sacred Language, Writings, and Religion of the Parsis*, 3rd ed. by Edward W. West (1862; repr., London: Trubner & Co., 1884), 280.

a divine being, as Thomas Oberlies[63] has shown by emphasizing that the seven Vedic priests can maintain a very specific relationship with the most important divine beings, as follows:

Hótr̥-	Indra,
Pótr̥-	Marut,
Néṣṭr̥-	Tvaṣṭr̥- (and the divine females)
Agnīdh-	Agni,
Praśāstr̥- / Upavaktr̥-	Mitra and Varuṇa,
Adhvaryú-	Aśvin,
+ Brahman-	Indra (and/or Br̥haspati).

63 Thomas Oberlies, *Die Religion des Ṛgveda*, vol. 1, *Das religiöse System des Ṛgveda*, Publications of the De Nobili Research Library 26 (Wien: Gerold, 1998), 275n603; Christopher Z. Minkowski, *Priesthood in Ancient India: A Study of the Maitrāvaruṇa Priest*, Publications of the De Nobili Research Library 18 (Vienna: Sammlung de Nobili, 1991), 82.

The End of the Yasna

Very interestingly, a ritual of dis-installation or dis-engagement of the seven priests of the solemn ceremony is attested in the text of the *Yasna* (*Y.* 58.4-8). It is peculiar that this pendant of the installation does not appear within the text of the *Wisprad*, as we should suppose for reasons of symmetry, but is presented toward the end of the ceremony in a special framework. Probably, this displacement is due to a reorganization of the solemn ceremonies, when their actual performance became obsolete, although a definitive solution is still a matter of discussion. Certainly, the end of the ritual presents a number of problems which are under close investigation. The important studies by Céline Redard and Jean Kellens[64] have shown the presence of some textual (and presumably performative) varieties in the conclusion of the *Yasna*, which in any case offer some parallels with the beginning of the liturgy, as underlined in different ways by Velizar Sadovski[65] and Alberto Cantera.[66] I would like to stress the fact that in one of the possible conclusions of the text of *Y.* 72.10, we find the meaningful sequence of *Θβāṣa xᵛaδāta*, *Zruuan Akarana*, and *Zruuan darəγō.xᵛaδāta*. These divinities respectively correspond to "the Vault of the Firmament, the Limited Time, and the Unlimited Time" (i.e., the revolving motion of the heavens and the two manifestations of time); their mention exactly in proximity of the conclusion of the *Yasna* ceremony emphasizes the cosmological role of the ritual, and its connection with the sequence of time's order (visible throughout the stars), which works as a weapon against Ahreman. It deserves careful observation, because its presence confirms the importance of a relatively ancient reflection on the sacrifice and its cosmogonic function even within the cycle of the 12 millennia, whose theological role was defined in the Young Avestan context.[67] This presence not only confirms that within the Later Avestan rituals, speculation on time and the intrinsic distinction between eternal and limited time already existed, but it also emphasizes the role of the power of time in the strategy of the eventual demolition of evil. It is within the limited time, with the cooperation of the stars and the motion of the heavens, supported by the *Frauuašis*, that Aŋra Mainiiu was entrapped within the living world, and it is thanks to the uninterrupted course of time that evil will be destroyed. In other words, the ritual cooperates in the preservation of cosmic order, which is strictly linked with the orderly and regular motions of the sun,

64 Céline Redard and Jean Kellens, *La liquidation du sacrifice (Y62 à 72)*, Études avestiques et mazdéennes 5, Persika 18 (Paris: De Boccard, 2013), 62-72; Céline Redard, "Y72.11: Un final qui n'en est pas un!," in *Iranian Studies in Honour of Adriano V. Rossi*, ed. Sabir Badalkhan, Gian Pietro Basello and Matteo De Chiara, vol. 2, Series Minor 87 (Napoli: UniorPress, 2019), 757–68.

65 Velizar Sadovski, "Avestan and Vedic liturgies in comparison, 1: Sociolinguistic stratification, politics of discursive authority and development of Indo-Iranian poetic genres," in *Lectures at the Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna: Ravenna, February 17–18, 2017* (Department of Cultural Heritage, 2017).

66 Alberto Cantera, "A Substantial Change in the Approach to the Zoroastrian Long Liturgy," 139–85.

67 Antonio Panaino, "The End of the Yasna Between Philological and Theological Problems," *Dabir* 1, no. 4 (2017): 73–84.

the moon, the stars, and with all the *ratu*s, i.e., the orderly masters of the universe, which cooperate in the resistance against the presence of evil. In this respect, as all the parts of the days, of the months, of the years are worshipped and assimilated to cosmic forces; they constitute the architectural pillars of the world, and must be carefully protected and supported.[68] For this reason, it is likely that the ideal model of sacrifice was seen in the continuum of the ritual chain, which links every Mazdean ritual taking place, one after the other, in each of the five (or four) daily *gāh*, (i.e., the different liturgical moments of the day), within an interrupted sequence of ceremonies, in which one priestly college transmits to the following one the regular duty of the ceremonial performance. This, at least, acts as a theoretical model, in which the time of the cosmic year must continue till the final battle against Ahreman, thus accompanied by continuous liturgical activity, underpinning the bones of the universe against the disentangling and chaos-inducing actions of the demons and their chief. With the birth of the *Saōšiianṭ* and the final resurrection, even Ohrmazd will irrupt into the world, whose mixture will be definitively purged, and the divine priestly college will join the human one. Only then will limited time be mixed and poured again[69] within eternal time, so that the present battle will find its totally irreversible conclusion with the total regeneration of the world, and the human liberation into the superb dimension of the *tan ī pasēn*, "the afterbody" of the transfiguration (*frašgird*) and resurrection (*rist-āxēz*). During the period of mixture (*gumēzišn*), the sacrifice is also a way to enforce the champions of Ahura Mazda in their battle against evil, and the highest god himself can offer to them an enforcing *yasna* in order to promote their success.[70]

68
Antonio Panaino, "Avestan *aiiara-* and *asniia-* (Y. 1,17; 2,17, etc.)," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 60 (2017): 303–30.

69
Antonio Panaino, "The 'Other' *gumēzišn*: About the Final 'Merger' of Limited Time with Eternity," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 31 (2021): 591–97.

70
Antonio Panaino, "An Aspect of the Sacrifice in the Avesta," *East and West* 36 (1986): 271–74.

The Vision of the Great Priest Kerdīr

It is well known that in two of the four inscriptions of the high Priest Kerdīr (a man living in third-century Iran and playing an authoritative role in the Sasanian court), that of Naqš-e Rostam (KNRm) and the nearly identical one of Sar Mašhad (KSM), §§ 26, 29, we find the description of a metaphysical journey into the afterlife. This description has been explained according to different interpretative keys.[71] Much has been said about a kind of potentially shamanic journey and a number of other solutions have been proposed, some even supposing the active presence of intermediaries, such as young people capable of going into a trance and hence narrating aloud their vision of the other world. I have rejected these solutions, preferring to situate the vision of which these texts speak within the framework of a sort of liturgical drama, celebrated by a priestly college in favor of the High Priest Kerdīr. This esoteric ceremonial, of which we can only infer few scattered fragments, would have been aimed at the acquisition of a higher "mental sight," the *mēnōg-wēnišnīg*, on which the Pahlavi sources preserve some pieces of information. Thus, the ritual mentioned there would be the anticipated representation, performed by a priestly college, of the future journey of Kerdīr's soul, as a physical enactment of his eschatological future destiny. The text of the inscriptions indeed evokes this *post-mortem* journey on several occasions, with the adoption of a precise terminology, which marks a difference between the real di-

71
Antonio Panaino, "Apocalittica, escatologia e sciamanismo nell'opera iranologica di Ph. Gignoux con una nota sulla 'visione' del mago Kirdēr," 205–43; Antonio Panaino, "The Ritual Drama of the High Priest Kirdēr," 179–88; Antonio Panaino, *Le collège sacerdotal avestique et ses dieux*.

mension and its ritual presentation. In this ceremony, a relevant part was practically played by a group of persons named lysyk (*rĕhīg*). It is implausible to suppose that these lysyk went into a trance all together (a solution technically impossible) or that they were "children" used within a divinatory ceremony (in this case, the counterargument is that children were usually excluded from rituals, because they were not yet qualified officiants). More simply, this could have been a group of assistant priests, who would have enacted the ritual and perhaps even dramatized its realization, if the oral performance was accompanied by a theatrical enactment. Kerdīr, in his turn, would have just observed the ritual (like a sort of Vedic *yájamāna-*) without playing any active role in the course of the ceremony, where, on the contrary, one finds reference to his "double" (*hangerb*), i.e., the image of his future alter ego in the afterlife. Very interestingly, the *hangerb* of the High Priest was in his turn accompanied by his wife, named *zan* "woman," both representing the "father" and "mother" of Kerdīr's soul (*ruwān*), just as in the *Anthology* of Zādspram 31, where we find a *mard-kirb*, "the form of a man" and the *kanīg-kirb*, "the form of a woman." It is clear that the deeply archaic and esoteric dimension of this ceremony was poorly understood by Zādspram, who had only preserved scattered fragments of an older tradition. In the context of Kerdīr's inscriptions, neither the *ruwān* nor his *dēn* are directly involved, reasonably because Kerdīr was still alive, so that the true separation of the male and female components of the soul (*ruwān* and *dēn*) could not still take place. For this reason, the late attestation (i.e., in the nineth century CE) of the *mard-kirb*, "the form of a man" and the *kanīg-kirb*, "the form of a woman" in an afterlife context, but well distinct from *ruwān* and *dēn*, shows that some memory of earlier esoteric traditions, probably similar to those ordained by Kerdīr, had survived, although their true meaning had become opaque. In conclusion, eight people (plus the *hangerb* and the *zan*) are mentioned in the frame of the "vision" of the Great Priest. This number corresponds exactly to that of the previously mentioned, old priestly college with its seven assistants in addition to the *zaōtar-*. This evidence does not exclude the presence of other assistants, in particular, for solemn or particularly complex ceremonies, such as this one. A priori, even the exclusion of women cannot be established, firstly because women could also receive (although with certain restrictions) elementary priestly training, so that in certain circumstances they might contribute to the *Yasna* ceremony by occupying the function of *zaōtar-* (*Nērangestān* 22) at least in theory. Secondly, because the seven sisters/wives of Ardā Wirāz are present, for example, when he takes the *bang*, "henbane," and help him during the preparation of his "journey." We may eventually remark that these ladies were presented in this Pahlavi text as persons who know the sacred sources by heart, and who are able to celebrate the liturgical ritual.[72]

72
Philippe Gignoux, *Le livre d'Ardā Vīrāz: Translittération, transcription et traduction du texte pehlevi,* 150.

Zurwān and Αἰών in the Framework of the Mazdean-Christian Intercultural Relations

It is a well-known fact that the time god Zurwān, whose cosmological importance has been previously emphasized, assumed a tetramorphous aspect, with three hypostases, named in Syriac sources as Ašōqar (cf.

Av. *aršō.kara-* "the one who makes virile"), Frašōqar (cf. Av. *frašō.kara-* "the one who makes splendid"), and Zarōqar (< **zarōkara-* "the one who makes old," probably a name re-interpreted after the model of Av. *maršō.kara-*, "the one who makes old"). In this way, he represented the three ages of life, which accompanied his main resumptive identity as the great divinity of eternal and limited time. This tetradic representation was explicitly mentioned by Theodor Bar Kōnay in his account on Zoroastrianism,[73] a work dated to 791–792 CE, but these forms of the time-god were also quoted in the Syriac *Acts of Ādur-Hormizd*.[74] This *Martyrologium* mentions Zurwān as the "Fourfold" God and as the highest divine figure, hence following a Manichaean pattern, but we know that this divinity was equally denominated τετραπρόσωπος πατὴρ τοῦ μεγέθους, "the four-faced father of Greatness" in the Byzantine anathemas against the Manichaeans.[75] Other sources confirm this tradition, which was certainly current among a number of Oriental Christian communities between the fifth and sixth centuries. Similar speculations about the divine image of time were developed in the Mediterranean context with close regard to Αἰών, the Greek high divinity of time, whose role increased after the Platonic speculations about him. For instance, in a very remarkable third century CE mosaic of Antioch,[76] three personages, denominated as "Chronoi" (Χρόνοι), sit in front of Αἰών. They represent (from the right to the left) "Past (Time)" (Παρω(ι)χημένος), "Present (Time)" (Ἐνεστώς), and "Future (Time)" (Μέλλων) (Levi 1944: 273-274).[77] Some scholars, such as Duchesne-Guillemin,[78] Leo Olschki,[79] and many others,[80] have called attention to the fact that when in some Christian apocryphal traditions the Magi go to worship Jesus in Bethlehem, they are presented as showing three different ages, one young, one adult, one very old, and equally Jesus reveals himself to each of them assuming a visible aspect of a being of the same age. This is narrated by Marco Polo with reference to a Persian context, but the same tradition is documented in the *Chronicle of Zuqnīn*[81] or in the *Armenian Gospel of the Infancy*. In particular, this Armenian source, in chapters 17–21,[82] after the Magi have brought the gifts to Jesus (ch. 16), shows an enlarged variant, in which the visit of the Magi to Jesus is repeated three times, and, on each occasion, the Magi have the privilege to see also the other manifestations of Jesus. The basic idea underpinning this esoteric vision was that every Magus started with a vision of Jesus corresponding to his present human condition (young, mature, aged), which did not simply correspond to a mirroring reproduction, but involved a speculative doctrine, in which, as Henry Corbin[83] had already fittingly emphasized, each age of Jesus represents the "bridge" through which a single human mind might try to perceive a little part of the whole greatness of God in his incomprehensible and extraordinary power. Thus, we can fittingly repeat the famous sentence of the *Acta Petri* 20, I:[84] *Unusquisque enim nostrum sicut capiebat uidere, prout poterat uidebat*, "in fact, as far as each one among us tried to see, he saw just according to his own possibility," which has been rightly connected with the idea that *Talem eum uidi qualem capere potui*, "I saw him such as I might seize," attested in the Christian-Gnostic Literature.[85] By contrast, we must consider that the coming of the Magi to Bethlehem was presented in the East as an event prophesied by Zoroaster himself, and that

73
Emile Benveniste, "Le Témoignage de Théodore bar Kōnay sur le zoroastrisme," *Le Monde Oriental* 26–27 (1932-33): 170–215; Richard Charles Zaehner, *Zurvan: A Zoroastrian Dilemma*, with a new introduction by the author (1955; repr., New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1972).

74
Emile Benveniste, "Le Témoignage de Théodore bar Kōnay sur le zoroastrisme," 170–215, 176; Richard Charles Zaehner, *Zurvan: A Zoroastrian Dilemma*, 434–37.

75
Richard Charles Zaehner, *Zurvan: A Zoroastrian Dilemma*, 54.

76
Doro Levi, "Aion," *Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens* 13, no. 4 (1944): 269–314, 269–71.

77
Doro Levi, "Aion," 269–314, 273–74.

78
Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, *Opera Minora*, vol. 3, *Iran-Grèce-Israël* (Téhéran: Univ. de Téhéran, 1978).

79
Leonardo Olschki, "The Wise Men of the East in Oriental Traditions," in *Semitic and Oriental Studies: A Volume Presented to William Popper, Professor of Semitic Languages, Emeritus, on the Occasion of his Seventy-Fifth Birthday, October 29, 1949*, ed. Walter Joseph Fischel, University of California Publications in Semitic Philology 11 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), 375–95.

80
Antonio Panaino, "Jesus' Trimorphisms and Tetramorphisms in the Meeting with the Magi," in *From Aṣl to Zā'id: Essays in Honour of Éva M. Jeremiás*, ed. Iván Szántó (Piliscsaba: The Avicenna Institute of Middle Eastern Studies, 2015), 167–209.

81
Jean-Baptiste Chabot, *Incerti Auctoris Chronicon Anonymum Pseudo-Dionysianum Vulgo Dictum*, vol. 1, *Versio Latina*, edidit [et interpretatus est] I.-B. Chabot, CSCO 121, Scriptores Syri, 3rd ser., 53 (Lovanii: Secrétariat du CSCO, 1927), 54–70.

82
Abraham Terian, *The Armenian Gospel of the Infancy with Three Early Versions of the Protevangelium of James* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 55–57.

83
Henry Corbin, "Épiphanie divine et naissance spirituelle dans la gnose ismaélienne," *Eranos Jahrbuch* 23, *Mensch und Wandlung* (Zurich: Rhein-Verlag, 1954), 141–249 (trans. Ralph Manheim as "Divine Epiphany and Spiritual

the expectation of the three posthumous sons of the Mazdean prophet, in particular the third one, the *Saōšiaṇt par excellence*, so that the Christian propaganda played with the explicit presentation of Christ as the true "savior," whom Zoroastrian people, for many centuries, had been longing for.[86] This assumption is based on a number of textual pieces of evidence, such as the one preserved in the *Arabic Infancy Gospel*[87] (*Codex Laurentianus*), which starts with a prophecy by Zoroaster concerning Jesus's coming. Other sources state that some Iranian Magi were looking for a sign connected with the birth of a "savior," who corresponds to Jesus.[88] This happened also in Syriac Literature,[89] but in particular it occurs in the *Disputatio de Christo in Persia*, a very intriguing Byzantine source, which had already introduced the anachronistic association between Cyrus the Great and Jesus.[90] Cyrus, who, in fact, (as stated by Isaiah), was a Messiah, according to this text received an astral sign announcing the future birth of Jesus, so that it was he himself who ordered his Magi to go to Bethlehem. This story was not isolated but was reported also by Mas ʿūdī and Ṭabarī.[91] Its meaning was quite simple and concerned the *Translatio Imperii*, from the most powerful human king (Cyrus) to Jesus, as universal emperor. Thus, the priests who anointed Cyrus were sent to anoint the new king of the universe, Jesus the Christos. Finally, it is useful to observe that the apocryphal representations of three Magi in the mirroring interplay with Jesus as *kosmokrátor*, which marked what has been defined as Christ's "tetramorphism," offers not only a direct comparison with the similar tetramorphic aspects of Αἰών and Zurwān, but also with Zoroaster and his three posthumous sons. All together, they actually formed a group of four "messengers" or "apostles" of Ahura Mazdā. As Widengren[92] remarked, if the Iranian god *Nairiiō.saŋha* was already considered as an *ašta-*, i.e., a "messenger" (*Vd*. 19.34), also the third and last of Zoroaster's posthumous sons, the true *Saōšiaṇt*, *Astuuaṯ.ərəta*, was literally presented as *aštō mazdå ahurahe*, i.e., "the messenger of Ahura Mazdā" (*Yt*. 19.22). According to the *Dādestān ī Dēnīg* 1.8,[93] Zoroaster, Ošēdar, and Ošēdarmāh (i.e., the other two sons of the prophet) were all together *frēstagān* "apostles," and a reference to "the four apostles of the good-religion" (*čahār hudēnwar frēstagān*), literally "the sent ones" (*frēstag*), the "envoys" from Ohrmazd, was again formulated in a very incisive way in the same Mazdean source (48,30).[94] There, Zoroaster, Ošēdar, Ošēdarmāh, and Sōšāns himself were meant without any doubt all together.[95] Thus, if Jesus indeed offered a tetramorphic image, and constituted with the three Magi a group of four, where the universal power of Time might be finally mirrored, Zoroaster himself with his three posthumous sons, who will come at a millennium of distance one after the other, formed yet another tetradic group, which again interplayed with the four aspects of Zurwān/Αἰών.[96]

Some Esoteric Trends Among Modern Parsis

The impact of western esotericism[97] on the Parsi community can be dated around the middle of the nineteenth century, when some members of the Zoroastrian elite entered in close contact with British and French freemasons.[98] But, despite the early foundation of the first In-

Rebirth in Ismailian Gnosis," in *Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks*, ed. Ernst Benz and Ralph Manheim, vol. 5, *Man and Transformation,* [London: Routledge & Paul, 1964], 69–160); Henry Corbin, "Face de Dieu et face de l'homme," in "Polarität des Lebens" ed. Adolf Portmann and Rudolf Ritsema (Zurich: Rhein-Verlag, 1968), special issue, *Eranos Jahrbuch* 36 (1967): 167–229.

84

Henri-Charles Puech, "Histoire de l'ancienne église et patristique," *Annuaire de l'école pratique des hautes études: Section des sciences religieuses* 73 (1965–1966): 122–25; Henri-Charles Puech, "Histoire de l'ancienne église et patristique," *Annuaire de l'école pratique des hautes études: Section des sciences religieuses* 74 (1966–1967): 128–38, 129; Henry Corbin, "Face de Dieu et face de l'homme," 167–229, 198.

85

Rudy Favaro, "Un'inconsueta adorazione dei Magi in un affresco di San Giorgio a Velo d'Astico," *Studi sull'Oriente cristiano* 4, no. 2, *Miscellanea Metreveli* (2000): 229–66, 237.

86

Giuseppe Messina, "Il *Saušyant-* nella tradizione iranica e la sua attesa," *Orientalia*, n.s., 1 (1932): 149-76; Giuseppe Messina, *I Magi a Betlemme ed una predizione di Zoroastro*, Biblica et Orientalia 3 (Romae: apud Pont. Institutum biblicum, 1933); Antonio Panaino, "The Esoteric Legacy of the Magi of Bethlehem in the Framework of the Iranian Speculations about Jesus, Zoroaster and His Three Posthumous Sons," in *Apocryphal and Esoteric Sources in the Development of Christianity and Judaism: The Eastern Mediterranean, the Near East and Beyond*, ed. Igor Dorfmann-Lazarev (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 368–82.

87

Mario E. Provera, *Il Vangelo arabo dell'infanzia secondo il ms. laurenziano orientale (n. 387)*, Quaderni della Terra Santa (Gerusalemme: Franciscan printing press, 1973).

88

Ugo Monneret de Villard, *Le leggende orientali sui Magi evangelici*, Studi e testi 163 (Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1952), 6–13, 96–98.

89

Giuseppe Messina, *I Magi a Betlemme ed una predizione di Zoroastro*, 62–85.

90

Antonio Panaino, "The Esoteric Legacy of the Magi of Bethlehem in the Framework of the Iranian Speculations about Jesus, Zoroaster and His Three Posthumous Sons," 368–82.

91

Antonio Panaino, *I Magi e la loro stella: Storia, scienza e teologia di un racconto evangelico,* Parola di Dio, 2nd ser., 67 (Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo, 2012); Antonio Panaino, "The Esoteric Legacy of

dian lodge in Fort William, Bengal, on January 24, 1728, under the authority of the Grand Lodge of England, the initiation of local people was not favored, and the admission of prestigious Parsis, such as Mr. Maneckjee Cursetjee (1808–1887) was refused. Because of some peculiar circumstances, this gentleman was finally initiated in Paris in 1842 in a very old French lodge, *Les Admirateurs de l'Univers*. The French reception was very positive because of the traditional association of Zoroaster in the foundational masonic mythology of the origins, which followed some speculations attested in the Classical, Mediaeval, and Renaissance literatures about magic and the Magi, among whom the role of Zoroaster emerged as one of the highest peaks.[99] Only when Cursetjee came back to Bombay was he invited to join the British lodge "Perseverance," and then from this episode onward other qualified Indians were allowed to join the Craft. Thus, in December 1843, a new lodge, named "Rising Star of Western India" was created, and in a few

The impressive memorial inscription in honour of Khurshedjee Rustomjee Cama (1831-1909), in the building of the Grand Lodge of Bombay. The highest and most important roles assumed by Cama in his 56 years of Masonic uninterrupted activity are there outlined. Photograph @ A. Panaino, January 15, 2024.

the Magi of Bethlehem in the Framework of the Iranian Speculations about Jesus, Zoroaster and His Three Posthumous Sons," 368–82.

92
Geo Widengren, *The Great Vohu Manah and the Apostle of God: Studies in Iranian and Manichaean Religion*, Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift 5 (Uppsala: Lundequistska bokhandel; Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1945), 61–62.

93
Mahmoud Jaafari–Dehaghi, *Dādestān ī Dēnīg*, vol. 1, *Transcription, Translation and Commentary*, Studia Iranica, Cahier 20 (Paris: Association pour l'avancement des études iraniennes, 1998), 40–41.

94
Geo Widengren, *The Great Vohu Manah and the Apostle of God*, 64.

95
Geo Widengren, "Man and his salvation," in *Man and his salvation*: *Studies in memory of S. G. F. Brandon*, ed. Eric J. Sharpe and John R. Hinnells (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974), 315–26.

96
Antonio Panaino, "The Esoteric Legacy of the Magi of Bethlehem in the Framework of the Iranian Speculations about Jesus, Zoroaster and His Three Posthumous Sons," 368–82.

97
Antoine Faivre, *Western Esotericism: A Concise History*, trans. Christine Rhone (New York: State University Press, 2010).

98
Antonio Panaino, "Zoroastrians and Feemasonry," in *Freemasonry and Religion: Many Faiths, One Brotherhood; Transactions of the Sixth International Conference, London, 6-7 November 2004*, ed. Trevor Stewart, The Canonbury Papers Volume 3 (London: Canonbury Masonic Research Centre, 2006), 51–67.

99
Michael Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathushtra: Zoroaster und die Europäische Religionsgeschichte der Frühen Neuzeit,* 2 vols., Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten 42 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1998); Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, *La religion de l'Iran ancien* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962).

years it became the center of the Zoroastrian masonic attraction. Some Muslims were admitted as well, while Hindus entered only in the year 1872. It is to be noted that not only Parsis (i.e., Indian Zoroastrians for many years), but also Iranis, i.e., Mazdeans of Persian origin, were interested in the masonic initiations. The rituals were translated even in Persian and a copy of the Avesta was placed on the altar together with the Bible and the Quran. It is interesting to note that the masonic framework, particularly in Europe, urged persons such as Khurshedjee Rustamjee Cama (November 11, 1831–August 24, 1909) to approach linguistics and Zoroastrian studies in a Western way, and to promote a refreshment of Mazdean culture, in particular with regard to priestly education. His role was so important that on December 18, 1916, the Marquess of Willingdon (1866–1941), the Governor-General of Bombay, inaugurated the official opening of the K. R. Cama Oriental Institute, which is still one of the most important archives in the academic world. During this new period, many social and cultural movements had a major impact on the educated Zoroastrians, who were interested not only in the Masonic "mysteries," but also in the esoteric messages of the Theosophical Society, which for instance involved distinguished Parsi scholars, such as Ervad Jivanji Jamshedji Modi. Thus, we can observe different trends[100] in which Western masonic esotericism underpinned a sort of rationalist approach to the religious sources, without excluding the role the other Masonic or Western esoteric cultural lines, that of the *Schwärmerei*, which involved the spiritualist attitudes of Theosophy.[101]

100
Jessica Harland-Jacobs and Jan A. M. Snoek, "Freemasonry and Eastern Religions," in *Handbook of Freemasonry*, ed. Jan A. M. Snoek and Henrik Bogdan, Brill Handbooks on Contemporary Religion 8 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 258–76.

101
James Russell, "On Mysticism and Esotericism Among the Zoroastrians," *Iranian Studies* 26, no. 1/2 (1993): 73–94.

Exploring Zoroastrianism and Esotericism in the Context of Global Religious History

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Abstract

The study of esotericism has, since the 1990s, seen lively debates on how to define its subject and how to demarcate the limits of its field. Most recently, approaches oriented toward postcolonialism and global history have challenged the dominant understanding, brought forward by Wouter F. Hanegraaff, of esotericism as a predominantly European phenomenon, denoting a tradition of "rejected knowledge." At the same time, poststructuralist critique has questioned the employability of the term "esotericism" as a scientific category before the nineteenth century. In response to this, the article explores two possible points of contact between the study of esotericism and the study of Zoroastrianism: first, the adoption of concepts developed in one field and their further development in the application to the respective other material—here using the example of the revelatory knowledge claims found in Middle Persian Zoroastrian texts. Second, the role Zoroastrianism plays in modern esoteric discourse will be examined.

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Introduction

The present article argues for caution in applying the concept of esotericism to Zoroastrianism throughout its history and instead proposes two alternative research routes. In a first step, a survey of influential research conducted by scholars in the study of Zoroastrianism on its esoteric qualities will show the inherent problems older research had in applying the concept meaningfully. In a second step, this will be linked to a survey of wider debates in the study of esotericism, which will further our understanding of the theoretical problems related to the concept. After that, two alternative routes of research will be proposed: Firstly, the alternative concept of revelatory knowledge claims, inspired by an approach from the study of esotericism, will be introduced as a category that will allow us to take a comparative look at traditions of such claims in the first millennium. The second route will explore Zoroastrianism as a topic of esoteric discourse. Specifically, it will examine the work of René Guénon and Julius Evola, two founding figures of the school of so-called traditionalism.

The Study of Zoroastrian Esotericism: The Last Fifty-Five Years

In recent decades, researchers who specifically focused on the history of Zoroastrianism have not often considered the existence of Zoroastrian esotericism. Still, two influential articles have prominently dealt with the topic, while coming to wildly different conclusions. In 1969, Shaul Shaked published "Esoteric Trends in Zoroastrianism."[1] It is probably no coincidence that it was published just five years after Yates's study of the connection between Giordano Bruno and hermeticism,[2] which—as will be discussed later on—helped spread interest in esotericism in academia. At the time, Mircea Eliade and Henry Corbin popularized the use of the esoteric vs. exoteric binary in religious studies, too. Shaked's use of the term "esoteric" does not seem to hold much conceptual value for him. He limits his study, in his own words, to evidence for "a secret element in the Zoroastrian religion of the Sasanian period."[3] Still, he seems aware of the more significant implications of the title of his article, contextualizing his research as a middle ground between research on the Iranian influence on Gnosticism, shamanistic, and mystic elements in Zoroastrianism, and a total denial of any esoteric elements.[4] Through this analysis, Shaked concludes that there is evidence to support the existence of a distinction between "folk religion" and more intellectual and inwardly oriented forms of Zoroastrianism, particularly as presented in certain sections of Middle Persian literature such as *Dēnkard* Book VI.[5]

While Shaked's judgment is very cautious, James R. Russell's "On Mysticism and Esotericism among the Zoroastrians" (1993)[6] arrives at much more far-reaching conclusions. His study is more a-historical, employing sources from the Avesta to Armenian, Roman, and Islamic authors, and even further to Ilme Kṣnum, a modern Parsi religious movement that developed in a complex dialogue between Persianate and Western traditions.[7]

Russell's definition of Zoroastrian mysticism—a term he uses interchangeably with esotericism—then appears more in the style of religionist perspectives, looking for phenomena *sui generis*.[8] He seems

1 Shaul Shaked, "Esoteric Trends in Zoroastrianism," *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 3, no. 7 (1969).

2 Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964).

3 Shaked, "Esoteric Trends in Zoroastrianism," 176.

4 Shaked, "Esoteric Trends in Zoroastrianism," 175–76. Later the existence of "esoteric teachings" was also denied in a misguided critique of Shaked by Bailey, cf. Harold W. Bailey, *Zoroastrian Problems in the Ninth-Century Books: Ratanbai Katrak Lectures*, reprint (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 29. On this passage cf. James R. Russell, "On Mysticism and Esotericism Among the Zoroastrians," *Iranian Studies* 26, no. 1–2 (1993): 73n2.

5 Shaked, "Esoteric Trends in Zoroastrianism," 200.

6 James R. Russell, "On Mysticism and Esotericism Among the Zoroastrians," *Iranian Studies* 26, 1–2 (1993).

7 The most recent contribution tracing the influences of the movement is that of Mariano Errichiello, "Beyond the Theosophical Paradigm: Ilme Kṣnum and the Entangled History of Modern Parsis," *Journal of Persianate Studies* (2024).

8 Russell, "On Mysticism and Esotericism among the Zoroastrians," 75. He actually asserts that—

to understand esotericism as an aspect of Zoroastrianism that does not correspond to the modern, Western understanding of religion, such as ritual intoxication,[9] but a clear definition is lacking. Interestingly, this is at odds with the understanding of esotericism prevalent in the modern Study of Western Esotericism, too, as we will see below.

In both cases, it seems questionable whether there is any heuristic benefit in using the term "esotericism"—as mentioned above; Shaked himself postulates instead a differentiation between folk religion and a more intellectual tradition.[10] So, where does this leave us? The existence of the journal at hand speaks to the interest in possible applications, but we should also proceed with caution. How can we move beyond anachronisms, and how can we analyze more recent interconnections? Here, we should look to the modern study of esotericism.

The History of the Study of Western Esotericism: Lessons to be Learned

Broader agendas often influence the study of Zoroastrianism and esotericism, and scholars in these fields have complex relationships with their subjects. One could think of extreme examples such as Martin Haug's research on the Gāthās in the nineteenth century and Davoud Monchi-Zadeh's association with National Socialism.[11] The study of esotericism has been dramatically influenced by the ideological interests and esoteric inclinations of scholars, too. As in the case of the study of Zoroastrianism, this has also shaped the study of esotericism as we know it today. Therefore, a short overview of its history is necessary to better understand the current debates in the field.

Wouter F. Hanegraaff has identified three key developments that led to the establishment of the field. First, the Eranos meetings played a crucial role, involving influential participants like Carl Gustav Jung, Henry Corbin, and Mircea Eliade.[12] Second, an independent scholarly engagement with Renaissance hermeticism was fueled by Frances Yates's 1964 publication of *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*; and third, it became popular in the counterculture of the 1960s.[13] Note that Shaked's article falls within this period.

Institutionalization was a slow process. The first chair for the study of esotericism was created in Paris in 1964—under the influence of Henry Corbin and initially with a focus on Christian esotericism. Its most prominent holder was Antoine Faivre, who himself had esoteric affinities.[14] Faivre developed a typology of esoteric thinking, attempting to encompass the subject's timeless essence. However, he later shifted towards a more historical approach.[15] Although such work focused on European or Western esotericism, people were always operating with a more phenomenological, ahistoric understanding of esotericism. "[They] were interested not so much in hermeticism specifically, as in esotericism generally [. . .]. According to this "traditionalist" understanding (which turns out to be implicitly assumed in many religionist studies of 'esotericism' as well), the esoteric means the 'inner' dimension or universal essence of religion *per se*."[16]

In 1999, the second chair was established in Amsterdam to which Wouter F. Hanegraaff was appointed. With it the first department dedicated to the study of esotericism was created, producing a new

while always taking a new form—"each religion has a mysticism of its own," Russell, "On Mysticism and Esotericism among the Zoroastrians," 73.

9 Russell, "On Mysticism and Esotericism among the Zoroastrians," 74.

10 Shaked, "Esoteric Trends in Zoroastrianism," 199–200.

11 On Haug's work in India, see Michael Stausberg, *Die Religion Zarathushtras: Geschichte—Gegenwart—Rituale*, Band 2 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002), 99–103. On Monchi-Zadeh's Nazism, see Siamak Adhami, "Monchi-Zadeh, Davoud," *Encyclopædia Iranica* (website), online edition, 2018, accessed April 17, 2023, https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/monchi-zadeh-davoud.

12 Cf. Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion*: *Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Hans Thomas Hakl, *Eranos: Nabel der Welt—Glied der goldenen Kette—die alternative Geistesgeschichte*, 2. und wesentlich erw. Aufl. (Gaggenau: Scientia Nova, 2015).

13 Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Beyond the Yates Paradigm: The Study of Western Esotericism between Counterculture and New Complexity," *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 1, no. 1 (2001): 7–21.

14 Hanegraaff, "Beyond the Yates Paradigm," 22–23.

15 Antoine Faivre, *Accès de l'ésotérisme occidental* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986). Michael Bergunder, "What Is Esotericism? Cultural Studies Approaches and the Problems of Definition in Religious Studies," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 22, no. 1 (2010): 14–16.

16 Hanegraaff, "Beyond the Yates Paradigm," 26.

generation of scholars focusing on Western esotericism. Through Hanegraaff's relentless work and the founding of linked institutions, this new Amsterdam school gained a hegemonic position in the field. Among the new institutions emerging in this process, we find the journal *Aries*, the *European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism*, and a publishing cooperation with *Brill*, cementing the influence of the "Amsterdam school."[17] Although recent discussions in the field have attempted to move beyond Hanegraaff's work, it remains the primary point of reference.[18] Therefore, it is necessary to become familiar with his arguments.

The boundaries of what was studied were initially a result of the field's genesis, but it gradually gained programmatic significance, particularly in the work of Hanegraaff. Hanegraaff's approach to defining esotericism evolved over time. Initially, he aimed to provide positive definitions but later looked at esotericism as a category of exclusion in European intellectual history. This shift responded to earlier researchers' essentialist and universalist tendencies.[19] Consequently, it led to a departure from positive determinations of the subject in much of the field, aligning with a broader skepticism towards such definitions in religious studies.[20]

As shown by Egil Asprem, two versions of this exclusion-narrative exist: first, what Asprem calls the "strict version," which can be found in its most developed form in *Esotericism and the academy* (2012).[21] Here, Hanegraaff tells how, beginning in the seventeenth century, primarily protestant scholars started a discourse of exclusion, which fostered connections between intellectual currents like Hermeticism, alchemy, and astrology. While not necessarily marginalized in their historical context, they finally became excluded from academic discourse during the Enlightenment period. In other publications, Hanegraaff softened this strictly historiographic perspective. Asprem calls this the "inflated version." It claims the existence of a structural continuity in Western history from ancient anti-pagan polemics to the exclusion of esoteric thinking in the Enlightenment.[22]

Michael Bergunder and his students, foremost Julian Strube, have forwarded an even more radical approach. This school focuses on the formation of esotericism as a global identity marker from the nineteenth century onwards. Bergunder opted for an approach informed by discourse theory, primarily through readings of Derrida and the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, which traces its "subject, esotericism . . . through an unbroken line of reception and tradition."[23]

In both these approaches—although for different reasons—there is limited to no space for "Zoroastrian esotericism," particularly in the pre-modern period. If we do not want to fall behind the historicist turn the study of esotericism has made in the last two decades, we should take these perspectives seriously. Still, in the following, two ways will be shown in which the study of Zoroastrianism and esotericism can benefit from each other. In the first case, the further development of concepts from the study of esotericism using Middle Persian examples will lead to the development of a possible new research perspective, while in the second case, the complex links between esoteric, scientific, political, and religious discourses in the global history of religions will be demonstrated using a concrete case study.

17
Cf. Michael Stausberg, "What Is It All About? Some Reflections on Wouter Hanegraaff's Esotericism and the Academy," *Religion* 43, no. 2 (2013): 219–20.

18
E.g., Moritz Maurer, review of *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprem and Julian Strube, Supplements to Method & Theory in the Study of Religion, vol. 17, *ΑΡGOS* 1, (2022).

19
Cf. Julian Strube, "Towards the Study of Esotericism Without the 'Western': Esotericism from the Perspective of a Global Religious History," *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprem and Julian Strube, Supplements to Method & Theory in the Study of Religion, vol. 17 (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 48. It should be noted that Hanegraaff by now looks to rehabilitate the religionist school, although more for political reasons. Cf. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Rejected Knowledge . . . So You Mean That Esotericists Are the Losers of History?," in *Hermes Explains: Thirty Questions About Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Peter Forshaw, and Marco Pasi (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 147–48. Contrary to the claims of Hanegraaff, Georg Lukács was not one of the founding fathers of the Frankfurt School. For an introduction to the relationship between Lukács and Adorno see Hans-Ernst Schiller, "Tod und Utopie: Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukács," in *Adorno-Handbuch: Leben—Werk—Wirkung*, ed. Richard Klein, Johann Kreuzer, and Stefan Müller-Doohm (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2019), 41–44. As to the question of whether Adorno and Horkheimer are the source of anti-esoteric identity politics in academia, there seems to be a lack of source references in Hanegraff. He just quotes the whole of the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*—which deals with a wide range of topics—and Adorno's minor reflections on the topic, the infamous "Theses against Occultism," a chapter of the *Minima Moralia*, while e.g., ignoring the treatment of belief in esotericism in the studies on the *Authoritarian Personality*.

20
For different reasons, Michael Bergunder reached similar conclusions around the same time but opted for an even more radical solution, a genealogy of the term "esotericism" as the appropriate subject of study; see Bergunder, "What Is Esotericism?"

21
Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

22
Cf. Egil Asprem, "Rejected Knowledge Reconsidered: Some Methodological Notes on Esotericism and Marginality," in *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, 129–32. Hanegraaff makes these wider claims, e.g., in Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Forbidden Knowledge: Anti-Esoteric Polemics and Academic Research," *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 5 (2005).

Revelatory Knowledge Claims

Beyond the early criticism against *Esotericism and the Academy*, the question of how non-European, pre-modern traditions can be the subject of research on Esotericism has sparked new controversies in the field. Liana Saif remarks on the problem of the study of Islamic esotericism: "It seems, then, that an academic global study of Islamic esotericism is caught between a pestle and a mortar, religionism and non-existence."[24] This seems to hold for pre-modern Zoroastrian esotericism, too. Saif tries to develop a heuristic under which it is still possible to speak of Islamic esotericism. She focuses on the concept *bāṭiniyya*, which she translates as esotericism, and creates a framework based on the axes of intellectual and revelatory approaches to hidden phenomena centered around Qur'anic exegesis, in the tenth to thirteenth centuries, influenced by the Neoplatonised-Aristotelianism of the nineth and tenth centuries and the rise of Sufism; while also highlighting the significance of the reception of Islamic esotericism in the early to mid-twentieth century in the Traditionalist milieu.[25] Based on an overview of historical sources, she excludes certain elements that seem central to most understandings of "Western" esotericism, like a "discreet social presence and the occult sciences."[26] An obvious question arising is: what heuristic benefit do we get out of such an identification? Instead, we should use her focus on heuristics as a foundation for exploring new avenues of inquiry.

In this context, referring to Gregor Ahn's article on the formation of concepts in religious studies might be beneficial. Ahn discusses the need to critically examine and reevaluate our conceptual frameworks, reflecting on culture-specific preconceptions. The result should be new heuristics "that are not based on a replacement by improved equivalent terms, but operate with substitute terms that presuppose a fundamentally changed structure of the conceptual field and the object of investigation implied by it."[27] The objective is not to completely eliminate culturally specific preconceptions but rather to aim for a more accurate and "factually appropriate" description.[28]

The starting point for the present investigation is a concept that Dylan Burns has explored in the context of ancient Mediterranean texts: claims of revelatory knowledge e.g., based on ritualistic attainment of "higher knowledge," which he envisions as a bridge between the study of different gnostic and apocalyptical traditions of the ancient Mediterranean.[29] Such claims have often been included in definitions of esotericism.[30] We will follow this route, focusing on a specific set of such claims in the Middle Persian Zoroastrian material, more or less elaborate narratives centered on the attainment of revelatory knowledge through rituals. Thus, a research framework from the Study of Esotericism will be the starting point—but, following Ahn's call for a reorientation of the conceptual field, it will make more sense to resituate it within the framework of other discourses found in the Zoroastrian material, namely debates surrounding mediality, especially the use of writing, which became ever more prominent in Late Antiquity.

The oldest dateable account of the use of ritual to reveal religious truths is found in the inscriptions of Kerdīr, the most prominent Zoroastrian priestly dignitary of the early Sasanian period.[31] In a somewhat obscure passage, he describes his use of young boys to obtain a vision

23
Bergunder, "What Is Esotericism?," 28.

24
Liana Saif, "What Is Islamic Esotericism?," *Correspondences* 7, no. 1 (2019): 5.

25
Saif, "What Is Islamic Esotericism?," 2.

26
Saif, "What Is Islamic Esotericism?," 46.

27
"[. . .] Beispiele für den Umgang mit Eurozentrismen [. . .] die nicht auf einer Ersetzung durch verbesserte Äquivalenzbegriffe basieren, sondern mit Ersatzbegriffen operieren, die eine grundsätzlich veränderte Struktur des Begriffsfeldes und des damit implizierten Untersuchungsgegenstands voraussetzen." Gregor Ahn, "Eurozentrismen als Erkenntnisbarrieren in der Religionswissenschaft," *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* 5, no. 1 (1997): 48.

28
"sachangemessener," see Ahn, "Eurozentrismen als Erkenntnisbarrieren in der Religionswissenschaft," 48.

29
Dylan Burns, "Receptions of Revelations: A Future for the Study of Esotericism and Antiquity," in *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, 35–36.

30
See the references in ibid. and e.g., on the importance of revelatory knowledge in his approach to esotericism in Kocku von Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Esoteric Discourse and Western Identity* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 56–59.

31
A general survey on him is found in Prods Oktor Skjærvø, "Kartir," accessed January 19, 2017, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kartir.

that reveals specific details about the soul's fate in the afterlife.[32] The exact method is debated; Martin Schwartz argues for the use of a reflective surface based on a proposed correction to older readings of the inscription.[33] The later accounts of comparable practices are found in the priestly literature but resist such a relatively straightforward dating.

The exact chronology of most of the Book Pahlavi literature remains a mystery; however, it is indisputable that all the following examples, as they exist in their present form, were written several centuries after the era of Kerdīr. The first example comes from the *Ardā Wīrāz Nāmag* (AWN), *Book of the righteous Wīrāz*,[34] probably the most well-known example of a Zoroastrian text containing a description of the afterlife. It describes the drinking of a vision-inducing liquid by Wīrāz. Still, it is embedded in a story about writing and is—another feature appearing in all the following examples—set in the distant past, its current redaction most likely composed in the Islamic period.[35] The reason for performing the ritual is the doubt into which the religion fell after the invasion of Alexander of Macedon. The first misdeed ascribed to the Macedonian conqueror is (most likely anachronistically) the destruction of a written version of the Avesta—seemingly the only copy, causing great calamity (AWN 1.5-6).[36] A minor but telling difference between Kerdīr's inscription and the *Ardā Wīrāz Nāmag* is the fact that after the performance of the appropriate rituals, the text explicitly mentions that a *dibīr ī dānāg ī frazānag*,[37] "a wise and intelligent scribe," is called to record the vision (AWN 3.12-13). The text continues: *ud harw čē Wirāz guft drust rōšn ud gōwizār nibišt*,[38] "and everything that Wīrāz said was written down rightly, clearly and in detail" (AWN 3.14). The section describing the vision even starts with the phrase *u-š ēdōn framūd nibištan*,[39] "and he ordered him to write" (AWN 4.1). While referencing a visionary experience, the text stresses that it was put into writing.

A similar observation can be made in the *Zand ī Wahman Yasn* (ZWY).[40] It depicts events unfolding during the *frašgird*, the Zoroastrian end times. While the exact age of the text remains uncertain, its surviving form appears to have undergone a complex editing process, with the current form of the text dating from Islamic times.[41] In the narrative, Zardušt (Zarathustra) tries to attain immortality, which Ohrmazd is unwilling to bestow on him. Instead, he grants him clairvoyance of the future through a drink of his wisdom in the form of water (ZWY 3,5-8). The whole narrative—as can be seen from the title and the beginning of the chapters—claims to be taken from the *Zand*, the translation with commentary of the Avesta. Chapter 3 starts e.g., with the expression *pad zand wahman yasn paydāg . . .*[42] "it is revealed in the *Zand* of the Wahman Yasn . . ." before recounting further parts of the vision. As the history behind the text already implies, this seems highly unlikely.[43] Still, it seems necessary for the text to provide a link to an older tradition and not solely rely on the claim to knowledge attained through rituals, presenting itself as a retelling of a preexisting text (although of unknown mediality).

One last example is found in the *Ayādgār ī Jāmāspīg* (AY), *The memoir of Jamasp*.[44] Once again, we encounter a text with a remarkably intricate history of transmission. It is evident that this text has undergone numerous changes and revisions throughout its existence.[45]

32
The latest transcription and translation of the relevant passages can be found in Frantz Grenet, "Pour une nouvelle Visite à la 'Vision de Kerdīr,' " *Studia Asiatica* 3 (2002): 9–13.

33
Martin Schwartz, "Kerdīr's Clairvoyants: Extra-Iranian and Gathic Perspectives," in *Iranian Languages and Texts from Iran and Turan: Ronald E. Emmerick Memorial Volume*, ed. Maria Macuch, Mauro Maggi, and Werner Sundermann, Iranica 13 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2007). It is worthy of note, that divination using children or teenagers as intermediaries is unknown in the later Book Pahlavi material, see Schwartz, "Kerdīr's Clairvoyants," 372–73.

34
The following references refer to the publication and translation of the text by Gignoux, see Philippe Gignoux, *Le livre d'Ardā Vīrāz: Translittération, transcription et traduction du texte pehlevi*, Recherche sur les civilisations. Cahier 14 (Paris: Ed. Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1984).

35
Philippe Gignoux, "Ardā Wīrāz," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, accessed February 7, 2017, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/arda-wiraz-wiraz. This article is available in print in vol. 2, fasc. 4.

36
For parallels to an account in Dēnkard III, cf. Michael Stausberg, *Die Religion Zarathushtras: Geschichte—Gegenwart—Rituale*, Band 1 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002), 78.

37
Following Gignoux, *Le livre d'Ardā Vīrāz*, 47.

38
Following Gignoux, 47.

39
Following Gignoux, 47.

40
For an edition and translation, see Carlo G. Cereti, *The Zand ī Wahman Yasn: A Zoroastrian Apocalypse*, Serie Orientale Roma 75 (Roma: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1995).

41
A detailed discussion and presentation of the debate is provided by Cereti, *The Zand ī Wahman Yasn*, 15–27. For a recent but more concise overview of the discussion, see Philip G. Kreyenbroek, "Millenialism and Eschatology in the Zoroastrian Tradition," in *Teachers and Teachings in the Good Religion: Opera Minora on Zoroastrianism*, ed. Kianoosh Rezania, Göttinger Orientforschungen Reihe 3, Iranica Neue Folge 10 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2013), 171–72.

42
Cereti, *The Zand ī Wahman Yasn*, 134.

Given that the Middle Persian version of much of the text is lost, our understanding relies heavily on the later renditions of Pāzand, i.e., Middle Persian written in Avestan script, and of Pārsī, i.e., a transcription in Arabic. In it, Jamasp, who became leader of the religion after Zarathustra's death, answers questions posed to him by King Wištāsp, a legendary ruler and contemporary of Zarathustra.[46] In contrast to the other examples, Jamasp does not achieve his visions through a ritual, but his knowledge was bestowed on him by Zarathustra himself (AY 1.5). Agostini speculates that this gave the figure a special role in the aftermath of the Islamic conquest.[47] Interestingly, in AY 1.3, the text also proclaims that it was written down in the time of Wištāsp, thereby dating its creation to a mythical past long before the reader's present.

What can we gather from these examples? Although our sample is limited, I propose some observations that prompt a broader perspective on claims of revelatory knowledge attained through rituals in the Zoroastrian Middle Persian material. After Kerdīr, no priest or other individual claims to possess such revelatory knowledge. Instead, we encounter claims projecting this knowledge to the distant past. This contrasts sharply with Kerdīr's account of his ritual accomplishments. However, it is overly simplistic to categorize these examples as mere pseudepigrapha. Instead, they all engage, to some extent, in a discourse on literacy and intertextuality, referring to a written transmission or source material incorporated into the work. Claims of revelatory knowledge appear intertwined with these claims of knowledge transmission. This is distinct from the directness found in Kerdīr's inscription.

While this shift is hard to explain, it should alert us to the possibility of a change in perceptions of mediality separating the two. Furthermore, this insistence on writing stands in some contrast—at first glance—to the only open discussion of orality and literacy that we can find in Middle Persian Zoroastrian literature, a passage in the fifth book of the *Dēnkard*. After discussing the connection between Avestan and the spiritual world, we can read the following in Dk. 5.24.13:[48]

> "And he [i.e., Ohrmazd] commanded the *dēn* and the ritual formula and all that is written with the tongue to be written down from the beginning. Now most of it has been preserved in writing, as is well known among the knowing. Nevertheless, it is of great benefit to memorise, and one advantage of this is to inform the common people about the rituals and worship. Another is to gain knowledge of things. Because it allows words of such depth to be transmitted and these in truthfulness and unadulterated, the correctness of the spoken word is much greater than that of the written word and for these and many other reasons the living and spoken word should be sensibly regarded as more important than the written word."[49]

It is noteworthy that the debate is between the high priest and a Christian convert in an Islamic context. Insisting on the superiority of orality could be a means of identitarian demarcation. Still, the passage—while proclaiming the superiority of orality—attributes the writing down of the tradition to Ohrmazd himself, although how this took

43
On the dating, cf. Carlo G. Cereti, "On the Date of the Zand ī Wahman Yasn," in *K. R. Cama Oriental Institute Second International Congress Proceedings*, ed. K. R. Cama Oriental Institute (Bombay: K. R. Cama Oriental Institute, 1996). On the debate surrounding this text, cf. Cereti, *The Zand ī Wahman Yasn*, 15–27.

44
Edition and translation see Domenico Agostini, *Ayādgār ī Jāmāspīg*: *Un texte eschatologique zoroastrien,* Biblica et orientalia 50 (Roma: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2013).

45
Agostini, *Ayādgār ī Jāmāspīg*, 14–18.

46
His role as a wise seer is also referred to in other Middle Persian texts, e.g., Dk. 5.4.3, see Jaleh Amouzgar and Ahmad Tafazzoli, *Le cinquième livre du dēnkard*, Studia Iranica Cahiers 23 (Paris: Association pour l'avancement des études iraniennes, 2000), 32–33.

47
Agostini, *Ayādgār ī Jāmāspīg*, 119.

48
"ud ēn dēn ud mānsr ud hamāg ī uzwānīg nibištan ōwōn framūd ō bunīg nibištag ud nūn-iz frāhist pad-iz nibēgīhā pad ēstēd čiyōn andar āgāhān paydāg bē warm kardan sūd was uš hūdagīh ī pad ēzišn ud stāyišn āgāhēnišn ī ō ramān ēk wēš dānistan ī čisān aziš ōh-iz ān ōwōn zofrīhā saxwan ud ēk rāstīhā ud a-wašt-rangīhā abespārdan šāyistan dādestānīgīh ī wāz-gōwišnīh frāy az ān ī nibēsišnīg wasīhā ud pad-iz abārīg was čim zīndag ud gōwišnīg saxwan az ān ī pad nibišt mādagwar-tar hangārdan čimīg," in Amouzgar and Tafazzoli, *Le cinquième livre du dēnkard*, 82–84.

49
Cf. the French translation in Amouzgar and Tafazzoli, *Le cinquième livre du dēnkard*, 83–85. A recent English translation can be found in Prods Oktor Skjærvø, *The Spirit of Zoroastrianism*, The sacred literature series (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 250–51.

place remains unclear.

What becomes clear is that research on claims of revelatory knowledge in Middle Persian Zoroastrian sources must consider wider discourses on mediality in the sources at hand. Therefore, it might make more sense to speak of *ritualistic knowledge claims*—which by the time of our sources seem to be in need of authoritarian support through references to tradition and writing. In Ahn's terms, such a readjustment of our research focus can help us overcome culture-specific preconceptions. This reorientation can be the starting point of a reorientation of research into the wider field of such claims in the Mediterranean area, too.

The Modern Period: The Case of Traditionalism

The preceding subchapter has proven that an engagement between debates in the study of esotericism and Zoroastrianism can be a fruitful endeavor for both sides. Exploring pre-modern examples through a concept linked to the formation of Western esotericism has helped to reframe it and possibly open up new lines of research into the wider world of Late Antique revelatory literature. But even when focusing on Middle Persian material, it became clear that a strictly historical approach is necessary, as evidenced by the differences between Kerdīr and the later texts.

The qualifier "Western," as we have seen, was meant to demarcate such a new, historicist approach in contrast to religionist approaches. Still, for several reasons, its validity has been questioned.[50] Post-structuralist and postcolonial perspectives, among others, are, as noted above, employed to challenge the validity of the qualifier. One argument in its problematization is that esotericism as a self-designation became prominent only in the nineteenth century, shaped by global exchange processes, emphasizing the dynamic and relational nature of its development, pushing the date of its employability even closer to the present.[51] Parsis, the Zoroastrian community of modern-day India, actively participated in these global discourses, with Theosophy being one of the most prominent examples, where members of the community rose to prominent positions.[52] Some studies have examined what could be described as such global entanglements, notably the work of Anna Tessmann on Russian forms of Zoroastrianism, which emerged at the intersections between scientific and esoteric discourses.[53] Scholars have also turned their attention to movements that claim a Zoroastrian identity, most notably Mazdaznan.[54] Beyond that, various esoteric traditions partook in discourses surrounding Zoroastrianism during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Still, this has received little attention in the scholarly literature, especially in the study of Zoroastrianism. Symptomatically, the articles gathered in *Part V. Intersections* of the *Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism* examine classical religious traditions but not modern esotericism.[55] This is reminiscent of the stigmatization of the study of esotericism in academia attested to by Hanegraaff, even as a subject and not as a theoretical perspective.[56]

However, examining the discourse surrounding Zoroaster and Zoroastrianism within a particular esoteric tradition can offer valuable

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A collection of it is found in Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "The Globalization of Esotericism," *Correspondences* 3 (2015).

51
See the two important studies by Julian Strube, "Occultist Identity Formations Between Theosophy and Socialism in Fin-De-Siècle France," *Numen* 64, no. 5–6 (2017), https://doi.org/10.1163/15685276-12341481; Strube, "Towards the Study of Esotericism without the "Western": Esotericism from the Perspective of a Global Religious History."

52
Cf. Sarah B. Motlagh, "*Zoroastrianism in the Light of Theosophy* (1898): On the Encounter between Theosophy and Zoroastrianism in the Early History of the Theosophical Society" (master's thesis, Department of History, European Studies and Religious Studies, University of Amsterdam, 2021), https://scripties.uba.uva.nl/download?fid=c4811146; Michael Stausberg, *Die Religion Zarathushtras,* 2:112–18.

53
Cf. Anna Tessmann, *On the Good Faith: A Fourfold Discursive Construction of Zoroastrianism in Contemporary Russia*, Södertörn doctoral dissertations 68 (Huddinge: Södertörns högskola, 2012).

54
On Mazdaznan, cf. Ulrich Linse, "Mazdaznan - Die Rassenreligion vom arischen Friedensreich," in *Völkische Religion und Krisen der Moderne: Entwürfe "arteigener" Glaubenssysteme seit der Jahrhundertwende*, ed. Stefanie von Schnurbein and Justus H. Ulbricht (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2001); Stausberg, *Die Religion Zarathushtras*, 2:378–400. A short survey of twentieth century examples can be found in Tessmann, *On the Good Faith*, 8–9. Michael Stausberg deals with a variety of examples in "Para-Zoroastrianisms: Memetic Transmission and Appropriations," in *Parsis in India and the Diaspora*, ed. John R. Hinnells and Alan V. Williams, Routledge South Asian religion series 2 (London: Routledge, 2007).

55
Michael Stausberg and Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw Ve-

insights into the interplay between different discourses and shed light on the representation of Zoroastrianism in these contexts. The example taken here is that of Traditionalism, especially that of its founding figure, René Guénon (1886–1951). While Traditionalism has predominantly been associated with the fringes of right-wing extremism for many years, it has gained some visibility in recent times. Notably, its influence on the Russian conspiritualist Alexander Dugin has attracted attention, with Western media occasionally portraying him as a shadowy figure influencing Vladimir Putin's imperial ambitions.[57] Beyond that, as the already quoted Liana Saif has remarked, among many others, it played a major role in the modern perception of Islamic esotericism in the West—and, especially through Mircea Eliade, it was a major influence on Religious Studies in the middle of the twentieth century.[58]

Guénon was a former French occultist who, for a short while, hoped to pursue a career in academia. He firmly believed the Western world was facing an imminent collapse primarily caused by its disconnection from Tradition, a transcendental framework of spiritual values. According to Guénon, the only remaining hope for Western individuals lay in reestablishing a connection to Tradition through initiation into a traditional religious system—which, according to him, was to be found in the East, in "Oriental metaphysics." While Guénon focused his writings primarily on Hinduism, he embraced Islam and lived as a practicing Muslim in Cairo for the last two decades of his life.[59]

While Guénon's work may contain limited references to Zoroastrianism, these references hold significant implications within the broader context of Traditionalism. To analyze these references, we will begin with his initial monograph and explore his writings' key themes associated with Zoroastrianism. In doing so, we will discover a distinct and original portrayal of the religion that sharply contrasts with prevailing depictions in the European esoteric tradition.

In *Introduction générale à l'étude des doctrines hindoues* (1921), which Guénon submitted as a dissertation to the French Indologist Sylvain Lévi, he mentions Zoroastrianism and the culture of pre-Islamic Persia on several occasions, although mostly in passing. As summarized by Mark Sedgwick, the thesis was rejected by Lévi because of its scientific shortcomings, its sole focus on Vedanta as the supposed essence of Hinduism, and its perennialism—these characteristics (and arguably the unscientific treatment of his source material) being central to Guénon's subsequent works as well.[60] Guénon emphasizes the influence of Persian culture on classical Greek civilization, which he already saw as a deviation from Tradition.[61] This perspective stands in stark contrast to his views on the interconnections among Traditional religions, i.e., religions that are still in contact with these metaphysical values. For example, in *Le roi du monde* (1927), Guénon expresses reluctance to perceive their relationship solely within the framework of influences, although he does not entirely dismiss their possibility. Rather, they supposedly show their own expressions of the perennial Tradition, which can serve as an explanation for similarities.[62] This perspective shapes his treatment of Zoroastrianism, too, e.g., in his discussion of Avestan *haoma* and Vedic *soma*.[63] Likewise, he treats

vaina, eds., *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015).

56
E.g., Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Imagining the Future Study of Religion and Spirituality," *Religion* 50, no. 1 (2020).

57
A cautious assessment of Dugin and his influence can be found in Marlene Laruelle, "Alexander Dugin and Eurasianism," in *Key Thinkers of the Radical Right*, ed. Mark Sedgwick (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019). A more journalistic account of the (possible) influences of Traditionalism, among others on the Alt Right in the USA, is to be found in Benjamin R. Teitelbaum, *War for Eternity: The Return of Traditionalism and the Rise of the Populist Right* (New York: Penguin Books, 2021).

58
Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 109–17.

59
A summary of the history of Traditionalism in the 20th century with a special focus on the life of Guénon is Mark J. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), esp. 21–80. In 2023, Sedgwick published a less academic overview of Traditionalist teachings, Mark Sedgwick, *Traditionalism: The Radical Project for Restoring Sacred Order* (London: Pelican, 2023).

60
See Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 22–23.

61
E.g., René Guénon, *Introduction générale à l'étude des doctrines hindoues*, Systèmes et faits sociaux (Paris: Rivière, 1921), 16–17, 32–33.

62
See René Guénon, *Le roi du monde*, Tradition 9 (1927; repr., Paris: Gallimard, 1958), 27–28.

63
He takes this up on several occasions, e.g., in Guénon, *Le Roi du Monde*, 36, n. 56. In the same year he makes the connection in an article in the Catholic periodical *Regnabit*, reprinted in René Guénon, "Le Sacré-Coeur et la légende du Saint Graal," in *Aperçus sur l'ésotérisme chrétien* (Paris: Les Éditions traditionnelles, 1954), 104.

the Avestan *Vohu Mana* as a manifestation of the *Homme Universel*.[64]

This theoretical outlook might also explain a difference between him and most other authors dealing with the history of religions in the widest sense at the time: While e.g., the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* focused on contacts and exchanges between religious traditions, Guénon is more than reluctant to give them a place in history. Particularly in his later writings, Guénon emphatically denies any influence of Zoroastrianism on the development of Iranian forms of Islam. Instead, he places significant emphasis on the Arab character of Islam and highlights the Islamic nature of modern Persia:

> "On the other hand, Persia should belong, ethnically and even geographically, to what we have called the Middle East; if we don't include it, it's because its current population is entirely Muslim. One is that of India, and the other that of the ancient Persians; but today, the latter is represented only by the Parsis, who form small and scattered groups, some in India, mainly in Bombay, others in the Caucasus . . ."[65]

Noteworthy is the depiction of Zoroastrianism as existing only in insignificant remnants, replaced by Islam. Nevertheless, in a review published in 1923, Guénon remained open to the possibility of Zoroastrian influence on Persian culture in the wider sense, although not on Islam as a (Traditional) religion. Writing for the Catholic *Revue de philosophie*, Guénon stresses the importance of Zoroastrianism's influence on the sciences in Iran.[66] This kind of influence is inconceivable regarding a Traditional religion in his specific kind of perennialism, as here, and as pointed out above, similarities are not proof of exchange but rather evidence of the shared genesis. In 1936—six years after moving to Cairo—he writes to Patrice Genty, a former Martinist who by then had become a Traditionalist, too:[67]

> "I don't see that there's any Manichaeism in Persian Sufism, or Mazdeism for that matter, as some Westerners have also claimed; it's always the mania for looking for 'fingerprints'; in reality, Sufism, both Persian and Arabic, is purely Islamic and has never been anything else."[68]

Zoroastrianism and its relationship to Islam is taken up by Guénon in reference to Henry Corbin, too. Corbin, whose influence still looms over the academic study of Islamic esotericism, identified it mainly with Shi'ite Sufism and here, especially with the figure of Suhrawardī.[69] In contrast to Guénon, Corbin—whose academic career spanned roughly five decades—stressed the importance of Zoroastrianism for the development of Islam and especially the Islamic culture of Iran.[70] In a critical review of Corbin's *Suhrawardi d'Alep, fondateur de la doctrine illuminative (ishrâq)* for *Études traditionnelles*, the only reference to Corbin in the works of Guénon, he rejects the notion of influence again.[71]

Returning to the *Introduction*, another passage illuminates Guénon's conception of Zoroastrianism. In the broader context of the history of traditional religions, Guénon integrates Zoroastrianism as

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See René Guénon, *Le symbolisme de la croix*, 3e éd. (Paris: Les éd. Véga, 1957), 74n54. Similarly, he references Zoroastrianism, respectively ancient Persian culture, in the discussion of world ages, e.g., in Guénon, *Le symbolisme de la croix*, 87, and of the world egg, see René Guénon, *L'homme et son devenir selon le Vêdânta* (Paris: Les Éditions traditionnelles, 1925), 112n123.

65
Translated from Guénon, *Introduction générale à l'étude des doctrines hindoues*, 59. The idea of Zoroastrians in the Caucasus might be a misunderstanding of some ideas voiced in Helena P. Blavatsky, "Persian Zoroastrianism and Russian Vandalism," *The Theosophist* 1 (October 1879), accessed April 24, 2023, https://universaltheosophy.com/hpb/persian-zoroastrianism-and-russian-vandalism/. I thank Anna Tessmann for this reference. On Guénon's relationship with Theosophy, see the following.

66
Similarly, in a 1929 review of a new edition of *Les religions et les philosophies dans l'Asie centrale* by Arthur de Gobineau, see René Guénon, review of *Les penseurs de l'Islam*, by Baron Carra De Vaux, vol. 1, *Les souverains, l'histoire et la philosophie politique*, vol. 2, *Les géographes, les sciences mathématiques et naturelles*, in *Recueil*, ed. Gauthier Pierozak, 1re éd. (Toronto: Rose-Cross Books, 2013). On his relationship with this journal, see Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 24, 30. Guénon seems to use Iran and Persia interchangeably. He makes a similar argument in a 1929 review of a new edition of *Les religions et les philosophies dans l'Asie centrale* by Arthur de Gobineau, see René Guénon, "Les religions et les philosophies dans l'Asie centrale," in *Études sur l'hindouisme*, Nouvelle édition (Paris: Éditions Traditionnelles, 1989).

67
On Genty cf. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 50, 56, 68.

68
Translated from René Guénon, "Letter to Patrice Genty, 10.02.1936," accessed April 24, 2023, http://www.index-rene-guenon.org/Access_book.php?sigle=C-PaGe&page=81. He repeats his opinion in a following letter, see René Guénon, "Letter to Patrice Genty, 1.12.1936," accessed April 24, 2023, http://www.index-rene-guenon.org/Access_book.php?sigle=C-PaGe&page=92. A later example explicitly mentioning Sufism is found in an article for *Études traditionnelles*, his own journal, see René Guénon, "Les Revues," *Études traditionnelles* 273 (1949): 48.

69
Cf. Liana Saif, " 'That I Did Love the Moor to Live with Him': Islam In/and the Study of 'Western Esotericism,' " in *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, 74–78.

70
Already in 1946 Corbin published a monograph on

a phenomenon that initially deviates from the Traditional path before undergoing a process of return to it—an ambiguity found in some of his other treatments of Zoroastrianism, too:

> "[T]his same tradition was . . . (Indo-Iranian), . . . simply to mark that it was later to give rise to the two Hindu and Persian civilizations, distinct and even opposed in some respects. At some point, therefore, a split must have occurred, rather like that which later occurred in Buddhism in India; and the separate branch, deviating from the primordial tradition, was then what we call 'Iranism,' i.e., what was to become the Persian tradition, still called 'Mazdeism.' We have already pointed out this tendency, general in the East, for doctrines that were initially anti-traditional to set themselves up as independent traditions; the one in question had undoubtedly taken on this character long before being codified in the Avesta under the name of Zarathustra or Zoroaster, in which we should see, moreover, not the designation of a man, but rather that of a group, as often happens in such cases . . . On the other hand, a very clear trace of the deviation remained in the Persian language itself, where certain words had a meaning directly opposite to that which they had originally and which they retained in Sanskrit . . ."[72]

Guénon's sources have been a subject of debate, with critics highlighting that he often drew upon materials that did not meet academic standards. Guénon's proposition that Zarathustra was a title rather than a historical figure is of particular interest in this regard. By the end of the nineteenth century, the idea that Zarathustra not only existed but had actually composed parts of the Avesta had become entrenched in scholarship on Zoroastrianism.[73] Where did Guénon come up with the idea that it was a title attached to several individuals? The answer seems to lie in Guénon's biography: 1921 saw not only the publication of Guénon's work on Hinduism but also his *Le Théosophisme: Histoire d'une pseudo-religion*, a reckoning with Theosophy, and two years later, in 1923, he published *L'erreur spirite*, in which he attacked his former spiritual master, Gérard Analect Vincent Encausse, better known under his pseudonym Papus. The Martinist movement, which Papus initiated and Guénon criticized, started as a breakaway from the Theosophical Society under Papus in late nineteenth-century France, but soon developed an international following of its own. Among its followers, at least for some time, was Guénon.[74] At the time of the publication of the *Introduction*, he had broken with Martinism, but up to the time of his death in Egypt thirty years later, he kept—among other esoteric works—books from the movement in his private library.[75]
While already obsolete in nineteenth-century academic discussions, the idea of several Zarathustras has still found some support in later esoteric writings, although mostly focusing on two separate Zoroasters.[76] Although early theosophical publications echo traditional Zoroaster discourses in European occultism,[77] Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891) mentions the idea that the name "Zarathustra" must have been a title used by several different people, e.g., in *Isis Unveiled* (1877), and this seems to have found at least some acceptance even among Theo-

the topic, Henry Corbin, *Les motifs zoroastriens dans la philosophie de Sohrawardî*, Publications de la Société d'Iranologie 3 (Teheran: Editions du Courrier, 1946).

71
See René Guénon, review of *Suhrawardi d'Alep, fondateur de la doctrine illuminative (Ishrâq)*, by Henry Corbin, *Études traditionnelles* 258 (1947). He made a similar point in reference to Yezidi angelology in René Guénon, review of *Aventures en Arabie*, by W. B. Seabrook, *Études traditionnelles* 181 (1935).

72
Translated from Guénon, *Introduction générale à l'étude des doctrines hindoues*, 167–68.

73
See Prods Oktor Skjærvø, "The State of Old Avestan Scholarship," review of *Les Textes Vieil-Avestiques, vol. 2: Répertoires Grammaticaux et Lexique, vol. 3: Commentaire*, by Jean Kellens and Eric Pirart, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 117, no. 1 (1997), 104–5.

74
On Guénon's engagement with these movements, see Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 39–50.

75
Igor Volkoff, "Voyage à travers la bibliothèque de René Guénon," in *L'ermite de Duqqi: René Guénon en marge des milieux francophones égyptiens*, ed. Xavier Accart, Archives 6 (Milano: Archè, 2001).

76
Cf. Michael Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathushtra*, 1:328–35.

77
An overview of the material in Helena Blavatsky's publications can be found in Motlagh, "Zoroastrianism in the Light of Theosophy (1898)," 26–30. While dealing with the material, she leaves out the passages in *Isis Unveiled* dealing with the question of the multiple Zarathustras.

sophical Parsis.[78] It is unclear where Guénon exactly encountered the idea as it seems to have had some presence in Martinist circles, too. Papus seems to endorse it when he writes of the "premier Zoroastre" in his *Traité élémentaire de science occulte* (1889).[79] This seems to allude more to the idea of a series of Zarathustras in line with Blavatsky and in opposition to the work of e.g., the famous French occultist Eliphas Lévi, who distinguishes between a *true* and a *false* Zarathustra.[80] Guénon keeps with the idea in his later work, too. For example, in his most famous book, *La crise du monde modern* (1927), he dates the "last Zarathustra" ("dernier Zoroastre") to the sixth century BCE.[81]

As shown above, Zoroastrianism plays a role for Guénon only in so far as it once was—at least for some time—a force of Tradition that has now been replaced by Islam in its heartland. He spelled out in several letters his view of Zoroastrianism as a schismatic sect that branched off from Vedic religion, which he perceives to be closest to the primordial religion. In his views, Guénon seems to give an esoteric echo and reformulation of views common . . .

The harshest judgement is found in a letter to Julius Evola (1898–1974). Evola had discovered Traditionalism in the mid-1920s. A staunch antisemite and right-wing elitist critic of fascism, he tried to gain influence on the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* in Italy as well as on the *Nationalsozialistische deutsche Arbeiterpartei* in Germany—with only limited success.[82] In what seems to be corrections to drafts for Evola's book *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno,* Guénon writes:

> "Another point of difference concerns Mazdeism (p. 269), the result of a very ancient schism, and certainly further from the principle than the Hindu tradition: one of the proofs of this is the inversion of the meaning of the word 'dêva,' which originally expressed the idea of 'luminosity'; others of the same kind could be found, for example the transformation of Indra into a demon; and there is also, in Mazdeism, a certain 'moralism' which is the incontestable sign of a degeneration."[83]

Following the passage from the *Introduction* quoted above, Guénon had already spoken of the Zoroastrian "deviation" regarding the change of e.g., the role of Indra in the two traditions. In the letter, he speaks of "l'inversion," a central term in Guénon's work, denoting a twisting of right and wrong in antitraditional societies—most notably in the modern Western World. Nevertheless, he writes in a following letter that this antitraditional schism might have been corrected over time, echoing the ideas encountered previously.[84] It is worthwhile to contrast Evola's perspective on Zoroastrianism with that of Guénon to give some perspective on the breadth of Traditionalist engagements with the religion and the relationship between the two authors.

In one of his corrections, Guénon brings up the idea of Zarathustra being a title borne by different people in different times, too,[85] which is taken up by Evola and linked to the thesis of the origin of the Aryans from an Arctic, i.e., hyperborean, homeland, the putative original homeland in the final version of *Rivolta*. In a specific interpretation of his own, he links it to the Hindu concept of avatar.[86] However, although he formulates this idea in a footnote, it plays practically no

78
Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled: Theology*, Cambridge library collection. Spiritualism and Esoteric Knowledge (1877; repr., Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 141. In the later work, *The Secret Doctrine*, she names an early modern Persian work called *Dabestan* as her source, see Helena P. Blavatsky, T*he Secret Doctrine*, vol. 2, *Anthropogenesis* (London: Theosophical Publ. Co, 1888), 6n1. There is no indication that Guénon knew the work. Blavatsky's etymological speculations did not receive any echo or source in the academic discussions of the time, cf. Friedrich Max Müller, *Zendstudien 1* (Wien: In Komm. bei Karl Gerolds Sohn, 1863), 1–7; Abraham V. Williams Jackson, *Zoroaster*: *The Prophet of Ancient Iran* (London: Macmillan, 1899), 147–49. Jackson discusses the question of the existence of two Zarathustras in relation to a passage in Pliny but the second one would have flourished much later than the Theosophist's Zarathustra, see Jackson, *Zoroaster*, 153. In *Zoroastrianism in the light of theosophy*, Henry Steel Olcott, one of the founding figures of the *Theosophical Society*, gives in a footnote a lengthy explanation of the theory, see Henry S. Olcott, "The Spirit of the Zoroastrian Religion," in *Zoroastrianism in the Light of Theosophy*, ed. Nasarvanji F. Bilimoria (Bombay : "Blavatsky Lodge" Theosophical Society, 1898), 3–4n. The volume was published by a prominent Parsi member of the Theosophical Society.

79
See Papus, *Traité élémentaire de science occulte* (Paris: G. Carré, 1888), 114.

80
Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathushtra*, 1:563–65.

81
René Guénon, *La crise du monde moderne*, Tradition 3, 7e éd. (Paris: Gallimard, 1946), 22. Another example can be found in René Guénon, "Letter to Vasile Lovinescu, 19.5.1935," accessed April 27, 2023, http://www.index-rene-guenon.org/Access_book.php?sigle=C-VLov&page=6; René Guénon, "Letter to Patrice Genty, 16.04.1935," accessed April 7, 2023, http://www.index-rene-guenon.org/Access_book.php?sigle=C-PaGe&page=68.

82
There exists no academic biography of Evola. For his activities during the fascist era, see Peter Staudenmaier, "Racial Ideology Between Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany: Julius Evola and the Aryan Myth, 1933–43," *Journal of Contemporary History* 55, no. 3 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1177/0022009419855428; Peter Staudenmaier, "Julius Evola and the 'Jewish Problem' in Axis Europe: Race, Religion and Antisemitism," in *Religion, Ethnonationalism, and Antisemitism in the Era of the Two World Wars*, ed. Kevin P. Spicer and Rebecca Carter-Chand, McGill-Queen's Studies in the History of Religion (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022). On his involvement with Traditionalism and its interplay with fascism see Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 98–109. Evola has gained some popularity in modern right-wing discourse on the internet, see

role in his conception of Zarathustra. Guénon had also pointed him to new sources on Hyperborea, recommending *Tilak's Arctic Home of the Veda* over Alfred Rosenberg, who seems to have been referenced in Evola's first draft.[87] In his conception, Zarathustra appears as a restorer of the traditional cult, which was in danger of degenerating, thereby defusing the conflict between Hinduism and Zoroastrianism as painted by Guénon.[88] Evola adopts some more points of Guénon's criticism, too, while ignoring others, e.g., he briefly mentions the moralizing element in Zoroastrianism that Guénon pointed out, but does not incorporate the note concerning the etymology of Skt. *asura* and Av. *ahura* proposed by Guénon.[89]

Evola and Guénon approach different aspects of Zoroastrianism as having varying significance. For Evola, Zoroastrianism is a Traditional Aryan warrior cult. He refers to it as "il dualismo guerriero mazdeo."[90] His interpretation of Franz Cumont's work on Roman Mithraism may have influenced this perspective, which holds a significant role in *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno*. Unlike Guénon, Evola references a wide range of academic sources, although he does not consistently quote them when referring to primary sources.[91] Often, he mentions concepts such as av. *xᵛarənah-* "the glory of the kings," and the Av. *fravaši*s, whom he thinks of as warrior spirits. They hold a specific importance in his later publications on the topic.[92] In Evola's perspective, this martial Zoroastrianism becomes a significant testimony to his conception of the Western path of traditional societies. According to Evola, this path is characterized by an active and warrior-like spirit, which he believed to be more suited to Europeans. In contrast, Evola associated contemplation with the East, an implicit criticism of Guénon's engagement with and views on Hinduism and especially Islam, highlighting their very different views on initiation into Tradition.[93]

Two of Evola's German publications from the Third Reich use Zoroastrianism as a key witness to argue for the spiritual importance of war in the traditional life of the Aryan race: an article written for *Geist und Zeit* published in October 1939 and the print version of a lecture steeped in it, which Evola had delivered at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute in Rome in 1940.[94] They both expand on material already found in the chapter on "holy war" in *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno*, which delves into the concept of Jihad in Islam.[95] However, in the later publications, Evola speaks of the "Aryan origin"[96] of the concept. This view contrasts sharply with Guénon's conception of the relationship between Islam and Zoroastrianism and his evaluation of Zoroastrianism in general. It is indeed notable that the works "Über die alt-arische Auffassung des Sieges und des 'Heiligen Kampfes' " ("On the Ancient Aryan Notion of Victory and the 'Holy Battle' ") and *Die arische Lehre von Kampf und Sieg* (*The Aryan Doctrine of Struggle and Victory*) were intended for German audiences and exhibit a more racially-charged line of argumentation compared to Evola's earlier publication. These works coincide with a period when he actively sought to reach a German readership and aimed to influence the Italian and German regimes' racial policies.[97]

Among other factors, Guénon's perception of Zoroastrianism as a relic of the past appears to influence his depiction of the contemporary

Moritz Maurer, "Conspirituality and Meme Culture: Transgressive Dynamics in Right-Wing Esoteric Social Media Discourse," *Religion*, preprint (2024): 7–8.

83
Translated from René Guénon, "Letter to Julius Evola, 21.10.1933," accessed April 10, 2023, http://www.index-rene-guenon.org/Access_book.php?sigle=C-JuEvo&page=3.

84
René Guénon, "Letter to Julius Evola, 21.11.1933," accessed April 8, 2023, http://www.index-rene-guenon.org/Access_book.php?sigle=C-JuEvo&page=4; René Guénon, "Letter to Patrice Genty, 12.02.1935," accessed April 7, 2023, http://www.index-rene-guenon.org/Access_book.php?sigle=C-PaGe&page=67.

85
Guénon, "Letter to Julius Evola, 21.10.1933."

86
Julius Evola, *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno* (Milano: Ulrico Hoepli, 1934), 325n49.

87
See René Guénon, "Letter to Julius Evola, 14.10.1933," accessed April 7, 2023, http://www.index-rene-guenon.org/Access_book.php?sigle=C-JuEvo&page=2. On Guénon's reliance on this rather questionable author cf. Alain Daniélou, "René Guénon et la tradition hindoue," in *René Guénon*, ed. Pierre-Marie Sigaud, Les dossiers H (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1984), 137.

88
Evola, *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno*, 247, 324.

89
Cf. Guénon, "Letter to Julius Evola, 21.10.1933."

90
Evola, *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno*, 170.

91
E.g., it seems most likely that for his translations of the *Yašt*s he relies on the *Avesta*-volume by James Darmesteter from the *Sacred Books of the East*, for which, see Evola, *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno*, 180n28. Evola's absorption of the current literature of the 1920s and 1930s is already noted in Melchionda's rather hagiographic article on the various editions of the work, see Roberto Melchionda, "Le tre edizioni di *Rivolta*," in *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno*, by Julius Evola (Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 2007), 458–60. He chooses to exclude mentions of Evola's references to, e.g., H. F. K. Günther, a German race scientist, also known as "Rasse-Günther," who is mentioned four times in the German edition from 1935 but only two times in the fourth edition, in which his publications from the Third Reich were deleted, cf. the references given in Julius Evola, *Erhebung wider die moderne Welt* (Stuttgart, Berlin: Dt. Verlags-Anstalt, 1935), 489; Julius Evola, *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno,* (Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 2007), 469.

Parsi community as well. While in his published works, he mostly mentions them in passing as a minority in India, there are some more extensive passages in his correspondence. In a letter written in Cairo in 1935, he seems to answer a catalogue of questions by Genty, among them a couple dealing with Zoroastrianism. Besides mentioning the idea of several Zarathustras, he further remarks: "[Q]uant à l'Avesta, on n'en connaît que ce qu'ont conservé les Parsis de l'Inde, et qui est très incomplet."[98] While the remark is factually correct, Guénon might have more in mind, as a loss of Tradition in his system is exactly what dooms Western culture. This is spelled out in two letters to Vasile Lovinescu, written in the following year. Lovinescu was at this time the leading figure of Romanian Traditionalism and in close contact with the antisemitic *Legion of the Archangel Michael*. He was in search of a way to be initiated in a Traditional religious movement and Guénon seems to react—among other things—to questions in this regard; interestingly, he tries to dissuade Lovinescu from involvement with the *Legion*.[99] In the first of the two letters, dating to August 1936, he remarks:

> "The 7th traditional form to be added to those you list is Mazdeism; but I must say that this does not refer to the Parsis, who have only preserved more or less incoherent fragments, although this is all that is usually known as Mazdeism."[100]

It seems like Lovinescu kept asking about the topic. In a letter dated to November of the same year, Guénon reaffirms the point:

> "True Mazdeism now exists only in Turkestan; it has no relation with the Parsis of India, who have preserved only a few fragments of their tradition (that's all we know of them in Europe), and who are generally very ignorant and very 'modernized.' It also appears that there are still Mazdeans in Persia itself, in certain inaccessible parts of the Mazanderan province . . ."[101]

Here, the perspective that was already laid out in the previous letters is explicated. Guénon disregards the modern Parsi community as cut off from tradition and too modernized to be a valid source of genuine initiation. A similar point is made in a letter to Evola written in 1949:

> "I don't know if he [Meher Baba] was ever attached to any regular initiatic organization, but it seems doubtful to me because he is a Parsi, as there seems to be nothing of the sort among the Parsis of India, who have only preserved very incomplete fragments of their tradition (I say the Parsis of India, because those of Central Asia have quite different knowledge, although they keep it very hidden)."[102]

Interestingly, a view similar to this is also found in Theosophical publications on Zoroastrianism. Henry Steel-Olcott (1832–1907), one of the founding figures of the Theosophical Society, complains of the materialism of large parts of the Parsi community. In the introduction to the collected volume *Zoroastrianism in the Light of Theosophy,* he

92
The former, e.g., in Julius Evola, *Sintesi di dottrina della razza* (1941; repr., Padova: Edizioni di Ar, 1978), 201. On the *fravašis* see below.

93
Cf. Paul Furlong, *Social and Political Thought of Julius Evola*, Extremism and democracy 13 (London: Taylor & Francis, 2013), 41–45.

94
Julius Evola, "Über die alt-arische Auffassung des Sieges und des 'Heiligen Kampfes,' " *Geist der Zeit*, Oktober (1939); Julius Evola, *Die arische Lehre von Kampf und Sieg*, Veröffentlichungen der Abteilung für Kulturwissenschaft Reihe 1, Bibliotheca Hertziana 28 (Wien: Schroll, 1941).

95
Evola, *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno*, 158–73.

96
"Arische Herkunft," Evola, "Über die alt-arische Auffassung des Sieges und des 'Heiligen Kampfes,' " 700 Cf. the similar passage in Evola, *Die arische Lehre von Kampf und Sieg*, 8.

97
Staudenmaier, "Racial Ideology between Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany: Julius Evola and the Aryan Myth, 1933–43," 480–81.

98
See Guénon, "Letter to Patrice Genty, 16.04.1935."

99
On Lovinescu cf. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 110–16.

100
Translated from René Guénon, "Letter to Vasile Lovinescu, 28.08.1936," accessed April 28, 2023, http://www.index-rene-guenon.org/Access_book.php?sigle=C-VLov&page=24.

101
Translated from René Guénon, "Letter to Vasile Lovinescu, 10.11.1936," accessed April 28, 2023, http://www.index-rene-guenon.org/Access_book.php?sigle=C-VLov&page=25.

102
René Guénon, "Letter to Julius Evola, 29.10.1949," http://www.index-rene-guenon.org/Access_book.php?sigle=C-JuEvo&page=13. While it is unclear how he formed the theory of more knowledgeable Zoroastrians living in Central Asia, an article published in *La Gnose* in 1910 already seems to hint at his belief in the existence of a hidden ancient civilization there, for which, cf. René Guénon, "À propos d'une mission dans l'Asie centrale," in *Mélanges*, Les Essais 194 (Paris: Gallimard, 1976). Interestingly, this article is a response to the presentation of the results of Paul Pelliot's expedition to Chinese Turkestan. A similar view as to the existence of decidedly Zoroastrian texts to be recovered archaeologically from there is also held by the Theosophist Henry Steel-Olcott, see Olcott, introduction to *Zoroastrianism in the Light of The-*

writes:

> "Of all the grand old religions, Zoroastrianism, or Mazdanism, is until now in worst case. To this deplorable fact various causes have contributed. Among these, the destruction of the Persian Empire and the upheaval of its social order by military conquerors . . . the ruthless destruction of temples, religious books and libraries . . . and the deadening effect on the exiles of a policy of eager money-getting, with neglect of spiritual teachers and teachings . . . and the placing of worldly success and worldly honours above all other subjects of endeavour, are to be borne in mind . . . [A]t the same time, it rejoices my heart to see as any one may in the essays which comprise the present volume that some of the best Parsi thinkers have begun to apply to their religion the key of Theosophy, and found that it lets them into various obscure chambers of their temple."[103]

We see a very similar perspective to Guénon's—with one difference. While in Guénon's system, a religion that has lost its connection to Tradition is lost, i.e., an invalid source of initiation, in the Theosophical system, there is rescue, of course: Theosophy itself, as the key to lost religious truths to be found in scriptures and rituals.

This short survey shows that Traditionalist perceptions of Zoroastrianism differ significantly from more classical conceptions found in the history of esotericism. Remarkably, neither Evola nor Guénon seem to show much interest in the figure of Zarathustra. Still, we see a surprising amount of talking points in Guénon, most likely derived from Theosophy and through Guénon's influence also in the works of Evola, who especially reacted to and incorporated academic publications in his writings. Comparing the thoughts of these two Traditionalists shows how the role of Zoroastrianism shifts according to the importance of racial doctrine and its perceived role in the history of Traditional religion. From here, further investigations could focus on the influence Traditionalism had on depictions of Zoroastrianism in scientific works; for instance, those of Mircea Eliade, who was in correspondence with Evola and Guénon,[104] and who picks up, e.g., the conception of the Alborz Mountain as a mystical center of the world, which Guénon had already discussed in *Le roi du monde*.[105]

Concluding Remarks

The study of Zoroastrianism stands to gain significant insights from engagement with the study of esotericism. This includes the lessons to be learned from its historical development as an academic discipline. As we have seen, it is crucial to exercise caution when employing the term "esotericism" as an analytical concept without due reflection. Although scholarly debates on this matter persist, it is ill-advised to reintroduce the concept within a typological or religionist framework, as the limitations and challenges associated with such an approach have become evident in the analysis of Shaked's and Russell's influential articles.

Nevertheless, engaging with research focused on premodern

osophy. Also compare his previous remarks on Zoroastrians in the Caucasus.

103
Olcott, introduction to *Zoroastrianism in the Light*, iii–iv.

104
On the early contacts between Eliade and Traditionalism, see Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 109–14.

105
See Guénon, *Le Roi du Monde*, 58, 61, 73. Eliade uses it, e.g., in Mircea Eliade, *Le chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase*, 2e éd., rev. et augmentée, Bibliothèque scientifique (Paris: Payot, 1968), 217.

materials can provide valuable tools for formulating novel heuristic approaches to the study of Zoroastrianism, thereby opening fresh perspectives. The investigation of revelatory knowledge claims, particularly those linked to divinatory rituals, has broadened the horizons of inquiry through the recognition of their interconnectedness with questions concerning mediality. There seems to be no exoteric/esoteric binary at play but rather a complex relationship with other knowledge claims and mediality. As a result, it seems more appropriate to speak here of ritual knowledge claims in order to differentiate the concept from the term "revelatory knowledge claims," which is very much tied to the esoteric discourse.

By expanding our examination to encompass the global history of esotericism, commencing from the nineteenth century, we can explore the intermingling of discourses and uncover intriguing correlations between diverse discursive fields. Through this, we can enhance our comprehension of how images of Zarathustra and Zoroastrianism are constructed and appropriated across different esoteric currents and how modern Zoroastrians engaged in the global exchanges, shaping the emergence of esotericism in the nineteenth century. In this chronological framework, Zoroastrian esotericism is clearly a tangible concept, e.g., in its connection to Theosophy or, as Mariano Errichiello was able to show, its own esoteric movements.

The case of Traditionalism is an illustrative example, demonstrating how conceptions of history, race, and spiritual practice in the twentieth century influenced discourses surrounding Zoroastrianism. Hereby it became evident how Guénon, who had publicly positioned himself as an aggressive opponent of the Theosophical Society, nonetheless displayed a strong reliance on Theosophical discourses.

By embracing this multidisciplinary approach and engaging with a wide range of scholarly perspectives and diverse sources, we can illuminate new dimensions of Zoroastrianism that transcend conventional disciplinary boundaries. While speaking of pre-modern Zoroastrian esotericism seems—from the perspective taken here—of somewhat questionable heuristic use, engaging with concepts from the study of esotericism can open new perspectives on well-known material. Beyond that, the engagement between Zoroastrianism and esotericism from the nineteenth century onwards in all its complexity still holds a lot of potential for further research. In continuing this line of inquiry, we deepen our understanding of the intricate complexities inherent within Zoroastrianism and the multifaceted pictures of it found in diverse global discourses, situating it within a broader cultural and historical context.

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Early American Transcendentalist Encounters with Zoroaster

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Abstract
While Parsi Zoroastrians were confronting the onslaught of Christian missionary activities in Bombay in the 1840s, members of the recently established Transcendental Club in Massachusetts were promoting their perception of Zoroaster as an early model of enlightened thought. The reception and interpretation of the "Persian religion" by prominent transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Amos Bronson Alcott, and Henry David Thoreau constitute the predominant American "encounter with Zoroaster" of the time. Their appropriation of Zoroaster is connected loosely to the broader field of "Zoroastrian esotericism" via their selective presentations of "Zoroastrian" texts in lectures, "Sunday readings," and the Transcendentalist publication, *The Dial*. The text that Emerson used for his choice of Zoroastrian "Ethnical Scripture" for inclusion in the volume of *The Dial* of July 1843 was not one that would be recognized as pivotal by most Zoroastrians today, but was considered by many Parsis of the time, as also by European scholars, to be an authoritative religious work. This was an English rendition of a pseudo-Zoroastrian mystical work known as *The Desatir*, the translation of which had been commissioned by the leading Parsi Zoroastrian priest in Bombay a few decades earlier.

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The connection between American Transcendentalism and the broader field of "Zoroastrian esotericism" lies mostly in the reception and interpretation of the religion by two of its leading New England advocates, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1883) and Amos Bronson Alcott (1799–1888). Both attended the so-called Transcendentalist Club, which was initially established in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in late 1836 to introduce a more experiential approach to discourse about religion. Meetings thereafter were held at members' homes in Boston. Participants, including several local Unitarian ministers, were particularly interested in the Romanticism inherent in the works of contemporary German philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and Georg W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), and European literati including Johann W. von Goethe (1749–1832) and Samuel T. Coleridge (1772–1834). The esoteric reading of the Zoroastrian religion and its founder that so appealed to the New England Transcendentalists finds particular context in European Romantic poetry and story, which often appropriated obscure figures from the past to transport readers to new visions of the present, albeit tinged with the orientalist biases of the time. For Americans and Europeans educated in the liberal arts, the prime introduction to an "Eastern" work that explored what could be termed a "Romantic" view of nature was a classical Sanskrit drama by Kālidāsa, which was translated first into Latin then English by Sir William Jones (1746–1794). Jones's English translation of *Sácontala, or the Fatal Ring*, initially published in Calcutta in 1789, then quickly reproduced by European presses, including a German translation by George Foster (1754–1794) in 1791, exposed Western readers to mythological and epic themes that would have been unfamiliar to them from a classroom study of Greek and Roman texts, such as Herodotus, Xenophon, Caesar, or Virgil.

Subsequent works by European authors such as Goethe became seminal in introducing Eastern languages, literary forms, and symbolism to a wider western audience, including those in North America. Although Goethe's reading interests included travelogues and histories relating to the whole of Asia, as then known, it seems that Persian literature appealed to him more than that of India, despite his enduring admiration for both Kālidāsa's play and its eponymous heroine. Goethe's awareness of Iranian mythical history and religion was not restricted to the Islamic period, nor confined to the poetry of Hāfez through Joseph von Hammer's German translation (which he first read in 1814). References in Goethe's diary entries between January and May of 1815 inform us that he knew Jean Chardin's *Voyages en Perse* and had borrowed from the library Saʾadi's *Gulistan*, von Hammer's *Die Fundgruben des Orients* ("Treasures of the Orient"), volume 1 of Heinrich Friedrich von Diez's *Denkwürdigkeiten von Asien* ("Memoires of Asia"), and the latter's translation from Persian of the *Qābusnāmeh* as *Das Buch des Kabus*.[1]

Goethe's *West-östlicher Divan* (1819), named after the collection of poems (Pers. *divān*) by Hafez, furthered the use of themes relating to Iranian myth and lyric that had first been introduced into German literature through Christoph Martin Wieland's *Dschinnistan*.[2] The author's *Noten und Abhandlungen* ("Notes and Essays") attached to the *Divan*, includes a commentary on the "Ancient Persians" (*Ältere*

1
Momme Mommsen, "Zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Buchs der Sprüche" in *Studien zum West-östlichen Divan Goethes*, ed. Edgar Lohner (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1971), 107–8.

2
Jenny Rose, *The Image of Zoroaster: The Persian Mage Through European Eyes* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 128–30, 151.

Perser) in which Goethe explains some of their religious customs and practices, with reference to Zoroaster as reforming an "original pure natural religion" into an elaborate cult.[3] The eleventh section of *West-östlicher Divan* develops some of the themes that Goethe drew from his understanding of the ancient Iranian belief system; it is titled *Parsi Nameh, Buch des Parsen* ("Book of the Parsis") with a subtitle "Vermächtnis altpersischen Glaubens" ("Testament of Old Persian Faith"). In this "Parsi book," Goethe, in company with earlier European Enlightenment literati and contemporary Romantic poets, depicts an early natural religion, which emphasizes all the elements of the world, including humanity, as manifesting a divine existence and power (cf. *Parsi Nameh*, ll. 37–52). The notion that religion evolved through the human experience of the natural world, as also from an intuitive perception of truth that is not bound to religious doctrine or authority, placed human reasoning above prophetic revelation. In his *Essai sur les Moeurs* (1756), Voltaire had succinctly summarized the view that the ancient Persian Zoroaster was the first of all philosophers to teach humans what they already knew in their hearts.[4] In this respect, Zoroaster was construed as the epitome of natural religion, and a model for moral philosophers through the ages. Goethe comments on the Ancient Persians: "Such a delicate religion, founded on the ever-present God in his works in the world of the senses, must exercise its own influence on morals [or manners; Ger. *Sitten*]."[5]

Goethe's *Parsi Nameh* develops the notion of an immanent God working in the world of the senses; he writes of the splendour of the rising sun which is greater than a king with all his jewels, since it is the light within which God is enthroned (*Parsi Nameh*, ll. 5–20).[6] The Notes refer to a "baptism in fire" (*Feuertaufe*) in explanation of the poem's allusion to the immersion of the new-born child in the fiery rays of the sun (*Feuerbade*: *Parsi Nameh*, ll. 29–31).[7] The concept of the sun's light reflecting "le feu d'Ormusd" ("the fire of Ohrmazd") would have been familiar from Anquetil Duperron's publication.[8] Human mirroring of this divine sunlike splendor is a theme that had featured in Mozart and Schikaneder's singspiel *Die Zauberflöte*, in which the protagonist Sarastro (Zoroaster), a Masonic high priest of the Temple of Wisdom, is the antithesis of the Queen of the Night, who is "banished by the brilliance of the sun" (*Die Zauberflöte* II.20).[9] At the end of the opera, the entire stage set is transformed into a sun, with Sarastro standing in an elevated position as he utters the triumphant words, "Die Strahlen der Sonne vertreiben die Nacht, Zernichten der Heuchler erschlichene Macht" ("The rays of the sun drive out the night [and] crush the fraudulently- obtained power of the hypocrite"; *Die Zauberflöte* II.30).[10]

Goethe later refers to the remnant "Parsi" religion in Persia, as "still persevering here and there in its primitive purity, even in desolate nooks" and as having brought much good through the ages.[11] The ascription of an innate morality and wisdom to the ancient Persian religion is revisited by the Transcendentalists in their presentation of Zoroaster and Zoroastrian text.

3
Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Poetische Werke*, Band 3 (Berlin: Aufbau, 1960), 174.

4
Rose, *Image*, 99.

5
Goethe, *Poetische Werke*, 3:175, "Eine so zarte Religion, gegründet auf die Allgegenwart Gottes in seinen Werken der Sinnenwelt, muss einen eignen Einfluss auf die Sitten ausüben."

6
See Goethe, *Poetische Werke*, 3:174, "Auf das Anschauen der Natur gründete sich der alten Parsen Gottesverehrung. Sie wendeten sich, den Schöpfer anbetend, gegen die aufgehende Sonne, als der auffallend herrlichsten Erscheinung. Dort glaubten sie den Thron Gottes, von Engeln umfunkelt, zu erblicken. Die Glorie dieses herzerhebenden Dienstes konnte sich jeder, auch der Geringste, täglich vergegenwärtigen."

7
Modi supposes that this may be a reference to the injunction in the *Saddar* (16.2) to kindle a lamp or fire at the birth of a child, and that Goethe may have read this in Hyde's *De vetere religione Persarum*; Jivanji Jamshedji Modi, *Goethe's Parsi-nameh Or Buch Des Parsen, i.e., The Book of the Parsees*, in *Asiatic Papers,* part 2 (Bombay: The Times Press, 1917), 119–48; 137–38. The notion of a "baptism in fire" recalls Bernard Picart's curious depiction of 'Baptême par le Feu des Gaures' in his *Cérémonies et Coutumes* (1723–38), where the baby is passed over the flames of a fire; see Rose, *Image*, 113.

8
Cf. Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil Duperron, *Zend-Avesta, ouvrage de Zoroastre,* vol. 1, pt. 2 (Paris: N. M. Tilliard, 1781), 180.

9
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Die Zauberflöte: Libretto* (New York: The Metropolitan Opera, 1990).

10
Mozart, *Die Zauberflöte: Libretto*.

11
Goethe, *Poetische Werke*, 3:177, "Willkür der Herrscher, hält sich noch diese Religion hie und da in der frühesten Reinheit, selbst in kümmerlichen Winkeln, wie der Dichter solches durch das *Vermächtnis des alten Parsen* auszudrücken gesucht hat."

Early Transcendentalist Encounters with Zoroastrian Texts

Although Goethe drew his awareness of Persian history and culture from his wide range of readings, it is not known whether he had come across Thomas Hyde's magnum opus, Historia religionis veterum Persarum (1700), which endured throughout the eighteenth century as a popular summary of the "Persian religion." Hyde referred to Arabic, Hebrew, Persian, and Syriac texts as well as Classical sources, but had no access to Avestan or Pahlavi texts, since these were as yet undeciphered by Europeans. By the time the Transcendentalist movement was underway, however, it was possible for European and American intellectuals to bring Greek philosophy into conversation with Sanskrit and ancient Iranian religious texts. The comparison resulted in the perception that the older Eastern sources promoted the same universal truths of later thinkers. This view was epitomized in the lectures and publications of the Transcendentalists, particularly of Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Emerson's approach to religion was initially influenced by his father, William Emerson (1769–1811), who was a Unitarian minister in Boston, and by his scholarly aunt, Mary Moody Emerson (1774–1863). Both senior Emersons were intrigued by Indian thought and culture.[12] As a regular contributor to the local literary journal *Monthly Anthology and Boston Review*, Revd. Emerson would have had instant access, in the June-December volume of 1805, to its publication of the first act of Jones's translation of *Śakuntalā*. The younger Emerson would have initially encountered adherents of the "Persian religion" through his study of the classics at Boston Public Latin School and then at Harvard College, where he also came across a tale of the "ancient Fire Worshippers of Persia" when he borrowed Irish author Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh: An Oriental Romance* from the Boston Library Society in 1819 and again the following year.[13] The third story of *Lalla Rookh*, entitled "The Fire Worshippers," was allegedly based "on the fierce struggle between the Ghebers or ancient Fire-Worshippers of Persia, and their haughty Muslim masters," but Moore acknowledged that this was a surrogate trope to address the struggles of the Irish under British rule.[14] Although Moore referenced Anquetil's *Zend-Avesta*, such deliberate deployment of ancient history as an analogy for the present required no primary knowledge of the Zoroastrian religion, since its purpose was to serve as a literary cipher.

Emerson and other Transcendentalists also conceived Zoroaster as a cipher in corroboration of their own understanding of enlightenment. Responding, somewhat disingenuously, to a letter from his aunt in the late spring of 1822 concerning her researches into the Hindu religion, Emerson wrote: "One is apt to lament over indolence and ignorance, when we read some of those sanguine students of the Eastern antiquities, who seem to think that all the books of knowledge, and all the wisdom of Europe twice told, lie hidden in the treasure of the Bramins and the volumes of Zoroaster. When I lie dreaming on the possible contents of pages, as dark to me as the characters on the Seal of Solomon, I console myself with calling it learning's El Dorado."[15] From this early period, Emerson sought beyond both romanticized myth and close reading of doctrine, to discern the latent meaning.

As a student in his last year at Harvard, Emerson borrowed Edward

12 See Alan D. Hodder, "Emerson, Rammohan Roy, and the Unitarians," *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1988), 133–48, 140–41. In a letter of May 1822, Mary Moody Emerson wrote to her nephew of "a Visitor here from India, well versed in its literature and theology"; Hodder, "Emerson, Rammohan Roy," 133. The visitor was Rammohan Roy, who became one of the founders of the Hindu-Unitarian syncretic movement known as Brahmo-Samaj.

13 Carl T. Jackson, *The Oriental Religions and American Thought: Nineteenth-Century Explorations*, Contributions in American Studies 55 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), 46.

14 Thomas Moore, *Lalla Rookh*: *An Oriental Romance* (Halifax: Milner and Sowerby, 1859), x; see also Rose, *Image*, 161–63.

15 Hodder, "Emerson, Rammohan Roy," 134.

Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. The first of the six volumes comments on Persian rule and religion, including the remark that under the Parthians and then the Macedonians "the memory of Zoroaster, the ancient prophet and philosopher of the Persians was still revered in the East."[16] In Emerson's diary, which he began at the age of sixteen and later published as his *Journals*, among the books quoted from or referred to in the years 1820–1821 is listed "Zendavesta, (apud Gibbon)."[17] The tally also includes Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (1721), an early European pseudo-Oriental tale satirizing current French beliefs and social structure but portraying the "most ancient" religion of Persia with sympathy, as expounded in the book of the "law-giver (*législateur*) Zoroastre," which enlightened those who read it "without prejudice."[18]

Emerson seems to have been drawn to Gibbon's outline of the Zoroastrian religious system of belief, which emphasized the two principles, as understood through Anquetil-Duperron's *Zend-Avesta* and Thomas Hyde's older, Latin treatise.[19] Gibbon described how internal schisms had arisen concerning "the obsolete and mysterious language in which the Zendavesta was composed" and the many sects that disputed the basic teachings of the religion. He had earlier noted the difference between *Zend* as "ancient idiom" and *Pehlvi* (Pahlavi), as "the language of the commentary," which "though much more modern, has ceased to be a living tongue."[20] In keeping with western scholarship of the time, Gibbon's use of the misnomer *Zendavesta* derives from the then prevalent misunderstanding that *zand* referred not to the "living" (Pers. *zendeh*) Avesta, but to its Pahlavi commentary (Phl. *zand*).[21] Anquetil had understood the phrase to mean "living speech." In a later volume of his work, Gibbon ascribed "the Zend or Pazend of the Ghebers [Zoroastrians in Iran]" as being "reckoned by themselves, or at least by the Mahometans, among the books which Abraham received from heaven; and their religion is honourably styled the religion of Abraham."[22] According to Gibbon, the resolution of the sectarian schisms concerning the teachings of the religion took place under Artaxerxes, who had formed a council of all the priests of the realm for this purpose: it was only through the reporting of "intimate conferences with the deity" by "Erdaviraph" (Phl. Ardā Wirāz and often read as Ardā Virāf in Pers.), one of the last seven remaining learned and pious Magi, that "the articles of the faith of Zoroaster were fixed with equal authority and precision."[23] Here, the original texts of the religion are presented as authoritative, but arcane, their import lost through the passage of time, but later (re-)clarified through the reporting of a vision by the "righteous" Wirāz.

Such deliberations on the authority of religious teaching and texts apparently resonated with Emerson: after leaving college, he continued to synthesize elements from his readings, thoughts, and experiences, until he arrived at his own vision of the indwelling God, expressed by the phrase "God in thee" in a poem of 1831 titled *Gnothi Seauton* ("Know Thyself"). Just over a decade after Emerson's initial encounter with the "faith of Zoroaster," as summarized by Gibbon, he came across volume thirty-seven of the *Histoire de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres . . . avec les mémoires de Littérature* (Paris, 1774), which contained Anquetil Duperron's *précis* of the re-

16
Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 1 (London: A. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1776), 202, https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=aLcWAAAAQAAJ&pg=GBS.

17
Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson 1820–1872*, vol. 1, *1820–1824,* ed. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1909), 84–85.

18
Montesquieu, *Lettres persanes*, ed. André Lefevre (Paris: Lemerre, 1873), 6.

19
Gibbon, *History*, vol. 1, 202–3.

20
Gibbon, *History*, vol. 1, xxx.

21
See Prods Oktor Skjærvø and Dan Sheffield, "Zoroastrian Scriptures," in *Islam, Judaism and Zoroastrianism,* ed., Zayn Kassam, Yudit Kornberg Greenberg, and Jehan Bagli, Encyclopedia of Indian Religions (New York, NY: Springer, 2018), 790–804, 791.

22
Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 5 (London: A. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1788), 383. The association with Abraham meant that the religion was recognized as belonging to a "people of the book"; cf. *Qur'an* Sura 2.62.

23
Gibbon, *The History*, 1:202. Although the name Virāza is found in an Avestan reference (Yt. 13, 101), the earliest text of this Zoroastrian vision of heaven and hell is in Pahlavi, dating to the nineth or tenth century CE.

ligion: "Exposition du système théologique des Perses, tiré des livres Zend, Pehlevis et Parsis." Emerson transcribed two full pages from this text, which he had borrowed from the Boston Athenaeum on April 18, 1832.[24] His journal entry for that day reads: "Strange poem is Zoroastrism [sic]. It is a system as separate and harmonious and sublime as Swedenborgianism—congruent . . . One would be glad to behold the truth which they all shadow forth . . . One sees in this, and in them all, the element of poetry according to [Francis] Jeffrey's true theory, the effect produced by making everything outward only a sign of something inward: Plato's *forms* or *ideas* which seem almost tantamount to the *Ferouers* [*frauuašis*] of Zoroaster."[25]

The "poetry" that Emerson identified as inherent in all religions, and the means through which inner reality or truth is illuminated, was, he felt, exemplified in the Zoroastrian concept of "Fire, the sun of Ormuzd." Like Plato's *forms*, Emerson understood, through his reading of Anquetil Duperron, that this concept of fire represented "though imperfectly, the original fire which animates all beings, forms the relations which exist between them and which in the beginning was a principle of union between Ormuzd and Time-*sans-bornes* ['without limit']."[26] The encapsulation of such an ontological scheme through what he termed the "fictions" of "elemental theories" and "primeval allegories" nonetheless seemed to Emerson to bring humans nearer to "divine truth" than "less pretending prose."[27]

Zoroaster, the perceived promulgator of such "fictions"—albeit transmitted via the biased and incomplete translations of Western scholars—was identified by Emerson as an early exemplar of the "alleged Light, or Conscience, or Spirit, [which] takes different names in every new receiver."[28] This allusion comes from a lecture given in early 1835 by Emerson, which focused on a much later embodiment of such illumination—the English religious dissenter, George Fox. The latter's reliance on "inner light" and a personal experience of the divine was at the heart of the revivalist movement known as "Quakerism," which became the Society of Friends. The Friends' conviction that all are capable of experiencing the divine nature of the universe, and that God speaks to all who listen and who are open to receive such messages, seems to have resonated with Emerson's own conception of each person's intuitive ability to discern religious truths. He postulated that the same internal principle that led "Zoroaster of Persia" to divine truth could be found in the enlightened teachings of other ancient sages: "Confucius in China, Orpheus in Greece, Numa in Italy, Manco Capac in Peru all asserted it. In terms and manner more remarkable Moses and Jesus in Palestine averred the same thing and an unbroken chain of witnesses ever since conspire in the same testimony."[29] Given this construction of a perennial "unbroken chain," Emerson postulated that each individual who so determined could commune with the divine. In an essay on "Self-Reliance," he declared: " 'To the persevering mortal,' said Zoroaster, 'the blessed Immortals are swift.' "[30]

Because truth so acquired was timeless, it was also, paradoxically, always new. In his article "Inspiration" in *Letters and Social Aims* (1875), Emerson wrote: "The raptures of goodness are as old as history and new with this morning's sun. The legends of Arabia, Persia and India are of the same complexion as the Christian. Socrates, Menu

24
Kenneth Walter Cameron, *Ralph Waldo Emerson's Reading: A Corrected Edition* (Hartford, CT: Transcendental Books, 1962), 19.

25
Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson 1820–1872*, vol. 2, *1824–1832,* ed. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1909), 473–74, citing *Académie des Inscriptions*, vol. 37, 623. Scottish-born lawyer Francis Jeffrey (1773–1850) was an editor, essayist, and literary critic before entering British politics in 1829.

26
Emerson, *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson 1820–1872*, 2:474–75.

27
Emerson, *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson 1820–1872*, vol. 2, *1824–1832*, citing page 643 quoting from the *Histoire de l'Académie des Inscriptions*, vol. 37.

28
Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 1, *1833–1836*, ed. Stephen E. Whicher and Robert E. Spiller (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1966), 166.

29
Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 1:166. Numa Pompilius was said to have founded the religious institutions of Rome, and Manco Capac the Inca dynasty at the capital of Cuzco.

30
Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson's Complete Works*, vol. 6, *Essays, First and Second Series* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1929), 78.

[Manu], Confucius, Zertusht [Zoroaster]—we recognize in all of them the ardor to solve the hints of thought . . ."[31] Emerson and other Transcendentalists recognized no proprietary rights of these original teachers to the "old worships" that they promulgated, which easily "domesticate themselves in the mind" and in which he found no antiquity, claiming: "They are mine as much as theirs."[32]

An entry in Bronson Alcott's journal for 1839 declares that such enduring truths should not only be accessible to the learned elite, but to all. During an afternoon with Emerson, Alcott had proposed that English readers should be exposed to the works of the great minds of the past: "Confucius, Zoroaster, Paracelsus, Galen, Plato, Bruno, Behmen [Boehme], Plotinus, More, Swedenborg etc. should be in the hands of every earnest scholar of the Soul. Had I the means, I should like to collect these works and set scholars into translating them into our tongue . . . We should have access to the truth through the purest channels."[33] Alcott's idea was to bring together all significant religions and philosophies into a "world Bible" that would transcend its component parts and unfurl its mysteries—its "truth"—to all.

31
Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 8, *Letters and Social Aims* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1917), 275.

32
Emerson, *Complete Works*, 6:28.

33
Jackson, *Oriental Religions*, 71.

A Zoroastrian Esoteric Text comes to Boston

In the Spring of 1836, as the Transcendentalist movement was taking shape as a distinctive reaction within—and then challenge to—the Unitarian congregations of New England, Emerson borrowed Anquetil Duperron's three-volume *Zend-Avesta* from the Boston Athenaeum.[34] But when he came to choose a representative Zoroastrian "Ethnical Scripture" to include in *The Dial*, the Transcendentalist journal of which he was now the editor, Emerson did not opt for Anquetil's translations of parts of either the Avesta or the Pahlavi *Bundahišn* with its detailed Zoroastrian cosmogony and cosmography. Instead, he reproduced a selection of extracts that he himself had arranged from the English translation of a pseudo-Zoroastrian mystical work of the Kayvānī sect, titled *The Desatir* (Pers. *Dasātīr-e āsmānī,* "Heavenly Regulations").[35] This work was considered by some contemporary Zoroastrians in both Iran and India, as also by European scholars, to be an authoritative scripture. Jonathan Duncan (1756–1811), the British governor of Bombay, who began the English translation at the behest of the city's leading Parsi Zoroastrian priest, Mulla Firuz (d. 1830), considered it to be an authentic Zoroastrian text.[36] In his preface to the 1818 publication, Mulla Firuz quotes William Jones's words from decades earlier, after the latter had encountered reference to *Dasātīr-e āsmānī* in an extract translated from *Dabistān-e mazāheb* ("School of Doctrines," another Kayvānī work): "The primeval religion of Iran, if we rely on the authorities adduced by Mohsan Fani [the attributed author of *Dabistān*] was that which Newton calls the oldest (and it may justly be called the noblest) of all religions."[37] Jones's affirmation, and his summary of that old, noble religion and its primary sources, as he understood them, influenced the western perception of Zoroastrianism well into the following century.

On publication, however, both the rendition into modern Persian of the "heavenly" "Mahabadian"-language text and its Persian commentary, as also its English translation, were castigated by some as spe-

34
Cameron, *Emerson's Reading*, 23. Emerson borrowed the *Zend-Avesta* from March 21 to April 4, 1836. For Emerson's own relationship with the Unitarian church and its tenets, see Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2007), 42–44.

35
Skjærvø and Sheffield, "Zoroastrian Scriptures," 798. For more on this sect, see Daniel J. Sheffield, "Exercises in Peace: Kayvāni Universalism and Comparison in the *School of Doctrines,*" *Modern Asian Studies* (2022), 56, 959–92.

36
Mulla Firuz bin Kaus, *Desatir, or Sacred Writings of the Ancient Prophets: In the Original Tongue; Together with the Ancient Persian Version and Commentary* (Bombay: Courier Press, 1818), ii–iii, vii.

37
Mulla Firuz bin Kaus, *Desatir, or Sacred Writings of the Ancient Prophets*, iii.

cious.[38] Those Parsis who accepted *The Desatir* as genuine, however, used it to reinterpret the religion in the light of the "hidden" doctrine that it expounded. There were a number of British subscribers to the publication in both India and Britain, and copies soon made their way to English ports.[39] Emerson does not seem to have come across the work, however, during his foray to England in 1833. Although he met with William Wordsworth at Rydal Mount in the Lake District and would have been familiar with the latter's long poem *Excursion* in which the figure of "the Persian" modelled a romantic view of ancient Persian religion based on Herodotus's account, there is no indication of any mutual awareness of *The Desatir*.[40]

Emerson seems to have received his English translation copy of *The Desatir* from Britain via Amos Bronson Alcott (1799–1888). It is not known how Alcott obtained the book, but it may have come from one of the 50 English subscribers to the publication. It is likely that some of the social reformers who shared Alcott's utopian ideals were among these subscribers, such as the business journalist Charles Lane (1800–1870), who was the editor and manager of *The London Mercantile Price Current.* This news sheet listed produce prices from around the world, including the East Indies, as well as East India ships that had recently arrived at British ports. Lane and his ten-year-old son sailed to America with Alcott on the *Leland* in October 1842, where he purchased farmland in Harvard, Massachusetts, and co-founded with Alcott the short-lived Fruitlands community. Lane's letters between 1842–1851 mention his acquaintance with Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller and contain a couple of direct correspondences to Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862).[41] In an essay on "English Reformers" which featured in *The Dial* of October 1842, Emerson referred to Lane as "a man of a fine intellectual nature, inspired and hallowed by a profounder faith. . . . This is no man of letters, but a man of ideas. Deep opens below deep in his thought, and for the solution of each new problem he recurs, with new success, to the highest truth, to that which is most generous, most simple, and most powerful; to that which cannot be comprehended, or overseen, or exhausted. His words come to us like the voices of home out of a far country."[42] This homage to Lane's profundity of faith and thought, and recourse to "the highest truth" which is ever present but never fully grasped, reflects Emerson's conviction that for the "self-helping man" who holds to his own path, without regard for the approval of others, "all doors are flung wide . . ."[43]

Emerson obviously considered himself to be one such "self-helping man," adhering to his own selection and interpretation of religious texts. Despite the fact that some scholars of the period doubted the authenticity of *The Desatir*, Emerson claimed that he was indifferent as to whether it or the "*Zendavesta*" were "genuine antiques or modern counterfeits," since he was "only concerned with the good sentences," recognizing all truth to be timeless and eternally relevant no matter their source "whether an hour or five centuries, whether it first shot into the mind of Adam or your own."[44]

The information in Emerson's "Preliminary Notes" to his selections from *The Desatir* for the "Ethnical Scriptures" section of *The Dial* in July 1843 is taken directly from Mulla Firuz's original English-language Preface. Emerson comments that the work "professes to

38
In fact, some of the passages are direct translations from the Arabic *ishraqi* texts of al-Suhrawardī (1154–1191).

39
Jenny Rose, *Between Boston and Bombay: Cultural and Commercial Encounters of Yankees and Parsis, 1771–1865* (Cham, CH: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 162.

40
Emerson also met with Samuel Taylor Coleridge in London and Thomas Carlisle at his home near Dumfries.

41
Charles Lane Papers, Series 1, Folder 1, 1842–1851; Charles Lane Papers, Fruitlands Museum, The Trustees of Reservations, Archives & Research Center.

42
Ralph Waldo Emerson, "English Reformers," in *The Dial: A Magazine for Literature, Philosophy and Religion*, vol. 3 (1843): 227–47, 235, 237.

43
Emerson, *Complete Works*, 6:78.

44
Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson 1820–1872*, vol. 10, *1864–1876*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), 382. A discussion as to whether the "*Zendavesta*" was a genuine work of Zoroaster was contained in the translated volumes of the (third) edition of Bayle's *Dictionary, Historical and Critical*, which Emerson had borrowed from Harvard College Library in February 1824; Rose, *Image*, 95–96. See also Cameron, *Emerson's Reading*, 45. Bayle's article on "Zoroastre" summarizes the legends about him and considers the appeal of Zoroaster and the "Magian" religion to Europe from the classical period to that of Islam.

be a collection of the writings of the different Persian prophets, being fifteen in number, of whom Zerdusht or Zoroaster was the thirteenth, and ending with the fifth Sasan, who lived in the time of Chosroes, contemporary with the Emperor Heraclius."[45] This framing of *The Desatir* as a compilation of works by an otherwise unattested line of "Persian prophets" is reproduced without question by Emerson, who accepts Mulla Firuz's attribution of William Jones as the first to draw attention to the book in England in his second volume of *Asiatic Researches*.[46]

Emerson's introductory paragraph concludes with the statement that "the book was afterwards translated from the Persian by Mr. Duncan, Governor of Bombay and by Mulla Firuz bin Kaus, a Hindoo . . ."[47] This astonishing misidentification of Mulla Firuz's religious affiliation may be ascribed perhaps to his designation as "Mulla," although this was generally a Muslim, not Hindu, honorific for a religious leader. (In Mulla Firuz's case, it is thought that the honorific was bestowed on his father and himself during an extended visit to Iran, when they immersed themselves in Arabic and Persian, as well as Avestan and Pahlavi).[48] The error in religious ascription indicates that Emerson was not particularly concerned to discover anything further about contemporary adherents of the Zoroastrian religion. His interest lay in discovering how their "scriptures" supported his own understanding of the human condition.[49] This approach, particularly his selection and reorganization of some of the material in *The Desatir*, reiterates Emerson's own concept of the role of personal intuition in transcending received forms of wisdom. Within the Transcendentalists' universalist scheme, there was no impetus to meet actual adherents of other faiths since all truths could be gleaned through "self-culture." In an essay penned in 1841, Emerson wrote: "It is for want of self-culture that the superstition of Travelling . . . retains its fascination for all educated Americans . . . The soul is no traveller; the wise man stays at home."[50] Such an attitude may be said to be in keeping with the orientalist biases of the time, implicitly promoting European intellectual superiority over the contemporary "Asian Other," while extolling the ageless wisdom of their ancient predecessors.

Emerson's presentation of "Extracts from The Desatir" introduces re-arranged passages from the book under six generic headings of his own devising: "Litany;" "The prophet;" "Mezdam [Ahura Mazda, as rendered in the English *Desatir*] the first cause, speaks to the worshipper;" "The heavens;" "Morals;" and "Of Writing." The last section includes seven consecutive sentences from the presumed writings of the "Prophet Zirtusht," but for the other five extracts, Emerson combined passages from several of *The Desatir*'s "books" to create his own esoteric rendition of this pseudo-Zoroastrian illuminationist work. These extracts from the work promoted its popularity among his fellow Transcendentalists. A letter from Margaret Fuller to Emerson on November 17, 1844, notes that she has his copy: "The Desatir I want to keep awhile for *Sunday reading*. I will not keep it always."[51] It may be that Emerson's restructuring of this putative Zoroastrian text, as of translations of other Eastern scriptures, made their ideas more accessible to the predominantly Christian readership of *The Dial*.[52]

That the discussion of "Oriental Literature" was also beginning to

45
Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Ethnical Scriptures," in *The Dial: A Magazine for Literature, Philosophy and Religion*, vol. 4 (1844): 59–62, 59.

46
Emerson, "Ethnical Scriptures," vol. 4 (1844): 59–62, 59.

47
Emerson, "Ethnical Scriptures," vol. 4 (1844): 59–62, 59.

48
In the early nineteenth century, the term "Mulla" was also used by Jews in reference to certain Persian and Central Asian rabbis.

49
Sarina Isenberg, "Translating World Religions: Ralph Waldo Emerson's and Henry David Thoreau's 'Ethnical Scriptures' Column in The Dial," *Comparative American Studies* 11, no. 1 (March 2013): 18–36, 20.

50
Emerson, *Complete Works*, 6:80–81.

51
Ralph L. Rusk, ed., *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson,* vol. 3 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), 269. Emerson's copy of *The Desatir* vol. 2, with his signature on the title page and marginalia notes is held in the R.W. Emerson Study Collection of the Concord Museum in Concord, MA. There is no inscription within that indicates that it was given to him by Alcott, or when he received it, nor is it certain whether the marginalia notes belong to Emerson; personal communications from Ryan Nichols, Senior Registrar & Preparator, Concord Museum, September 27, 2018.

52
Isenberg, "Translating World Religions," 24.

be of broad academic interest is evidenced from the formation of the American Oriental Society (AOS) at Harvard in 1842 by John Pickering, a scholar of Arabic and other Near-Eastern languages. The AOS is the oldest such society in America dedicated to a specific field of scholarship, and Emerson became a member.[53] The society's focus on the scholarly analysis of all "Eastern" texts, including, at an early stage, Persian cuneiform and Indian Buddhism, contrasted with the "Sunday readings" mentioned by Margaret Fuller in connection with her borrowing of Emerson's copy of *The Desatir*. The "readings" refers to the regular meetings for constructive, creative analysis of the literary extracts, as well as essay topics, which were reproduced in *The Dial*.

53
William Tolbert, "The American Oriental Society and the Growth of US Empire," *South Atlantic Review* 86, no. 4 (2021): 31–49, 33. The travel author Bayard Taylor was also a member of the AOS. For Taylor's encounters with Parsi Zoroastrians during his visit to Bombay from late 1852 until early 1853, see Rose, *Between Boston and Bombay*, 232–33, 237.

The Sacred Books of Mankind

In 1849 Amos Bronson Alcott formalized these sessions into "Sunday Readings and Conversations," a public forum at which he envisaged segments from the 'Sacred Books of Mankind' being read, "with interpretations and original teachings interspersed."[54] The meetings were to be open to those "disposed to give hospitable entertainment to the words of illuminated Mind of all times." One of the ten works recommended to Alcott for the course by the Unitarian minister of Boston's Church of the Disciples, James Freeman Clarke, was "The Zendavesta." Alcott's purpose in promoting these moments of "hospitable entertainment" was expressed in a diary entry for February 12, 1851: "A few texts, very few, will serve, and more than serve, for the Readings. Of all Mind, Zoroaster, whether he were one or several, a real or mythological Personage, is the more occult and astral of my cycle, doubled and opening into a third in Goethe—the void-mind, mythology and history alike twisted into the web of his Genius, and himself but the spokesman of the Fate that ruled him."[55]

Another work recommended by Clarke "to be sought at the [Boston] Athenaeum" was "Firdusi."[56] Early English translations of parts of the New Persian *Šāh Nāmeh*, including excerpts by William Jones, proclaimed its author, Firdausi, as "the Persian Homer" and it is in this guise that Emerson recognizes the author of the "annals of the fabulous and heroic kings of the country" as rivalling the ancient Greek epic.[57] Alcott's search for other "Sacred Books" from the Athenaeum library led him not only to several works about or ascribed to Confucius, but also to Isaac Preston Cory's translation of "The Oracles of Zoroaster," which he declared to be "superior to [Thomas] Stanley's or Thomas Taylor's."[58] In his *Society and Solitude* of 1870, Emerson's own recommendation of "the best" books of the East included "After the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures, which constitute the sacred books of Christendom . . . the Desatir of the Persians, and the Zoroastrian Oracles."[59] That he makes no reference to any Avestan or Pahlavi works reflects Emerson's opinion that—at least with regards to non-Biblical text—he must choose those "good sentences" that resonate with his own sense of the sacred. After spending the evening with Emerson in mid-August 1866, Alcott wrote in his journal that the two were in agreement that "Oriental scriptures are to be given to the people along with the Hebrew books, as a means of freeing their faith from Hebrew superstition."[60] A similar sentiment had been expressed by Henry Da-

54
Arthur E. Christy, *The Orient in American Transcendentalism: A Study of Emerson, Thoreau and Alcott* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 242.

55
Christy, 247–48.

56
Christy, 243.

57
Emerson, *Complete Works*, 8:241.

58
Christy, *The Orient in American Transcendentalism*, 244.

59
Arthur Versluis, *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 72.

60
Arthur Versluis, *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions*, 101.

vid Thoreau (1817–1862) in *Walden*, when he wrote: "That age will be rich indeed when those relics which we call Classics, and the still older and more than classic but even less known Scriptures of the nations, shall have still further accumulated, when the Vaticans shall be filled with Vedas and Zendavestas and Bibles, with Homers and Dantes and Shakespeares, and all the centuries to come shall have successively deposited their trophies in the forum of the world. By such a pile we may hope to scale heaven at last."[61]

The *Oracula Chaldaica*, translated as "Chaldean or Chaldaic Oracles" had been popular from late antiquity through the mediaeval period into the Renaissance. These mystical poems of purported divine origin contained religious concepts central to various classical philosophies, including Platonic, neo-Pythagorean, and Stoic teachings, along with some Persian elements.[62] They introduce such topics as the Gnostic idea of the freeing of the soul from its captivity within the human being so that it could be reunited with God. Although George Gemistos Pletho (c. 1355–1452) had attributed authorship of the Chaldean Oracles to the Zoroastrian magi, giving them the prestige of antiquity and "Eastern" wisdom, and a sixteenth-century manuscript of Michael Psellus's commentary had referred to them as "the sayings of Zoroaster," there are no grounds for their association with Zoroaster or the Persian magi.[63] Pletho did not formally attribute the Oracles to Zoroaster but promoted the latter as the most ancient legislator and sage who revealed "the truth concerning divine matters" to the Medes, Persians, and other ancient "Asian" peoples.[64] This notion that "the truth concerning divine matters" was first revealed to and by Zoroaster was a trope that held appeal for the Transcendentalists, as later for the Theosophists.[65] Emerson presented his extracts "of all the sentences ascribed to Zoroaster" from Taylor's edition of "The Oracles of Zoroaster and The Theurgists" in *The Dial*'s "Ethnical Scripture" selection for April 1844.[66] Thoreau subsequently referred to "sublime sentences, [such] as the Chaldaean oracles of Zoroaster, still surviving after a thousand revolutions and translations, alone make us doubt if the poetic form and dress are not transitory, and not essential to the most effective and enduring expression of thought."[67]

Whereas Emerson saw a confirmation of his own notion of universal truth expressed in some ancient Indian, Iranian, and Chinese religious texts, which might galvanize a reconsideration of Christian belief and practice, Thoreau approached the Indian spiritual traditions differently, recognizing that they offered alternative truths to received western forms of religion, particularly doctrinaire Christianity. Both addressed the implications of these Eastern texts and their teachings in their own way. For Emerson this meant reproducing his own version of their literature as a means to self-transcendence; he was more interested in "the blasting light of mysticism," rather than form and ritual.[68] Thoreau, on the other hand, was drawn to the asceticism of these religions and its practical application, trying for a time "to live out the Laws of Manu on the shores of Walden."[69]

Prompted by his own attempt to assimilate Eastern religions—and their sages—as a present, lived reality for himself, Thoreau felt that all should experience the thrill of the "noble sentiment of the oldest books," including the Zendavesta, which is "wafted down to us on

61
Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1938), 91.

62
Rose, *Image*, 63.

63
Rose, *Image*, 64.

64
Rose, *Image*, 64.

65
Cf. Michael Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathushtra: Zoroaster und die europäische Religionsgeschichte der frühen Neuzeit*, vol. 1 (Berlin: de Guyter, 1998), 436.

66
Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Ethnical Scriptures," *The Dial: A Magazine for Literature, Philosophy and Religion*, vol. 4 (1844): 529–36, 529.

67
Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers,* https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/4232/pg4232-images.html; see David Scott "Rewalking Thoreau and Asia: 'Light from the East' for a 'Very Yankee Sort of Oriental,' " *Philosophy East and West* 57, no. 1 (January 2007): 14–39, 22.

68
Versluis, *American Transcendentalism*, 78.

69
Versluis, 77.

the breeze of time, through the aisles of innumerable ages" and which "by its very nobleness . . . is made near and audible to us."[70] Thoreau wrote of Zoroaster, along with other teachers, including Socrates, Christ, and Shakespeare, as one of "our astronomers"—that is, as one whose senses had been attuned "to penetrate the spaces of the real, the substantial, the eternal."[71] He hoped that Zoroaster would speak "to the solitary hired man on a farm in the outskirts of Concord [a town in Massachusetts]," whose faith drives him to "silent gravity and exclusiveness,"[72] explaining:

> "Zoroaster, thousands of years ago, travelled the same road and had the same experience; but he, being wise, knew it to be universal, and treated his neighbors accordingly, and is even said to have invented and established worship among men. Let him [the hired man of Concord] humbly commune with Zoroaster then . . ."[73]

The Transcendentalists' reading of Zoroaster, as of other "Eastern" sages, was informed initially by their interest in and access to newly translated sources regarding the religion and its putative founder. Emerson's selection and re-arrangement of passages from *The Desatir* was constructed in support of his own understanding of the human condition and his approach to Christianity. In this respect, he may be said to have paved the way for the subsequent exploration of esotericism relating to Zoroastrian sources, such as pursued by Madame Blavatsky and the theosophists, which included many Parsis.

70 Henry David Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau: Journal*, vol. 1, *1837–1846*, ed. Bradford Torrey (Boston: Houghton Mifflin & Co., 1906), 55. Thoreau's reference to the "Zendavesta" was made in his journal entry for August 22, 1838.

71 Thoreau, *A Week,* 405.

72 Thoreau, *Walden*, 118.

73 Thoreau, 94.

What is Zoroastrian Esotericism? Towards an Ontological Approach

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Abstract

Between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, different interpretations of Zoroastrianism began to emerge among the Parsis of India. Some of these interpretations were based on ideas that Parsis defined as "esoteric." This article examines the participation of Parsis in Freemasonry, the Theosophical Society, and *Ilme Kṣnum* ("Science of Bliss") in modern India. The analysis of primary and secondary sources, combined with the examination of ethnographic data, leads to a definition of "Parsi esotericism" as a heuristic category. This proposal is in discontinuity with the deductive approach that has characterised the study of esotericism in Zoroastrianism and has been largely inspired by a Western conceptualisation of esotericism.

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Introduction

Between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the encounter with colonial modernity had a huge impact on the way Zoroastrianism was understood by its practitioners in India, also known as Parsis. Having built long-standing ties with the Persianate world and having been thoroughly exposed to the Western world and compelled by the proselytising activities of Christian missionaries, Parsis began to propose different interpretations of Zoroastrianism in a quest for religious authenticity. Such a plurality of interpretations found its expression in the printing press which became the space of social debate. Numerous English and Gujarati publications, supporting either one or the other religious views on Zoroastrianism, emerged in India. The protagonists themselves defined some of their interpretive ideas with the English term "esoteric." What did they mean by it?

Secondary sources that engage with esotericism and modern Zoroastrianism fail to answer this question. Publications that describe the impact of Freemasonry and the Theosophical Society on Zoroastrians; the emergence of *Ilme Kṣnum*, Pundolism, and the Mazdaznan movement; as well as claims advanced by public figures like Pavel Global, Meher Master-Moos, and Alexander Bard, among others, constitute significant contributions to scholarship on modern Zoroastrianism.[1] However, they are often informed by a historiographical approach based on the diffusionist model and West-East acculturation. As a consequence, the participation of Parsis in these organisations and movements is often framed as the result of a Westernisation process. I also find it problematic that these organisations, movements, and people are all situated on the margins of the Zoroastrian community, which is described as split between orthodoxy and reform. Such a dichotomous classification of religious communities in colonial India has largely been problematised by scholars like Nile Green.[2] This approach, in effect, perpetrates a Weberian view of society that sees human development as a linear progression and is articulated around binary oppositions, a legacy of Orientalism.

A publication that provides valuable reflections on the question of esotericism and modern Zoroastrianism is that of James Russell on mysticism and esotericism.[3] However, the scholar adopts a deductive approach inspired by a Western connotation of esoteric ideas and practices. Russell identifies three features (i.e., non-ordinary experiences, acquisition of special knowledge, and emotional fulfilment) as criteria to assess the eventual presence of esotericism in Zoroastrianism. This deductive analysis clearly carries the heavy baggage of "Western" esotericism which does not fit the way modern Zoroastrians understand it, as this paper shall show.

By combining analysis of primary and secondary sources with findings of ethnographic research,[4] this article examines the meaning conferred by Parsis to the term "esotericism" through the study of their participation in Freemasonry, the Theosophical Society, and *Ilme Kṣnum* ("Science of Bliss"). As this contribution gives particular emphasis on the constructivist approach emerging from interdisciplinary research, I adopt Niklas Luhmann's operational conceptualisation of first- and second-order categories.[5] It differs from the emic/etic distinction, which is common in anthropological literature, inasmuch

1 Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge, 1979), 205; John R. Hinnells, "The Parsis" in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism,* ed. Michael Stausberg, Yuhan S.-D. Vevaina, and Anna Tessmann (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 168–69; Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Shehnaz N. Munshi, *Living Zoroastrianism: Urban Parsis Speak about Their Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001), 231–75; Tanya Luhrmann, "Evil in the Sands of Time: Theology and Identity Politics among the Zoroastrian Parsis," *Journal of Asian Studies* 61, no. 3 (2002): 861–89; Jesse S. Palsetia, *The Parsis of India: Preservation of Identity in Bombay City* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 264; Michael Stausberg, *Die Religion Zarathushtras: Geschichte, Gegenwart, Rituale,* vol. 2 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002), 123; Michael Stausberg and Anna Tessmann "The Appropriation of a Religion: The Case of Zoroastrianism in Contemporary Russia," *Culture and Religion* 14, no. 4 (2013): 445–62; Anna Tessmann, *On the Good Faith: A Fourfold Discursive Construction of Zoroastrianism in Contemporary Russia* (Huddinge: Södertörns högskola, 2012); Michael Stausberg, "Para-Zoroastrianisms: Memetic Transmissions and Appropriations" in *Parsis in India and the Diaspora*, ed. John R. Hinnells and Alan Williams (London: Routledge, 2007), 236–54.

2 Nile Green, *Bombay Islam: The Religious Economy of the Western Indian Ocean, 1840–1915* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 105–6.

3 James Russell, "On Mysticism and Esotericism among the Zoroastrians," *Iranian Studies* 26, no. 1–2 (1993): 73–94; Shaul Shaked, "Esoteric Trends in Zoroastrianism," *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 3 (1969): 175–222.

4 Fieldwork research conducted in India from 2019 to 2023 consisted of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, filming, and a survey. Research participants were recruited through snowball sampling.

5 Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2000).

as first-order observers are considered unaware that their production is being contextualised. Second-order categories are built by putting first-order insights into perspective. The former thus result from "observations that observe observations."[6] Emic and etic instead refer to different standpoints. Often equated with insider/outsider perspectives, they are the result of second-order observations and examine how an object of knowledge is conceived.[7]

Given the challenges and limitations of interdisciplinarity, Luhmann's approach seems more appropriate for this article's endeavours. The sociohistorical contextualisation provided at the beginning of this contribution sets the ground to appreciate the extent to which Parsis were primary actors in modern India, rather than passive recipients of a Western acculturation. In this vein, I intentionally avoid conceptualising esotericism in order to let it emerge from Parsi "voices." I then conclude by proposing a second-order definition of "Parsi esotericism" in dialogue with scholarship on esotericism.

Parsis, the Persianate World, and Colonial India

In the nineteenth century, while a nationalist discourse was gradually developing in Iran, India was already central to the colonial interests of the British. Parsis were influential social actors between these two worlds. The Zoroastrian religion and myths became pivotal in the narrative of the glorification of the pre-Islamic past which characterised the Iranian nationalist discourse. Literary works portraying the allure of an Iranian intellectual supremacy before the Arab conquest acquired the value of "national artifacts."[8] This narrative massively circulated across the Persianate world, especially in India, through the significant development of Persian print culture.[9]

In this context, Parsis harked back to the glory of their ancestry in Iran. In nineteenth-century India, the activities of the European traders and later the British Rāj furthered a significant transformation in local society. Surat and Bombay, the main economic centres of Western India, became hubs for intellectual exchange. These cities were home to the largest number of Parsis who rapidly became major players in international commerce and enjoyed a close relationship with the British. While the ties of Parsis with the Persianate world facilitated the transition from an Indo-Persianate to a reconstructed pre-Islamic Persian identity, as Daniel Sheffield suggests,[10] their proximity to colonial power exposed them to Western customs and forms of knowledge.

In those years, the Zoroastrians of India accumulated great wealth, established economic empires, and became pioneers in various sectors of social and economic life such as shipbuilding, textiles, infrastructure, print media, education, and scholarship. When Christian missionaries began to promote moral and religious activities in India, they attempted to convert local communities, including the Parsis. Missionaries described non-Christian religions as irrational and superstitious. Likewise, Zoroastrianism and its scriptures became the preferred ground of contestation for the Scottish missionary John Wilson (1804–1875).[11]

The heterogenous response of Parsis to these attacks exposed their theological vulnerability, a vulnerability informed by the absence of

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Luhmann, *Art*, 56.

7
See Russell T. McCutcheon, *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader* (London: Cassell, 1999); Steven J. Sutcliffe, "The Emics and Etics of Religion: What We Know, How We Know It and Why This Matters," in *The Insider Outsider Debate: New Perspectives in the Study of Religion*, ed. George D. Chryssides and Stephen E. Gregg (Sheffield: Equinox, 2918), 30–59.

8
Afshin Marashi, *Nationalizing Iran: Culture, Power, and the State, 1870–1940* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 60.

9
Farajollah Ahmadi, "Communication and the Consolidation of the British Position in the Persian Gulf, 1860s–1914," *Journal of Persianate Studies* 10, no. 1 (2017): 73–86; Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 319; Marashi, *Nationalizing*, 57–65; Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism and Historiography* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 77–123; Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, "Self-Orientalization and Dislocation: The Uses and Abuses of the 'Aryan' Discourse in Iran," *Iranian Studies* 44, no. 4 (2011): 445–72.

10
Daniel J. Sheffield, "Iran, the Mark of Paradise or the Land of Ruin?," in *On the Wonders of Land and Sea: Persianate Travel Writing*, ed. Roberta Micallef and Sunil Sharma (Boston: Ilex Foundation and Center for Hellenic Studies, Trustees for Harvard University, 2013), 14–43.

11
Teresa Albuquerque, *Urbs Prima in Indis: An Epoch in the History of Bombay 1840–1865* (New Delhi: Promilla & Co., 1985), 2, 133–38; Mary Boyce, *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 132; Ian Copland, "The Limits of Hegemony: Elite Responses to Nineteenth-Century Imperial and Missionary Acculturation Strategies in India," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 49, no. 3 (2007): 637–65; Christine Dobbin, *Urban Leadership in Western India: Politics and Communities in Bombay City 1840–1885* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 2–17; Green, *Bombay Islam*, 105–06; Hinnells, "The Parsis," 157–72; Barbara D. Metcalf and Thomas R. Metcalf, *A Concise History of Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 44–47; Palsetia, *The Parsis of India*, 40, 112; John Wilson, *The Parsi Religion: As Contained in the Zand-Avastá, and Propounded and Defended by the Zoroastrians of India and Persia, Unfolded, Refuted, and Contrasted with Christianity* (Bombay: American Mission Press, 1843).

a normative religious authority within the community. What emerged was a need for religious authenticity that favoured the development of distinctive and competing interpretations of Zoroastrianism. Elements of the Iranian nationalist discourse and Western colonial disciplines served as resources for groups of Parsis to articulate what "authentic" Zoroastrianism was, often associating antiquity with authenticity in an Orientalist fashion. Ideas labelled as "esoteric" by Parsis became resources for emerging claims of authenticity.

Parsis exchanged these resources in "relational spaces" which were favoured by the colonial enterprise, like Freemasonry and the Theosophical Society, or established by Parsis themselves, like *Ilme Kṣnum*. The entanglement of Parsis with the West and the Persianate world provided Parsis with the resources to construct truth-claims offering distinctive interpretations of Zoroastrianism. The emergence of a plurality of these claims, differentiated based on "hermeneutics," gave rise to what I define as a "hermeneutical polyphony."[12]

In the following sections, I analyse the findings of the ethnographic research I conducted between 2019 and 2023 in India, during which I met Parsis involved in Freemasonry, Theosophy, and *Ilme Kṣnum*. Although access was difficult, I was able to participate in some of their activities, especially those organised by adherents to *Ilme Kṣnum*. Upon request, I anonymised the markers of identification of some participants; this is signposted with footnotes.[13] The examination of the sociohistorical drivers behind their participation complements these sections. Finally, I discuss how modern Parsis developed an esotericism that could be identified as "Zoroastrian."

12
For further details on Parsi politics of authenticity, relational spaces, and hermeneutical polyphony please read Mariano Errichiello, "Beyond the Theosophical Paradigm: Ilme Kṣnum and the Entangled History of Modern Parsis," *Journal of Persianate Studies* 16, no. 2 (2024): 245–69.

13
Please note that I address anonymised research participants with their first name.

Parsi Freemasons

During my time in India, I found that people taking part in the activities of masonic lodges rarely like to speak publicly about their affiliation. A few Parsis I met disclosed their "initiation into the Craft" only after some time. Even after having revealed this, their answers to my questions were often evasive. This observation forced me to reconsider my positionality and the expectations about the researcher/participants dynamic. The sensation of "being assessed" gradually emerging in me was counterbalanced by the impression that Parsi Freemasons enjoyed being perceived as holders of unutterable truths. Such a layer of secrecy and concealment, however, was not entirely unexpected as it has historically characterised the brotherhood and esotericism in its Western contours, as Jessica Harland-Jacobs and Kocku von Stuckrad suggest.[14]

After several attempts, I succeeded in setting up a meeting with Yazad Mehta,[15] a Parsi Freemason from Mumbai. This was possible through the referral of a common acquaintance, a Parsi Freemason herself, whom I had known for a few years. Such a "referral mode" echoes the way the brotherhood invites new members for initiation, transcending the fieldwork's boundaries and reverting the asymmetry between researcher and participant. I met Yazad on a Wednesday in a Starbucks in Bandra, a residential neighbourhood of Mumbai popular among Bollywood stars. However, with the recent establishment of the Bandra Kurla Complex, Bandra is shifting from being a residential

14
Jessica Harland-Jacobs, *Builders of Empire: Freemasons and British Imperialism, 1717–1927* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 122–23; Kocku von Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Esoteric Discourse and Western Identities* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

15
The identity of this research participant has been anonymised.

area to one of the main corporate centres of the city.

We met at 6pm, right after Yazad finished work at his office job. While savouring an iced Frappuccino, he shared the story of his initiation into Freemasonry. Yazad joined the brotherhood because he thought it was the ideal place to pursue his quest for hidden truths. In fact, the popular reputation of Freemasonry for harbouring secret networks of power and for playing a central role in many conspiracy theories was a hook for him. Aware of his curiosity, one of his friends, a Mason himself, invited Yazad to be initiated into a Delhi lodge more than ten years ago. After the initiation, however, he found out that all the stories about hidden power and conspiracies were made up. The only thing that met his expectations was a consistent degree of secrecy. In fact, Yazad recounted that Freemasons in India are warned not to share details about the ceremonies and activities that take place in masonic gatherings. By contrast, disclosing one's own affiliation is a personal choice. Yazad, for instance, has never told his parents he is a Freemason, fearing a negative reaction.

Freemasonry has almost 300 years of history in India. In 1729, Captain Ralph Farrwinter, an officer of the East India Company, established the country's first masonic lodge. In eighteenth-century South Asia, Freemasonry was instrumental in connecting high-ranking British officers operating in the region with the centre of the Empire. The kernel of this organisation rested upon the principles of charity, benevolence, and universal brotherhood, embedded in ritual symbolism and masonic ceremonies.[16] Yazad confirmed that the focus of today's Freemasonry in Mumbai is, for the most part, unchanged: morality and charity are still at the centre of the brotherhood's activities. The emphasis on these values was reiterated by other Freemasons I met in India, though they are not Zoroastrian and are affiliated with different lodges. Yazad added that Freemasonry endows its members with a moral code that they apply gradually in everyday life, transforming themselves into better human beings. "It's like carving the self out of a stone," he remarked.

The way these principles are put into practice, however, may vary from one lodge to another, shedding light on a certain degree of heterogeneity in Indian Freemasonry. The first lodge that Yazad joined in Mumbai was largely composed of Muslim Masons, he recounted, adding that many of the lodge's charitable activities were directed towards the Muslim community. Yazad found this to contrast with his idea of the universality of the brotherhood's masonic principles, so he switched to a new lodge in South Mumbai where he is currently a Master of the 3rd degree. The vast majority of members of the new lodge are Parsis. Here, he continued, they promote many charitable initiatives for the wider community. During the Covid pandemic, for instance, they financially supported hospitals and funded the construction of health infrastructure to help tackle the virus.[17]

While universal brotherhood is a core value of Freemasonry, it is interesting to note how a clear ethnoreligious distinction emerges from the account of Yazad. I observed that it is common for Parsi Freemasons to join lodges with which a large number of their co-religionists are affiliated. However, these ethnic boundaries are not a masonic specificity but rather a characteristic Parsi orientation. Such boundaries

16
Harland-Jacobs, *Builders of Empire;* Jessica Harland-Jacobs, "Freemasonry and Colonialism," in *Handbook of Freemasonry*, ed. Henrik Bogdan and Jan A. Snoek (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 439–60; Jessica Harland-Jacobs and Jan A. Snoek, "Freemasonry and Eastern Religions," in *Handbook of Freemasonry*, 258–76.

17
I cannot disclose further details on the lodges and the related charitable activities to keep the identity of the research participant anonymous.

materialise even when approaching Zoroastrian sacred spaces in India, as shown in Fig. 1.

Although the participation of a large number of Parsis in Freemasonry may not be surprising for a minority elite of a former colonial city, for a long time access to the brotherhood remained exclusive to British men. In particular, adherence to a monotheistic religion was required for new initiates. British Freemasons made a few exceptions for individuals with a strategic role in the colony, such as Umdat-ul-Umrah Bahadur (1748–1801), the governor of the Carnatic region, who joined the brotherhood in 1775.[18] Access for women has never been allowed, though they played a significant role in the activities of Freemasonry, as found by Harland-Jacobs.[19]

Parsis became involved with Freemasonry when the Grand Master of all Scottish Freemasonry in India, James Burnes (1801–1862), invited Manekji Cursetji (1808–1887) to join the brotherhood. Cursetji was a businessman, judge, philanthropist, and a distinguished member of the Parsi community in Bombay. His initiation into the *Lodge Perseverance* of Bombay, however, was rejected. On a journey to Paris in 1842, Cursetji was initiated as a Freemason and, on returning to India, he again requested admission to the *Lodge Perseverance*. But he was again rejected.[20] Refusing the admittance of individuals thought to show high moral standards and to profess a monotheistic faith contradicted the ideals of equality and universal brotherhood. It was also detrimental to the reinforcement of ties with local influential people. Simon Deschamps suggests that, in 1843, the compatibility of Zoroastrianism with masonic values led some British Freemasons to partner with Cursetji and establish the masonic lodge *Rising Star of Western India* (henceforth *Rising Star*).[21]

The requirements to join Freemasonry today are still very similar. Yazad illustrated how members are required to believe in one God and uphold high standards of morality. But how is morality assessed? Yazad related that the referral system serves as the initial selection process. Then, Parsi candidates are usually asked if they wear the white undergarment (*sudreh*) and girdle (*kustī*), accessories that they are given at their initiation into Zoroastrianism (*navjote*). "This is the way Masons assess whether the candidates are good Zoroastrians," Yazad added.

He went on to describe how, during the performance of masonic ceremonies, all members refer to God as the Great Architect, regardless of their own faith. Yazad asserted that this embodies a non-dogmatic approach towards the belief in a higher divinity, mitigating the risk of falling into the contours of a specific religion and ensuring inclusivity towards all the faiths represented in the masonic assembly. As a Zoroastrian, when he was initiated, Yazad took the oath on the Avesta. He recounted that the ritual of the oath varies according to the religion of the new initiate. Christians take the oath on the Bible; Hindus on the Bhagavad Gita; Muslims on the Koran; Jews on the Torah; Sikhs on the Guru Granth Sahib; and so forth.

The first report of a masonic assembly incorporating the Avesta goes back to the second half of the nineteenth century.[22] In 1854, the Parsi scholar Kharshedji Rustomji Cama (1831–1909) joined the *Rising Star*. His efforts to associate Zoroastrianism with Freemasonry in a

Fig. 1. Banner placed at the entrance of the *Ustad Saheb Behramshah Nowroji Shroff Daremeher* fire temple, Mumbai, India, 2023. Photograph © Mariano Errichiello.

18 Henrik Bogdan, "Freemasonry and Western Esotericism," in *Handbook of Freemasonry*, ed. Henrik Bogdan and Jan A. Snoek (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 277–305; Simon Deschamps, "Freemasonry and the Indian Parsi Community: A Late Meeting on the Level," *Journal for Research into Freemasonry and Fraternalism* 3, no. 1 (2012): 60–71; Harland-Jacobs, *Builders of Empire*, 18, 72; Harland-Jacobs, "Freemasonry and Colonialism," 439–60.

19 Harland-Jacobs, *Builders of Empire*, 16–22. In 2011, the Honourable Fraternity of Ancient Freemasons established the Lodge Bharati 56 in New Delhi, the first women's lodge in India. Although it is not recognised by traditional lodges, female Parsi Freemasons are well connected with and highly regarded by the male "brothers." That is how I was introduced to Yazad Mehta.

20 Deschamps, "Freemasonry and the Indian Parsi Community," 60–71; Antonio Panaino, "Zoroastrians and Freemasonry," in *Freemasonry and Religion: Many Faiths, One Brotherhood*, ed. Trevor Stewart (London: Canonbury Masonic Research Centre, 2006), 51–67.

21 Deschamps, "Freemasonry and the Indian Parsi Community," 60–71.

22 Wadia, *History of Lodge*, 1–40.

universalist fashion were manifold.[23] Besides presenting a copy of the Avesta to the lodge and probably introducing the practice of taking the oath on this Zoroastrian text, the Parsi scholar established the celebration of the *Jamshedi Navroz Masonic Festival* in Parsi masonic lodges. Cama's proposals all aimed to establish the glorious past of pre-Islamic Zoroastrianism as a universal heritage.[24] In his discourse of 1874, Cama attempted to demonstrate that the *Jamshedi Navroz* was based on annual cycles of nature which were universally accepted. In the pamphlet *A Discourse on Zoroastrians and Freemasonry* published in 1876, the scholar argued for similarities between masonic symbolism and Zoroastrianism. Cama's career in the brotherhood was marked by prestigious honours, including the rank of Honorary Depute Grand Master of the Provincial Grand Lodge of All Scottish Freemasonry of India in 1876.[25]

By 1864, all the available positions in the *Rising Star* were held by Parsis. The initiates spoke both Persian and Gujarati alongside English during the lodge's meetings. Notable Parsi Freemasons include the philanthropist Kharshediji Nasarvanji Cama (1815–1885), the textile entrepreneur Dinshaw Maneckji Petit (1823–1901), the "architect" of the Parsi *baugs*[26] Muncherji Cowasji Murzban (1839–1917), the politician Pherozeshah Mehta (1845–1915), and the "great old man of India" Dadabhai Naoroji (1825–1917).[27] In 1899, Jivanji Jamshedji Modi (1854–1933) was initiated into the brotherhood through an inspiring conversation with Cama.[28] The participation of two of the most important Parsi scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Freemasonry informs the impact of universalism and comparativism on the development of Zoroastrian studies as a field.

With the development of Freemasonry and the increased participation of Zoroastrians, lodges whose initiates were exclusively Parsi began to emerge, revealing the tension between ethnoreligious boundaries and the ideal of a universal brotherhood. In these lodges, masonic rituals were adapted to be acceptable to both Freemasonry and Zoroastrianism. The dedication of some lodges to Zoroastrian figures like Cyrus the Great and Zarathustra illustrates the extent to which masonic spaces made it possible to reconstruct a pre-Islamic identity in the Parsi community. Tallin Grigor found that the inclusion of motifs recalling ancient Iran was a wider architectural trend in colonial Bombay, emblematic of a "Persian revival."[29] Yazad explained that, today, some Parsi Freemasons wear masonic paraphernalia that include Zoroastrian symbols, like the pin that combines the masonic triangle and the Persian winged disk with a figure in the centre (*fravahar*).

Yazad recounted that initiates are instructed on the meaning of the brotherhood's symbols and rituals as long as they progress through the masonic degrees. He added that, in the past, they were given many readings, in particular those associated with Western philosophy. Today, they only read masonic ritual books. Through the participation in masonic ceremonies and personal study, Yazad began to examine religions from a comparative perspective. "All of them offer an interpretation of the underlying universal nature. For instance, Hinduism had a great influence on Zoroastrianism, in particular on the worship of fire and on the performance of some ceremonies. Once, Zoroastrians were Hindu; in fact, Persian names proceed from Vedic Sanskrit," Yazad remarked.

23
Panaino, "Zoroastrians and Freemasonry," 51–67.

24
Wadia, *History of Lodge*, 1–40.

25
Kharshedji R. Cama, *A Discourse on Jamshedi Naoroz* (Bombay: n.p., 1874); Kharshedji R. Cama, *A Discourse on Zoroastrians and Freemasonry* (Bombay: n.p., 1876); Harland-Jacobs and Snoek, "Freemasonry and Eastern Religions"; Wadia, *History of Lodge*, 96–97, 140.

26
This term refers to housing colonies.

27
Wadia, *History of Lodge*, 24–35, 96, 138–47, 266.

28
Harland-Jacobs and Snoek, "Freemasonry and Eastern Religions"; Wadia, *History of Lodge*, 323–26.

29
Talinn Grigor, "Freemasonry and the Architecture of the Persian Revival, 1843–1933," in *Freemasonry and the Visual Arts from the Eighteenth Century Forward: Historical and Global Perspectives*, ed. Reva Wolf and Alisa Luxenberg (New York: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020), 159–180; Talinn Grigor, "Time of Historicism, Print Revival, and Parsi Patronage of Architecture, 1887–1936," *Iranian Studies* 56, no. 1 (2023): 9–36.

When I asked him to expand on the concept of esotericism, Yazad mentioned that he applies the "first principle's thinking" to everything he experiences in life. He described this method, drawing upon the Aristotelean concept of the first cause, as a way of deriving knowledge from its fundamental axioms in a given field. This exercise is then followed by checking whether the conclusions violate any fundamental laws, to confirm their validity. Through the lens of this "Aristotelean" form of esotericism, Yazad considers all religions as systems embedding fundamental laws that enable humans to live in harmony with nature. The application of this method led him to believe that all religious teachings convey the same message of "diversity" and "morality." "The problem of modernity," he added, "is that the process of individualisation is stretched, causing the fragmentation of communities. In this context, religions lose relevance but they are not replaced by systems conveying the same messages. That is why our societies are experiencing a decline all over the world."

When explaining how Freemasonry informs the way its initiates look at religions, Yazad emphasised the importance of individual freedom of thought. On the other hand, the contributions of Cama and Modi as well as records of masonic activities indicate that universalism and comparativism shaped a common religious orientation among Parsi Freemasons.[30] The esotericism described by Yazad lies exactly at the intersection of this tension between individual freedom and collective religious orientation; it endows him with the possibility of deriving principles from every field of knowledge, and then synthetising them into fundamental laws which are universally valid.

30
Kharshedji R. Cama, *A Discourse on Freemasonry among the Natives of Bombay* (Bombay: n.p., 1877), 5–6; Jivanji J. Modi, *Masonic Papers* (Bombay: Jivanji Jamshedji Modi, S.A., 1913), 245–53; Wadia, *History of Lodge*, 272.

Parsi Theosophists

Adil Nariman[31] is a Parsi from Mumbai in his 70s who has been involved with the Theosophical Society since he was a young priest. I arranged to meet him at the Horniman Circle Garden, in Kala Ghoda, South Mumbai. Adil prefers to meet in the early morning, before the unbearable heat rises. Having arrived at the venue, a small green park set at a very busy roundabout of the city, I found Adil waiting for me on a bench. He wore a white garment with a white cap, which form the Parsi priestly attire for formal occasions. As we started speaking, I soon realised that Adil had a unique ability to convey difficult religious concepts in simple English. We easily dug into esotericism and he explained to me his view that every religion needs its esoteric side. In particular, he lamented that Zoroastrianism is merely studied through textual works and, while he admires philologists for their valuable contribution to the understanding of the Avestan and Pahlavi scriptures, he remarked that this is not enough to fully comprehend a religion.

Adil believes that the teachings spread by the occultists Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891) and Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907) contain a spiritual truth applicable to every religion. In 1875, Blavatsky and Olcott founded the Theosophical Society in New York to revive ancient wisdom and form a universal brotherhood. Inspired by the way Freemasonry was organised, the Society was structured in lodges. In 1879, Blavatsky and Olcott established the Bombay Branch of the Theosophical Society, later known as Blavatsky lodge, and soon gained a large following.[32]

31
The identity of this research participant has been anonymised.

32
Bruce F. Campbell, *Ancient Wisdom Revived: A History of the Theosophical Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 1; Julia Chajes and Boaz Huss, introduction to *Theosophical Appropriations: Esotericism, Kabbalah, and the Transformation of Traditions*, ed. Julia Chajes and Boaz Huss (Jerusalem: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2016), 9–29; Joscelyn Godwin, "Blavatsky and the First Generation of Theosophy," in *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, ed. Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 13–31; Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 61; John R. Hinnells, "Contemporary Zoroastrian Philosophy," in *Companion Encyclopedia of Asian Philosophy*, ed. Brian Carr and Indira Mahalingam (London: Routledge, 1997), 59–84; Paul K. Johnson, *The Masters Revealed* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 1; K. J. B. Wadia, *Fifty Years of Theosophy in Bombay* (Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1931), 21–50.

The Parsi Kavasjee Mevanjee Shroff (1852–1903) was among the founders of the Blavatsky lodge. Besides Shroff's contribution to the establishment of the Theosophical Society in India, other Parsis made financial endowments for the organisation. From 1880 to 1909, the Blavatsky lodge had two Parsi Presidents, eight Parsi Honorary Secretaries, eight Parsi Treasurers, and fifteen Parsi Honorary Librarians. The leadership of Parsi Theosophists was so influential that Avestan verses were chanted during the celebration of the Society's gatherings. Jehangir Khurshedji Daji (n.d.), Nasarvanji Framji Bilimoria (1852–1922), and Bahman Pestonji Wadia (1881–1958) were the editors of the lodge's magazine. In 1900, Bilimoria and his son Ardeshar (n.d.) started the bilingual (English and Gujarati) monthly magazine *Cerāg* ("lamp") for the Parsi readership. This magazine examined Zoroastrianism under a theosophical lens and significantly contributed to the revival of the teachings of the early modern mystic Āẕar Kayvān (942–1027 AH/1533–1618 CE).[33]

Adil is well versed in the literature produced by the *ābādīs*, the religious group founded by Āẕar Kayvān. He remarked that recent editions of the *ābādī* treaties do not exist, but thanks to the work of Parsi Theosophists, he could access many of them. He used to read passages from the English translations of the *Jām-i Kaykhusraw* (*The Goblet of Kaykhusraw*), published in *The Theosophist* in 1880, and the English translation of the *Dasātīr-e Āsmānī* (*The Heavenly Regulations*) translated by Dhunjeebhoy Jamsetjee Medhora in 1888. Inspired by these readings and reflecting on the figure of Āẕar Kayvān, Adil came to the conclusion that the Persian mystic was a sage gifted with the power of ubiquity who spread pre-Islamic Zoroastrian wisdom through his teachings.

Like Adil does today, early Parsi Theosophists regarded contested texts such as the *Dasātīr-e Āsmānī* and the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* ("The School of Creeds") as authentic Zoroastrian sources.[34] Blavatsky herself, who took part in the construction of a theosophical Orientalism, as suggested by Christopher Partridge, associated the *ābādī* literature with Zoroastrianism in theosophical circles.[35] In effect, Blavatsky's ahistorical approach that situated India as the birthplace of ancient wisdom informs a romanticised view of local religions.[36]

Blavatsky gradually combined Indian religious concepts with ideas based on Western esotericism. Scientific advancements of the time like evolutionary theory and thermodynamics were used to explain and legitimise some of her teachings. For instance, she held that the mechanisms of evolutionary theory were spiritually driven, influencing the Theosophists' understanding of race as a hierarchically ordered manifestation of the universal spirit.[37] In this vein, while Blavatsky designated the mythological people of Atlantis and Lemuria as the ancestors of human progeny, Olcott encouraged Parsis to consider themselves as "heirs of the Chaldean lore."[38]

Adil was inspired by Blavatsky's race theory to make sense of the ethnocentric character of Parsis in India. He remarked that those who are born Zoroastrian are the result of the incarnation of souls that are spiritually advanced. "Parsis have a chance to elevate their spirit by practicing the Zoroastrian liturgy, which harmonises the practitioners with the surrounding nature," he added. This approach also reiterates

33
Wadia, *Fifty Years*, 8–18, 49–51, 113–15.

34
Anonymous, "Reviews," *The Theosophic Gleaner* 7, no. 2 (1897): 53–54; Dhunjbhoy J. Medhora, *The Zoroastrian and Some Other Ancient Systems* (Bombay: Indian Printing Press, 1886), 55–66.

35
Cristopher Partridge, "Lost Horizon: H. P. Blavatsky and Theosophical Orientalism," in *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, ed. Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 310–33.

36
Karl Baier, "Theosophical Orientalism and the Structures of Intercultural Transfer: Annotations on the Appropriation of the Cakras in Early Theosophy," in *Theosophical Appropriations: Esotericism, Kabbalah, and the Transformation of Traditions*, ed. Julia Chajes and Boaz Huss (Jerusalem: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2016), 309–54; Isaac Lubelsky, "Mythological and Real Race Issues in Theosophy," in *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, ed. Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 335–55; Partridge, "Lost Horizon," 310–33.

37
Egil Asprem, "Theosophical Attitudes Towards Science: Past and Present," in *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, ed. Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 405–27. Lubelsky, "Mythological," 339–46; Partridge "Lost Horizon," 330; James Santucci, "The Notion of Race in Theosophy," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 11, no. 3 (2008): 37–63.

38
Henry. S. Olcott, *The Spirit of Zoroastrianism* (Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1913), 4.

the strict endogamy practised by a large part of the Parsi community in India. "Parsis are like water in a bottle in the middle of the ocean: by opening it, the water will dilute with the ocean." As inter-marriage would "dilute" the spiritual kernel that Parsis are born with, he used this metaphor to firmly state his view on the preservation of customary forms of religion.

However, Adil's views on race and marriage are not representative of what other Parsi Theosophists believe and practise. During a residency at the Zoroastrian College in Ghimaniya, a village in Gujarat, I attended a few classes that Meher Master-Moos delivered to a small group of students. Master-Moos is a Parsi public figure in her seventies who practises astrology and divination. Over the last few decades, she has been at the centre of polemics for promoting conversions of Tajiks and Russians to Zoroastrianism, a form of heresy for a large part of the community.[39] Inspired by a mystical vision that involved the *Kṣnumist* Behramshah Naoroji Shroff, she established the Zoroastrian College in 1986. Although she often refers to the teachings of Blavatsky as spiritually significant and considers herself a Theosophist, Master-Moos has adhered to *Ilme Kṣnum* since the 1970s.[40] She does not care much about endogamy. Rather, she is preparing for the imminent advent of the Zoroastrian saviour who will put every human being under his aegis, acting as an "equaliser."

The Zoroastrian College hosts students who pursue research on Zoroastrianism and/or esotericism. The classes focus on subjects that help students' individual projects. When I was there, a student was working on *vāstu śāstra*.[41] Master-Moos advised her on how to frame the research, moving from one topic to another with extreme ease and demonstrating her broad knowledge of esoteric currents, often unrelated to Zoroastrianism. Between lessons in the morning and the afternoon, we usually had lunch all together. Right before eating, Master-Moos asked us to form a circle, hold hands, and synchronously intonate a short prayer in English to express our gratitude to the creator. We then shared a variety of carefully prepared dishes of vegetables, legumes, and fruits.

Following a vegetarian diet is a practice shared by many Parsi Theosophists I met in India. In this regard, Master-Moos and Adil share the same eating habits. Interestingly, both explained to me that vegetarianism represents a natural inclination deriving from the degree of spiritual advancement as indicated by their individual stage of reincarnation. Although the founders of the Theosophical Society advocated this practice, Parsi Theosophists following vegetarianism gradually distanced themselves from the Society. In 1903, a group of them founded the *Zoroastrian Jashan Committee* (ZJO). Following Olcott's death in 1907, the disputes on the relocation of the Society's headquarters and the Hindu dominance within the organisation led various ZJO members to resign from the Society. A few years later, they began to publicly attack Theosophists.[42]

In that same period, the global temperance movement advocated the banning of alcohol, and hundreds of organisations emerged in colonial India under its umbrella. One of these was the *Parsi Vegetarian and Temperance Society* (PVTS), founded in 1907 by the Parsi priest Phiroze Shapurji Masani (1887–1942) and his brother Dinshaw (d.

39
For further details on Meher Master-Moos, please read Stausberg and Tessmann, "The Appropriation of a Religion," 445–62; Tessmann, *On the Good Faith.*

40
I use the term *Kṣnumist* to indicate those Parsis who follow the teachings of Behramshah Naoroji Shroff.

41
Vāstu śāstra is a Hindu system of architecture that combines ancient beliefs with principles encouraging harmony with nature and functionality.

42
John R. Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora: Religion and Migration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 103; Wadia, *Fifty Years*, 66, 88–90.

1965). The PVTS campaigned for the adoption of vegetarianism and the banning of liquor, tobacco, and narcotics in the Parsi community. Through its emphasis on vegetarianism, this organisation became the new home for many Parsi Theosophists.[43]

The PVTS still operates in today's Mumbai and Adil is one of its members. On a Wednesday morning, I ventured into the streets of South Mumbai where the PVTS offices are. After having entered an old building and climbed the stairs, I saw a person locking the door of the PVTS office; he kindly gave me the phone number of the Managing Trustee with whom I arranged a meeting. When I returned that afternoon, four people were waiting for me around an old wooden table. The image of this handful of elders, who administrate what once was a vocal organisation in the community, clashed with the large portraits of distinguished Parsis hanging on the walls of the room. A few shelves arranged all around the office displayed the historical PVTS print production of the early- and mid-twentieth century.

The Managing Trustee inquired about the reasons for my visit and everybody patiently listened to my research plans. He then advised me to liaise with Marzban Palsetia,[44] a PVTS staff member. Having arranged a meeting with Palsetia via phone, I returned a third time to the PVTS. The first thing that Palsetia asked when he saw me was, "Have you ever experienced God in your life?" This question instantly reconnected me with the sensation of "being assessed" that I felt when trying to meet Freemasons.

Palsetia has been a member of the PVTS for a long time but is also a connoisseur of the life of Behramshah Naoroji Shroff and *Ilme Kṣnum*. Marzban reiterated the words of Adil and Master-Moos regarding the spiritual reasons behind vegetarianism. Further, he recounted that when a person is born, parts of the soul are scattered between the mineral, plant, animal, and human kingdoms. The purpose of incarnation is to reunite these parts. An individual who craves meat, for instance, still needs to connect with the related part of the soul sedimented in the animal world. By contrast, someone practicing vegetarianism is closer to the full reunification of the soul's parts. Palsetia added that this mechanism is governed by *jīram*, one of the laws of *Ilme Kṣnum*.

This short conversation with Palsetia echoes what I soon realised to be a recurrent insight of my research: placing Freemasonry, Theosophy, PVTS, and *Ilme Kṣnum* and their members into defined categories does not really work. These organisations did not claim exclusive affiliation; thus, ideas about reincarnation, race, vegetarianism, endogamy, and so forth were constantly exchanged and used to advance claims of religious authenticity. The perseverance of such a "religious brokerage" in today's Mumbai is one of the most emblematic findings of this research. In practical terms, it shows how interpretive approaches to Zoroastrianism emerge and inform religious claims in the context of an ongoing Parsi hermeneutical polyphony.

Adil and Palsetia confirmed that several PVTS members are also part of the Theosophical Society, though the contiguity between the two organisations is much less explicit than a hundred years ago. Adil participates in the activities of the PVTS and uses its library to find answers to questions on Zoroastrianism. He often flips through the pages

43
John N. Farquhar, *Modern Religious Movements in India* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1915), 421–22; Marzban Hathiram, *A Wondrous Life: The True Story of the Master Ustad Saheb Behramshah Nowroji Shroff* (Bombay: n.p., 2013), 99; Phiroze S. Masani, *Zoroastrianism Ancient and Modern* (Bombay: Parsee Vegetarian & Temperance Society, 1917); Ian R. Tyrell, "India," in *Alcohol and Temperance in Modern History: An International Encyclopedia*, ed. Jack Blocker, David Fahey, and Ian R. Tyrell (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003), 308–11.

44
Marzban Palsetia passed away in 2021.

of issues of *Cerāg*, difficult to find otherwise. Adil spoke fondly of the scholar-priest Phiroze Masani. His contribution to the study of Pāzand[45] literature, for instance, still represents a valuable legacy of Parsi scholarship that emerged in colonial India. Such an intellectual approach characterises the esotericism of Adil. However, being a priest, he combines his numerous readings with first-hand experiences.

When I asked him about esotericism, Adil remarked, "I go by my experience. When I am in the temple to perform the last prayers of the day, around midnight, I am alone in darkness with the fire. I cannot put in words what I feel, but the fire speaks and gives me clarity of mind, solving my doubts and answering important questions of life. The fire of the temple is a divine being, and we keep it alive through our prayers and rituals." Reflecting on these experiences, Adil observed that "one needs to study, acquire practical knowledge, and receive wisdom from the forefathers. Religions and rituals are explained to priests through material examples but their meaning lies in the spiritual world. If one does not go into the esoteric understanding of things, then one knows nothing."

By integrating theosophical and *Kṣnumic*[46] notions, Adil draws upon race theory and the law of *jīram* to make sense of Parsis' customary endogamy and the practice of vegetarianism. The efforts of searching for spiritual meaning beyond the philological interpretation of scriptures and the mechanical performance of rituals inform the esotericism practised by Adil. He sees esotericism as the understanding of hidden forces that govern existence beyond the literal meaning of scriptures and the mere performance of rituals. Adil does not regard Blavatsky, Olcott, or Shroff as holders of the ultimate truth but finds the application of some of their teachings useful in a universalist way. Nevertheless, in light of the religious ethnocentrism for which he advocates, such a universalism takes the shape of a hierarchical inclusivism where Zoroastrianism is placed at the top of the spiritual chain.

45
This is a writing system for Middle Persian developed from the Avestan alphabet.

46
I use *Kṣnumic* as a qualifier deriving from *Ilme Kṣnum*.

Parsi Kṣnumists

Khojeste Bharucha[47] is a staunch follower of *Ilme Kṣnum*. When I first contacted him, Khojeste refused to meet. He was puzzled by a request coming from a non-Zoroastrian who claimed to be interested in knowing more about *Ilme Kṣnum*. He decided it was not worth his time to speak with me. However, through perseverance and the good offices of a common acquaintance, Khojeste changed his mind. He invited me to his home in Tardeo, a residential and commercial locality in South Mumbai. He lives on the first floor of a 2-storey building in one of the Parsi colonies of the area.

Wooden chairs and tables in the living room and the ticking of a pendulum clock in the hallway gave a colonial allure to Khojeste's house. While his wife was preparing a *chai*, we went into a private room and began to speak. Khojeste told me that he learned about the existence of *Ilme Kṣnum* about twenty years ago thanks to a neighbour who invited him to attend a talk of Kaikhushru Navroji Dastoor (1927–2019). Dastoor was a lawyer and worked for many years in the banking industry. He published a few books on Zoroastrianism, but his main contribution was the launch of three magazines dedicated

47
The identity of this research participant has been anonymised.

to *Ilme Kṣnum*. Khojeste was very impressed by Dastoor's religious fluency and charisma. Since that first talk, he began studying books explaining what *Ilme Kṣnum* is. "The more I read, the more my thirst for knowledge grew," he commented.

Ilme Kṣnum was introduced to the Parsi community by Behramshah Naoroji Shroff in 1906. After his public debut, Shroff soon earned a large following among Parsis, including scholars, Freemasons, and Theosophists. Interested in learning more about *Ilme Kṣnum*, even Cama chaired some of his talks. *Kṣnumists* believe that Shroff was initiated by the *sāheb delān* ("master-hearts"), mythical masters who are thought to live in seclusion in the paradisiac community of Firdos, located on Mount Damāvand in Iran. *Kṣnumists* recount that they isolated themselves in a hidden mountain village a few centuries after the Arab conquest of Iran in order to preserve Zoroastrianism. Today, there are probably around three hundred *Kṣnumists*. However, there are many more who believe in the existence of Zoroastrian sages hiding in Iran. The narrative theme of the "nostalgia of origins" that characterises this diasporic community favoured the integration of the myth of secluded masters into the Parsi collective memory.[48]

In our conversation, Khojeste commented that "*Ilme Kṣnum* explains nature through a set of laws. It is not something you can change, it is difficult to explain, one has to adapt. Nature goes as it has to go, and *Ilme Kṣnum* tries to teach us the laws that we as individuals have to follow." This definition of *Ilme Kṣnum* is similar to that provided by Shroff himself in his first book *jarthośtī dharm samajavā māṭe ilme kṣnumnī cāvī* (*The key of Ilme Kṣnum to understand the Zoroastrian religion*), published in 1911. This publication, through the use of a large number of *logato* (Guj. "technical terms"), lists a number of *kudaratnā kāyado* ("laws of nature") that are believed to govern existence. These laws advance an emanationist theory of cosmogenesis;[49] a monistic dualism that solves the problem of evil by turning it into "necessary evil"; the concept of reincarnation; and a cyclical view of time. Further, Shroff firmly advocated for customary forms of religion and used to emphasise the importance of the daily performance of *tarīkato* ("religious observances").[50]

In line with this orientation, Khojeste performs *tarīkato* as prescribed in Zoroastrianism. He explained that, when he cuts his nails or hair or takes a bath, he performs a set of small rituals whose purpose is to reduce the risk of his soul becoming polluted. Khojeste believes that the recitation of the Avestan prayers forms an invisible defensive wall around the practitioner. This wall protects them from the attacks of contaminating agents proceeding from evil forces. While we spoke about *tarīkato*, our conversation reached a level of complexity that I struggled to follow. Khojeste employed an abundance of technical terms I was largely unfamiliar with. To make a point regarding the importance of following *tarīkato*, he cited a number of chakras, their correspondence with the spiritual world, and how mundane activities affected them. He then concluded by remarking that ritual performance produces electric and magnetic forces that interact with the subtle world.

Using language evoking scientific concepts such as electricity and magnetism as a means of explanation, however, is not peculiar to

48
Hathiram, *A Wondrous Life*, 25–32; Meher Master-Moos, *Life of Ustad Saheb Behramshah Nowroji Shroff* (Bombay: Mazdayasnie Monasterie, 1981), 11–23.

49
This refers to the idea that all created things are the product of a series of emanations proceeding from a creative principle. In this vein, all created things carry within themselves a manifested degree of the creative principle.

50
S. N. Banaji, "śeṭh beherāmśāh navarojī śarāphe jarthośtī ilme-kṣnumnī pehel muṃbaimāṃ kevī rīte karī?" (How did Sheth Behramshah Naoroji Shroff commence the Zoroastrian Ilme Kṣnum in Mumbai?), in *Behramshah Shroff Memorial Volume*, special issue, *Frasho-Gard* 17–18 (1930): 331–46; Behramshah N. Shroff, *tāvīl-ī-sudreh ('interpretation of sudreh'): The Inner Deep Scientific Rationale of the Sacred Shirt "Sudreh"* (Mumbai: Cerāg Prīnṭīṃg Pres, 1913), 39–41; Behram J. Unwalla, "beheśt-behereh mānavaṃt ustād sāheb beherāmśāh navarojī śarāph: teo sāthno paṃdar varṣno māro samāgam ane tethī thayalā mane phāyadā" (Respected Late Ustad Sāheb Behramshah Naoroji Shroff: My 15 Years-Association with Him and Its Benefits to Me), in *Behramshah Shroff Memorial Volume*, special issue, *Frasho-Gard* 17–18 (1930): 113–18.

Khojeste; nor is it a special feature of *Ilme Kṣnum* or Theosophy. Michael Bergunder shows how, in the nineteenth century, the *Materialismusstreit* ("materialism controversy") and the spread of scientific theories triggered the emergence of the debate about religion and science. In this context, esotericism as an instrument to mediate between science and religion impacted India to the point that Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam were classified as scientific religions.[51] Likewise, Shroff and today's *Kṣnumists* consider Zoroastrianism to be the most scientific religion of all.[52]

Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi shows how the Iranian nationalist discourse of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries situated *vatan* ("homeland") as a territory battered by Arab rule, and the acquisition of *ilm* ("knowledge") as the way to restore the past glory of Iran.[53] In the same way, Shroff situated *Ilme Kṣnum* as a scientific knowledge deriving from the wisdom of ancient Iran, offering Parsis an *ilm* to re-establish the *vatan* undermined by colonial modernity.

By attending a talk on *Ilme Kṣnum* in Mumbai today, one can learn about an esotericism built around a number of *logato* and scientific concepts that nostalgically evoke the Parsi *vatan*. One Sunday morning, I went to the Sohrab Palamkote Hall at Dadar Parsi colony. The audience were mainly old Parsi women diligently wearing the customary scarf to cover their head. Marzban Hathiram, a Zoroastrian priest in his 50s who has long been one of the public voices of *Ilme Kṣnum*, began to speak about the esoteric meaning behind some passages of the *Šāhnāme*, the famous Persian epic. He skilfully managed to combine Avestan, Pahlavi, and Persian terms with Gujarati *logato* and scientific ideas. This gifted and charismatic orator wove a thread that brought the audience back to the mythical *vatan*, between Persian kings and heroes. A round of applause followed the end of the talk. While some attendees encouraged Hathiram to come back for another talk, others queued to receive spiritual advice on private matters.

The links of *Ilme Kṣnum* with Iran and the broader Persianate world go beyond the Iranian nationalist discourse and the reference to *vatan*. The *logato* employed by Shroff in his publications and by Hathiram in his talks largely correspond to religious terms and ideas that thrived across the Persianate world after the seventh century CE, through Ismāʿīlīs, Twelvers, Ahl-i Ḥaqq, *išrāqī*, and other *ḡolāti*[54] groups, including the *ābādī* sect of Āẕar Kayvān.[55] When I shared this finding with Khojeste, he claimed that the Persianate character of *Ilme Kṣnum* was unequivocable evidence that Shroff did not make up his esoteric ideas, as many of his opponents have argued for years. Khojeste situates *Ilme Kṣnum* in pre-Islamic times, suggesting that the religious groups I referred to drew upon the teachings of the mythical masters of Firdos.

The way Khojeste articulated the relation between *Ilme Kṣnum* and the religious diversity of the Persianate world illustrates the extent to which antiquity is still an important marker of authenticity. What is more, Shroff's life story illustrates how *Ilme Kṣnum* was more than an initiative to spread esoteric ideas; it was, in fact, a religious project whose purpose was to reestablish practices deemed to be authentically ancient. In this vein, one of the most ambitious initiatives of Shroff was the incorporation of the Fasli calendar[56] in the Parsi liturgy.

51
Michael Bergunder, " 'Religion' and 'Science' within a Global Religious History," *Aries*: *Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 16, no. 1 (2016): 86–141.

52
Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 48; Bergunder, "Religion," 88–132; Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora*, 167.

53
Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning*, 116–23.

54
The term *išrāqī* ("illuminationist") refers to the school of thought introduced by the twelfth-century Persian philosopher Šehāb-al-Din Yaḥyā b. Amirak Sohravardi (1155–1191). The term *ḡolāti* proceeds from the noun *ḡolāt* which is the plural form for *ḡhāl* or "exaggerator." It was used by Islamic theologians to classify those groups that believed in heretical ideas such as reincarnation.

55
Errichiello, "Beyond the Theosophical Paradigm," 245–69.

56
The Fasli (from Pers. *faṣl* or "season") calendar requires the intercalation of a day every 4 years. It is based on the Iranian *Jalālī* calendar which drew upon astronomical observations of the solar transit.

On 1 April 1923, Shroff led a ceremony to lay the foundation of a temple according to the Fasli calendar, which was thought to be the ancient liturgical system of Zoroastrianism. This temple would have served a colony of Parsi *Kṣnumists* built on a plot of land that Shroff had purchased. He engineered this initiative in collaboration with the PVTS. However, it failed due to clashes with the Masani brothers. Nevertheless, in 1997, the project was revived and a Fasli temple was established in Behram *baug*, the plot Shroff purchased more than seventy years earlier. The construction was concluded in 2001 and the temple is named the *Ustad Saheb Behramshah Nowroji Shroff Daremeher*, in honour of Shroff (see Fig. 2).[57]

Fig. 2. *Ustad Saheb Behramshah Nowroji Shroff Daremeher* fire temple, Mumbai, India, 2023. Photograph © Mariano Errichiello.

On a hot day in March, I went to see the *Ustad Saheb Behramshah Nowroji Shroff Daremeher*. The main entrance of the temple opens between two slightly inclined walls depicting impressive motifs based on Persian iconography. While I was looking around, a young priest saw me and came out of the temple. Having learned about my interest in *Ilme Kṣnum*, he invited me to see a small memorial erected a few meters away from the temple (see Fig. 3). That is the place where Shroff had placed the foundation stone of the *Daremeher* in 1923. Together with this memorial, I noticed that each building of the colony is named using a religious nomenclature that recalls *Ilme Kṣnum*, such as "Damavand" (see Fig. 4). The architecture of Behram *baug* materialises the legacy of Shroff's teachings.

57 Hathiram, *A Wondrous Life*, 131–54, 200–201; Masani, *Zoroastrianism*; Master-Moos, *Life*, 140–71; Behramshah N. Shroff, "daśtān-suvāvaḍnī hālat" daramyān jāḷavvānā asal jarthośtī kāyadāo" (part of "*darūjī from menses*," also known as authentic Zoroastrian laws to observe during "the condition of menstruation-confinement"), (Mumbai: Ilme Kṣnum Īnstītyut, 1919); Behramshah N. Shroff, "jarthośtī daennāṃ asal ṣikṣaṇ mujab phasalī roj-māhnī gaṇatrī" (Calculation of the Fasli Roj-Mah according to the original teachings of the Zoroastrian religion), *Frasho-Gard* 11, no. 3–4 (1922); Phiroz N. Tavaria, *A manual of* "*Khshnoom*"*: The Zoroastrian Occult Knowledge*, (Bombay: Parsee Vegetarian & Temperance Society and Zoroastrian Radih Society, 1971), 82.

Fig. 3. Memorial erected in honour of Behramshah Naoroji Shroff, Mumbai, India, 2023. Photograph © Mariano Errichiello.

Fig. 4. Entrance of a building in Behram *baug*, Mumbai, India, 2023. Photograph © Mariano Errichiello.

The young priest proudly shared that a commemoration ceremony is performed annually in memory of Shroff. He went on to state that he follows the teachings of *Ilme Kṣnum*, though he also lamented that Parsis living in Behram *baug* did not properly adhere to the *tarīkato* performed in a *Kṣnumic* fashion. Only a few elders remained loyal to Shroff's teachings and showed rigorous discipline in the performance of the *tarīkato*. Khojeste is one of them. He attends Fasli functions but principally follows the *Šahanšāhī* ("royalist") calendar, which is the most common for the Zoroastrians in India. He explained that, in practice, it is hard for him to completely adhere to the Fasli liturgy because, unlike Behram *baug*, all the fire temples established in the area where he lives follow the *Šahanšāhī* calendar. However, Khojeste confirmed that he performs the *sarośnī kṣnuman sāthnīj kustī* ("Kusti with the propitiation of Saroś") daily. This way of tying the *kustī* is characteristic of Parsis adhering to *Ilme Kṣnum* and makes this small ritual last longer.[58]

By calling for special attention to rituals and by situating its knowledge back in the glorious pre-Islamic past, *Ilme Kṣnum* provided Parsis with an esotericism that combined Persianate religious ideas and scientific discoveries. In this way, Shroff contextualised *Ilme Kṣnum*

58 Marzban Hathiram, "How to do the right kusti," accessed December 27, 2022, https://www.frashogard.com/how-to-do-the-right-kusti/.

in colonial modernity and considered Zoroastrianism as a "scientific religion" on a par with Western forms of knowledge. *Ilme Kṣnum* was not just an intellectual exercise but also a project of religious militancy. It implied the construction of sacred spaces for its followers and the reintroduction of religious practices performed in the past. While aspects of this project have been realised, only a tiny number of Parsis intellectually adhere to *Ilme Kṣnum*, and the number of those practising the liturgy as prescribed by Shroff seem to be on the decline.

However, *Kṣnumic* ideas are still very influential in the community at large, to the point of becoming an asset in legal debates. One of the most recent examples is that of the construction of a metro line that was supposed to run beneath two fire temples in South Mumbai. A group of Parsis, including some who did not necessarily adhere to *Ilme Kṣnum*, petitioned the court to move the construction site, as it would affect the vibrational power of the fires enthroned in the temples and their spiritual integrity. Nevertheless, the court ruled against them because it considered these arguments to be merely an interpretation of Zoroastrianism; hermeneutical polyphony does not always pay off.[59]

59
For further details on the metro case, read Vevaina, Leilah, "Two Fire Temples and a Metro: Contesting Infrastructures in Mumbai," *Space and Culture* 26, no. 2 (2023): 242–52.

Esotericism as an Ontological Instance

The search for authentic Zoroastrianism that arose among Parsis in colonial times triggered the emergence of a hermeneutical polyphony. Freemasonry, Theosophy, and *Ilme Kṣnum* offered relational spaces where resources for authentication were negotiated and exchanged. In his research on the transculturation of *cakras* in the theosophical context, Karl Baier stresses the importance of acknowledging the heterogeneity of the Theosophical Society's membership.[60] Likewise, the Parsi variable membership to Freemasonry, Theosophy, and *Ilme Kṣnum* generated entanglements between universalism, inclusivism, ethnoreligiosity, and monogenism.[61] While Parsi Freemasons attended and chaired Shroff's lectures, many of the PVTS members proceeded from Theosophy, whose members were also attracted by the teachings of Shroff.

By acknowledging the generative role of entanglements in global religious history, Giovanni Maltese and Julian Strube suggest that "different understandings of religion were produced and constantly negotiated through global exchanges during the nineteenth century."[62] Their approach overcomes the idea of "the West influencing the East" and decentralises agency, succeeding in moving beyond a Western-bound esotericism, as urged by Egil Asprem.[63] Likewise, Parsis were not mere passive recipients of colonial power, but "brokers of ideas" and primary actors in the construction of Zoroastrianism as a "modern" religion. Inspired by Michael Bergunder's research on esotericism, religion, and science,[64] I situate esotericism as a mediative instance that helped Parsis to make sense of their religion. In the context of the community's hermeneutical polyphony, esotericism was therefore a form of knowledge that contributed to the reconstruction of an ancient Iranian identity. From a sociological perspective, it became a currency that conferred authenticity in the economy of power relations of the Parsi community, rather than an instance of "rejected knowledge" as long theorised in the context of Western esotericism.[65]

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Baier, "Theosophical," 309–54.

61
This term refers to the idea that humanity descends from a common ancestor.

62
Giovanni Maltese and Julian Strube, "Global Religious History," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 33, no. 3–4 (2021): 229–57.

63
Egil Asprem, "Beyond the West: Towards a New Comparativism in the Study of Esotericism," *Correspondences* 2, no. 1 (2014): 3–33.

64
Bergunder, "Religion," 86–141.

65
Cf. Wouter Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

The ethnographic findings enrich the understanding of Parsis' esotericism as a form of knowledge that endows actors with social capital, adding glimpses into the subjective domain of its practitioners. The esotericism of Yazad, driven by a quest for power and knowledge, is reflexive and extractivist inasmuch as it aims to methodically "extract" universal principles from readings and personal observations, an approach that leads the practitioner to consider religions as different expressions of the same nature. By embodying study as practice, the esotericism of Adil integrates intellectual knowledge with praxiological intuitions deriving from a dialogical relation with the sacred fire, which helps him make sense of nature. The esotericism of Khojeste is characterised by strict adherence to the laws of nature to revive ancient practices and reconstruct the glorious pre-Islamic past.

Yazad, Adil, Palsetia, Master-Moos, Hathiram, and Khojeste often refer to nature in their conception of esotericism. This is not surprising since the ethnographic findings indicate that they experience esotericism as a method to apply every day, as a practical exercise and a way of life. Esotericism is also visible in the way Parsis design urban spaces and turn them into sites of memory production. By informing religious ideas, claims of authenticity, daily practices, and urbanisation, esotericism contributes to embodying the nature of being in practitioners. Thus, while the study of history and society by means of textual analysis sheds light on the epistemological and sociological aspects of esotericism, ethnography illustrates how esotericism is a mode of existence, an expression of a given ontology. Such an "ontological" approach moves along the lines of recent research on esotericism conducted at the Center for Advanced Studies ("Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective") at the Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg in Germany.[66]

Ethnographic research also shows the limits of the researcher in defining the boundaries of the organisations examined and in translating the research participants' experiences. Difficult access to some participants, initial refusals, and appointments agreed upon only through referral prompted observations on the rhetoric of secrecy and reflections on the researcher/participant dynamic.

Secrecy as a feature of Western esoteric currents, including Freemasonry, has been extensively studied. Von Stuckrad's research epitomises esotericism as a discourse claiming higher knowledge in a rhetoric of secrecy.[67] Nevertheless, I do not consider the concealment prompted by organisations like *Ilme Kṣnum* as a marker a "Western" esotericism. In fact, the *Kṣnumic* use of a complex language, while historically contingent on the Iranian nationalism's revivalism, is largely based on concepts proceedings from the Persianate world, such as *bāṭin* ("inner, hidden, esoteric") and *taʾwīl* ("esoteric, inner interpretation").[68] As demonstrated elsewhere, this evidence points in a direction other than the West.[69]

By contrast, the concealment I experienced triggered the adoption of a "slow fieldwork" approach.[70] Nevertheless, rather than considering this concealment as a discursive feature, I look at it as a social practice. In the context of the competitive landscape of the Parsi religious marketplace, and given how publicly claims of authenticity based on esotericism are voiced, I argue that such a concealment is intended to target

66
An edited volume showcasing the contributions of the first cohort of research fellows is on its way.

67
Kocku von Stuckrad, "Western Esotericism: Towards an Integrative Model of Interpretation," *Religion* 35, no. 2 (2015): 78–97.

68
See Liana Saif, "What is Islamic Esotericism?," *Correspondences* 7, no. 1 (2019): 1–59 for a genealogical analysis of these terms.

69
Errichiello, "Beyond the Theosophical Paradigm," 245–69.

70
This not only refers to the idea of conducting field research over an extended period of time, but also pertains to the ethnographer's process of maturation and trust-building with the research participants. See Paul Stoller, *Wisdom from the Edge: Writing Ethnography in Turbulent Times* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2023), 29–43. For further details on the limitations and problems of ethnography, see Martyn Hammersley, "Ethnography: Problems and Prospects," *Ethnography and Education* 1, no. 1 (2006): 3–14.

a specific segment of practitioners to increase affiliation. Certainly, I was not a target, due to the ethnoreligious boundaries. However, as suggested by Stausberg and Vevaina, scholarship is often a currency sought after by Zoroastrians for the validation of religious claims,[71] an observation that impeccably explains my experience. These findings can also inspire textual studies in that the debate on these limitations and experiences would constitute an interesting research subject, as suggested by Yuhan S.-D. Vevaina, who prompts philologists of Zoroastrianism to reflect on their positionality when engaging with texts.[72]

Recent developments in the study of esotericism show how the field is very active and moving towards a more global and interdisciplinary approach.[73] In such an evolving context, I do not find the use of the qualifiers "Zoroastrian" or "Parsi" as conceptually problematic for the construction of a second-order category, as long as they typify an esotericism practised by individuals who self-identify as Zoroastrian or Parsi. Informed by the analyses adduced in this article and the characteristic ethnoreligiosity of the research participants, I propose to look at the esotericism of modern Parsis (rather than Zoroastrians) as a resource to construct hermeneutical voices resulting from the mediation between relational spaces, organisations, and people, between different epistemologies, between multiple ontologies.

The study of the ontological domain of esotericism leads to a programmatic reflection on the field of Zoroastrian studies. This proposition raises both a methodological and a theoretical question. Textuality and ethnography, I argue, can work together in an interdisciplinary enterprise that enriches scholarly outputs. By expanding the study of the reception and performativity of texts in contemporary communities around the world through anthropological analysis, Zoroastrianism can be studied as a living religion, as a way of life, as a mode of existence, perhaps making research on Zoroastrian ontologies the long-sought theoretical thread in our field.

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71 Michael Stausberg and Yuhan S.-D Vevaina, introduction to *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism,* ed. Michael Stausberg, Yuhan S.-D. Vevaina, and Anna Tessmann (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 15–17.

72 Yuhan S.-D. Vevaina, "No One Stands Nowhere: Knowledge, Power, and Positionality across the Insider-Outsider Divide in the Study of Zoroastrianism," in *The Zoroastrian Flame: Exploring Religion, History and Tradition*, ed. Sarah Stewart, Alan Williams, and Almut Hintze (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016), 27–58.

73 Julian Strube and Egil Asprem, eds., *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism* (Leiden: Brill, 2021); Marco Pasi, "Il Problema della definizione dell'esoterismo: Analisi critiche e proposte per la ricerca futura," in *Forme e correnti dell'esoterismo occidentale*, ed. Alessandro Grossato (Milan: Edizioni Medusa, 2008), 205–28; Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic, "Introduction: Occultism in a Global Perspective," in *Occultism in a Global Perspective*, ed. Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 1–15; Asprem, "Beyond," 3–33.

Inspired by Theosophy and Astrology: Esoteric Elements in Russian Zoroastrianism

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Abstract
The study of esoteric references in the context of Zoroastrianism may be exciting as it allows us to describe synthetic, hybrid discursive practices—defined by scholars or insiders as religious or secular—that are rare, understudied, or invisible. It is almost trivial to say that the religionist/phenomenologist conception of esotericism (an unusable, vague construct for comparisons) is doomed to epistemic failure, which precludes any joint work within "Zoroastrian Studies" or bringing them all together in a distinct theoretical framework for the study of "Zoroastrian esotericism." More promising (also mixed) approaches in empirically grounded research into esoteric elements, structures, intersections, figures, and episodes of marginalization neglected in earlier scholarship can be developed through accurate sociocultural historicization, revision, or, if necessary, deconstruction of previous studies in the history of religions as well. This heuristic agenda is the only viable option for studying small communities of post-Soviet Zoroastrians and the sympathizers of the Zoroastrian religion who practice astrology and other forms of contemporary esotericism, heavily influenced, and changed by local cultural-historical contexts.

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Research Questions, Methods, and Sources

Considering the example of the Zoroastrian community in St Petersburg as one of the prominent representatives of Russian Zoroastrianism, this essay will respond to the questions posed by the editors of this special issue on "Zoroastrian esotericism" and evaluate whether establishing the theoretical framework of "Zoroastrian esotericism" can be heuristically justified. I will address the possibility of defining *esotericism* as *Zoroastrian*, and vice versa, by discussing the *emic* esoteric categories of the local believers and some of the occult components constituting their religion. In my study, I have applied interdisciplinary methods—elements of anthropological observation; *netnography*; "appointment anthropology,"[1] especially interviews, emails, and social media correspondence; and discursive analysis—and I have worked with diverse sources: *Zoroastrian* and *astrological* publications, individual opinions, and collective activities during which the Russian followers of the Zoroastrian religion reveal the "alternative" potential of their practice. After discussing the theoretical concepts of contemporary esotericism, I will touch upon the notions of Zoroastrian diversity in Zoroastrian Studies and briefly discuss several types of Zoroastrian communities in the post-Soviet space. Finally, I will focus on the St Petersburg Zoroastrian community, its origins in the (post-)Soviet New Age scene, and the set of esoteric elements and structures that are absent in the ethnic forms of contemporary Zoroastrianism in Iran and India, even in the diaspora—primarily theosophical and astrological forms—at the levels of belief, practice, and institution in the religion of Russian Zoroastrians.

1 The term used by Tanya M. Luhrmann, *The Good Parsi: The Fate of a Colonial Elite in a Postcolonial Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), vii.

Concepts of Esotericism as Analytic Instruments

Before starting the discussion on how *Zoroastrianism* and *esotericism* are connected in the practices of Russian Zoroastrians, it is necessary to explain what I understand by *esotericism* from a pragmatic point of view.

The *etic*, academic use of *esotericism* that foregrounds Western religious history is relatively new: in the study of religions, it appeared in the 1990s.[2] The construction of the research object within this concept, or what *esotericism* is, depends on the approach the scholar of religions will adopt in her or his work.[3] The terms *esoteric* and *esotericism* originally presupposed a level of transmitting knowledge distinguished as "inner" within teachings or practices instead of a freely accessible level. Many individuals and communities in the history of religions adopted the idea of hierarchical secrecy (and in this sense, we cannot say that all such communities were marginal since secrecy was realized through access to "secret" teachings and practices within them).[4] I understand the term *esotericism* in a discursive sense, referring to a range of religious texts and practices, e.g., different systems of religious knowledge, covering many topics such as Gnostic teachings, conspiracy, parascience, occult divination practices, etc. In this sense, my methodology of studying *esotericism* is close to the styles of discursive analysis proposed by the historian of religions, Kocku von Stuckrad, who views discourses as communicative structures that can organize knowledge in (religious) communities. Discourses are in-

2 Wouter Hanegraaff, "Esotericism," in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter Hanegraaff et al. (Leiden, Brill Publishers, 2006), 336–40, 339.

3 Wouter Hanegraaff examined five of them: "religionism, sociology, secrecy, discourse, and history." Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Esotericism Theorized: Major Trends and Approaches to the Study of Esotericism," in *Religion: Secret Religion*, ed. April D. DeConick (Farmington Hills: Macmillan, 2016), 155–70, 155f.

4 I believe that esotericism, in contrast to *mysticism* (from Old Greek *mystikos*, "hidden, concealed"), in most cases, refers to marginal, neglected religious communities. Consequently, *mysticism* has long been recognized as part of the history of "monotheistic" or "world" religions. Especially within Christian religions, for instance, the Russian Orthodox Church tradition, one of the largest heirs of the Byzantine-Greek tradition, has inherited some practices of mystical praying in the framework of Christian apophatic (negative) theology. See Wolfgang Heller, "Russische Mystik," in *Wörterbuch der Mystik*, ed. Peter Dinzelbacher (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1989), 445–47.

tended to "establish, stabilize, and legitimize systems of meaning and provide collectively shared orders of knowledge in an institutionalized social setting; they are statements, utterances, and opinions about a specific topic that are systematically organized and repeatedly observable."[5]

The concept of *esotericism* is interrelated with two other concepts in the study of religions that are connected or at least occupy neighboring territories—occultism and the New Age. All three concepts need to be kept in mind as they are an integral part of the toolkit for the study of various, often minor, contemporary forms of religion.

Esotericism and *occultism* (from Latin *occultus,* whose etymological meaning is "hidden") are often used interchangeably and can be understood as well as used as comparative categories.[6] According to Wouter Hanegraaff, the descriptive potential of *occultism* unfolds from two perspectives relating to (1) "the specifically French currents in the wake of Éliphas Lévi, flourishing in the 'neo-Martinist' context of Papus and related manifestations of fin-de-siecle esotericism"; and (2) "the *type* of esotericism that they represent" since ca. the mid-nineteenth century onward, which we can observe, for instance, in Spiritualism, Theosophy, the magical practices around the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and the *New Age* movement.[7] Nevertheless, I believe it would be better to rely on one of the "applied" meanings of *occultism* as contemporary forms of divination arts[8] or practices, tools, or "methods" of astrology, chiromancy, and others.[9] In this meaning, *occultism* can be a constitutive part of *esotericism* and *New Age* in a specific historical context of the modern history of religions (from the mid-nineteenth century to now) and explain particular practices.

The *New Age* movement or *New Age* spirituality is conceptualized in the sociology of religion as a large complex of new forms of weakly or non-institutionalized groups and communities that came into being in the 1970s, gradually declined toward the mid-1990s, and revised or re-invented esoteric practices and occult divination arts of the past. Although various taxonomies of the New Age movement have been developed[10] to express it, according to Gordon Melton, two ideas underlie the concept of this movement. "First, it predicted that a New Age of heightened spiritual consciousness and international peace would arrive and bring an end to racism, poverty, sickness, hunger, and war. This social transformation would result from the massive spiritual awakening of the general population during the next generation. Second, individuals could obtain a foretaste of *New Age* through their own spiritual transformation."[11]

Studies on Contemporary Zoroastrian Diversity

In the Western cultural reception at the origin of Oriental studies in Europe, Zoroastrianism has been one of the "classic" examples of an "Oriental religion" since the eighteenth century.[12] The academic study of Zoroastrianism, after its heyday in the first part of the twentieth century and as one of the central "areas of specialisation"[13] of influential scholars of the history of religions, became a marginalized field of inquiry in the 1970s.[14] With just a few exceptions, what prevailed was the study of Zoroastrianism by philological, archaeological, and historical

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Kocku von Stuckrad, "Esotericism Disputed: Major Debates in the Field," in Religion: *Secret Religion*, ed. April D. DeConick (Farmington Hills: Macmillan, 2016), 171–81, 176.

6
Karl Baier, "Esotericism," in *Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. Robert A. Segal and Nickolas P. Roubekas, 2nd ed. (Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2021), 229–40, 230f.

7
See Wouter Hanegraaff, "Occult/Occultism," in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter Hanegraaff et al. (Leiden, Brill Publishers, 2006), 884–89, 888.

8
See Thérèse Charmasson, "Divinatory Arts," in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter Hanegraaff et al. (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2006), 313–19.

9
This view is close to the sociological distinction by Edward Tiryakian in "Towards the Sociology of Esoteric Culture," *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 3 (1972): 491–512, here 265f.

10
Olav Hammer, "New Age Movement," in *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, ed. by Wouter Hanegraaff et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 855–61.

11
J. Gordon Melton, "New Age movement," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, February 14, 2023, https://www.britannica.com/topic/New-Age-movement. Since the 2000s at least, we live, in J. Gordon Melton's words, in the "post-New Age" era; the traces of this transnational movement are "evident in the number of New Age bookstores, periodicals, and organisations that [continue] to be found in nearly every urban centre."

12
John R. Hinnells, "Postmodernism and the Study of Zoroastrianism," in *Zoroastrian and Parsi Studies Selected works of John R. Hinnells* (London: Routledge, 2018), 7–26, 10; Michael Stausberg and Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina, "Introduction: Scholarship on Zoroastrianism," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism,* ed. Michael Stausberg, Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina with Anna Tessmann (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2022[2]), 1–18, 7.

13
Stausberg and Vevaina, "Introduction: Scholarship on Zoroastrianism," 2.

14
Michael Stausberg, "On the State and Prospects of the Study of Zoroastrianism," *Numen* 55, no. 5 (2008): 561–600, esp. 566.

(ancient history) approaches that primarily did not inform the current state of Zoroastrians or their practices. The scholars of Zoroastrianism did not reflect the recent changes in the theory and history of religions until the 1980s.[15] According to John R. Hinnells, the most notable shift (he meant from the modernist to postmodernist trends) in "Zoroastrian studies"[16] occurred in the works of his teacher, the influential but controversial scholar Mary Boyce (1920–2006). In the late-1970s, she began to explore neglected topics, for instance, the "importance of living and domestic practice, not least the emphasis on the role of the women, the awareness of the situatedness of herself and others, the blurring . . . of religious and secular distinctions,"[17] and so on.

Michael Stausberg and Yuhan S.-D. Vevaina have recently disputed Hinnells' "harmonising" attempt to reconstruct the study of Zoroastrianism, claiming that neither the "postmodern challenge" nor the *Orientalism* debate has played much of a role in the twentieth-century survey of Zoroastrianism.[18] Moreover, they have seen a "disintegrated academic landscape" in it and called for a non-chronological picture of the scholarship, in which single critical scholars and their work are supposed to be responsible for the significant turns during the past three centuries. In Stausberg's and Vevaina's presentation of nine personalities, Mary Boyce is the first Western (only female) scholar in their list who "succeeded in integrating the study of Zoroastrianism into a consistent subject." She is also the latest prominent scholar whose legacy, according to the authors, has continued until now.[19]

Nevertheless, the "post-Boycian" inquiry of Zoroastrianism has only reinforced the trend toward the heterogeneity of approaches and an acceptance of the contemporary diversity of Zoroastrianism, as John R. Hinnells suggested in his works on the Parsi diaspora world-wide.[20] Hinnells introduced a somewhat differentiated picture of the Zoroastrian religion, synthesizing social practices of other religions in the immediate environment, in most cases, far away from the scholarly constructions of old Iranian versions of Zoroastrianism based on the textual analysis of extremely few primary sources. In his view, a "religion is what it has become; that Zoroastrianism is what Zoroastrians do and believe when they consider that they are being Zoroastrian."[21] Thus, any contemporary variety of "Zoroastrianism" had to gain legitimacy as an object of study.

Some subsequent studies of modern Zoroastrianism in India reinforced this notion. Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Shehnaz Neville Munshi's interview collection of Parsi Zoroastrianism in Mumbai in the 1990s showed that even Indian Zoroastrians viewed their ethnic religion as non-monolithic and often expressed their belonging to the Zoroastrian community in different ways.[22] They grouped the collected material, namely interviews, around traditionalist, neo-traditionalist, modernist, and eclectic categories and were dedicated to discussing Zoroastrianism as cultural heritage trends in religious Parsi groups and movements.[23] The esoteric beliefs were also included.[24] The diversity of Parsi religious practices in the 1980s was also highlighted in an earlier study by the anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann in 1996.[25] In 2022, Mariano Errichiello's doctoral thesis at SOAS of the University of London was dedicated to the esoteric *Ilm-e-Khshnoom* movement.[26]

15
Hinnells wrote that "(t)he modernist conviction that Western (all male), unbiased scholars could write 'scientific,' objective accounts of a clearly definable, homogeneous, unitary phenomenon, Zoroastrianism, whose essence is characterised by formal theological doctrines in 'classical' texts, underpinned Zoroastrian studies until the 1980s." See Hinnells, "Postmodernism and the Study of Zoroastrianism," 10.

16
Hinnells, "Postmodernism and the Study of Zoroastrianism," 18.

17
Hinnells, 20.

18
Stausberg and Vevaina, "Introduction: Scholarship on Zoroastrianism," 6.

19
Stausberg and Vevaina, 13.

20
John R. Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora: Religion and Migration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

21
Hinnells, "Postmodernism and the Study of Zoroastrianism," 22.

22
Philip G. Kreyenbroek in collaboration with Shehnaz Neville Munshi, *Living Zoroastrianism: Urban Parsis Speak about their Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001).

23
See Yuhan S-D Vevaina, "No One Stands Nowhere: Knowledge, Power, and Positionality across the Insider-Outsider Divide in the Study of Zoroastrianism," in *The Zoroastrian Flame: Exploring Religion, History and Tradition*, ed. Almut Hintze, Sarah Stewart, and Alan Williams (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016), 27–57, esp. 36–40, for a critique of these etic categories.

24
Kreyenbroek and Munshi, *Living Zoroastrianism*, 231ff.

25
Luhrmann, *The Good Parsi*, 33. For instance, she described eclectic religious pictures in 1989 while observing a poor area in Mumbai: "All of the five or so rooms we visited had pictures of Zarathustra somewhere, along with Sai Baba (an Indian guru popular with Parsis), the Virgin Mary, and—less usual for Parsis—various Hindu deities."

26
Mariano Errichiello, "Ilme Kṣnum: An Esoteric Interpretation of Zoroastrianism; History and Beliefs" (PhD diss., SOAS University of London, 2022).

Due to the political situation in the country after 1979, the study of modern Zoroastrians in Iran was much more complex than in India and the diaspora, so it was limited to a few anthropological studies and book projects.[27] The recent studies by Sarah Stewart in collaboration with Iranian scholars are significant as they have preserved the oral heritage in two collections of interviews with Iranian Zoroastrians from the urban centers of Tehran, Kerman, Ahvaz, Shiraz, Esfahan and the city of Yazd and surrounding villages.[28] However, the fragments from over 300 interviews present a picture of a relatively closed ethnic minority with locally formed, almost monolithic views of the Zoroastrian religion, even in urban settings, which contrasts with Kreyenbroek's and Munshi's description of Parsi Zoroastrianism. Stewart claimed that the "teaching of Zoroastrianism in Iran is defined by the quest for historical continuity within the literary tradition."[29]

With his seminal social-historical studies on Zoroastrianism worldwide, the most comprehensive to date, Michael Stausberg mapped out the panorama of ethnic Indian and Iranian Zoroastrianism in the 1990s and the early 2000s. He included many descriptions of teachings and communities that, in previous centuries, were inspired (but not always accepted) by ethnic Zoroastrians.[30] Later on, Stausberg's work continued the discussion of alternative and diverse images of what contemporary Zoroastrianism could be. In one article, partly drawing on Richard Dawkins' theory of memes, he discussed seven cases of innovations in the history of Zoroastrianism. He claimed that "forms of elaborations and reconfigurations of Zoroastrian memes by persons who were not primarily socialised into (ethnic) Zoroastrianism"[31] have created communities or "para-Zoroastrianisms." The examination of Russian Zoroastrianism outlined there adheres to the paradigm in Religious Studies that recognizes the variety within modern expressions of religious life. In Stausberg's view, it is an example of the practiced Zoroastrian religion, which can be interpreted as a particular "variety of 'para-tradition,' i.e., where cultural information has been replicated outside the line of ethnic transmission."[32]

Origins, Types, and Tendencies of Russian Zoroastrian Communities

Local reinterpretations of Zoroastrian practices in the post-Soviet space, far away from India and Iran and any Western Zoroastrian diaspora, have been known since the early 1990s, and they have been under scholarly consideration since the 2000s.[33] In the eyes of scholars of religions, the communities, also in a discursive sense,[34] claiming to practice Zoroastrianism in this territory are distinguished by their place of origin. In this way, at least two categories can be distinguished. The first includes Central Asian groups (e.g., in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan), which are now, as in the past, poorly studied. These communities were organized by local intellectuals who felt deeply connected to the ancient Iranian heritage and were initially open to international contacts. They viewed Zoroastrianism as a better alternative to expanding, diverse types of Islam and set themselves up as "cultural centers/houses." The second category is represented by Zoroastrian communities in other parts of post-Soviet Eurasia (Russia:

27
See Sarah Stewart, "On the Problems of Studying Modern Zoroastrianism," *Oral Tradition* 35, no. 2 (2022): 251–66, esp. 253. Stewart has discussed the works by Mary Boyce, Michael Fischer, Janet Kestenberg-Amighi, and Navid Fozi. Nonetheless, she has not mentioned other scholars who have studied Iranian Zoroastrianism, such as German scholars Michael Stausberg or Robert Langer, and Beate Schmermbeck.

28
Sarah Stewart, *Voices from Zoroastrian Iran: Oral Texts and Testimony*, 2 vols. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2018–2019).

29
Stewart, *Voices from Zoroastrian Iran: Oral Texts and Testimony*, 1:20.

30
See Michael Stausberg. *Die Religion Zarathushtras,* vol. 2, *Gegenwart* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002).

31
See Michael Stausberg, "Para-Zoroastrianisms: Memetic Transmissions and Appropriations," in *Parsis in India and the Diaspora*, ed. John R. Hinnells and Alan Williams (London: Routledge, 2007), 236–54, here 251.

32
John R. Hinnells and Alan Williams, introduction to *Parsis in India and the Diaspora*, ed. John R. Hinnells and Alan Williams (London: Routledge, 2007), 1–11, 10.

33
See Stausberg, *Die Religion Zarathushtras*, 2:332–34, 6f. Stausberg discussed Central Asia and Europe (Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine); Anna Tessmann, "Astrozoroastrismus in modernen Russland und Belarus," Unpublished Magistra Artia Thesis (Ruprecht-Karls-Universität, ZEGK, Institut für Religionswissenschaft, Heidelberg, 2005); Anna Tessmann, *On the Good Faith: The Fourfold Discursive Construction of Zoroastrianism in Modern Russia* (Stockholm: E-Print, 2012).

34
Tessmann, *On the Good Faith*, 28.

St Petersburg, Moscow, Perm, Novosibirsk; Belarus: Minsk, Vitebsk; Ukraine: Kyiv; Latvia: Riga; and others) that owed their emergence to a mass media celebrity, astrologer Pavel P. Globa (b. 1953). Most of them were an extension of or based on his astrological courses, which were later renamed *Avestan Schools of Astrology*. As a rule, these *Avestan astrology* groups, with a distinct predominance of women, have sought no other authority than Globa's as a "hereditary Zoroastrian (priest)," as he used to present himself in public at the beginning of his career as a Zoroastrian leader. With a few exceptions, they have not tried to gain any further acceptance from Indian and Iranian Zoroastrians. Parallel to them, and sometimes based on *Avestan astrology*, there have been neo-Zoroastrian trends in the 2000s, inspired in many ways by Central Asian and Iranian converts who wanted to feel part of the global "ethical," non-ethnic neo-Zoroastrian movement (the early Moscow *Russian Anjoman*).[35] That is why Zoroastrianism in Russian urban settings may be considered contemporary, almost conflict-free "cross-cultural appropriation,"[36] and a new religion in its own right, expressing different "living styles" of Zoroastrianism. These living styles have been shaped by the persistent assertion of a "Zoroastrian identity" in the public sphere (in newspapers, on TV, and on the Internet: *YouTube*, *WhatsApp*, and *Telegram* messengers[37]), a supportive legal framework onsite for so-called "traditional" religions (from time to time officially registered as "religious communities"), as well as regularly performed rituals in individual and collective social contexts over the past thirty years. However, since their official registration in the mid-1990s, Russian Zoroastrian communities have continually restructured their practices, beliefs, and institutions. It is worth considering that these doctrinal and ritual changes took place in virtual isolation from foreign Zoroastrian communities, against the background of exchanges with other mainly Russian neopagan groups. Such re-arrangements have often been negotiated as schisms and inner conflicts, and gradually, communities have become self-regulated, weakly hierarchized groups. Over time, it became clear that the Zoroastrian branch in post-Soviet Eurasia, originating from the *Avestan astrological schools*, turned out to be the most stable community, albeit gradually dwindling. Occasionally, and to a minimal extent, it has also been supported by some Parsi individuals and organizations (including Meher Master-Moos organizations, i.e., *Mazdayasnie Monasterie*; *Zoroastrian College*; *All India Shah Behram Baug Society*), some Iranian *mobedyar*s, the Swedish *Zoroastrian Universal Community*, and maintained many contacts (mainly written communication) with various American Zoroastrian organizations (for instance, the *Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America* [FEZANA]). Prolonged observation of practitioners and their activities allows us to see the relationship between constant and changing elements and enables us to attempt some diachronic comparisons.

35
Tessmann, *On the Good Faith*, 101.

36
See Michael Stausberg and Anna Tessmann, "The Appropriation of a Religion: The Case of Zoroastrianism in Contemporary Russia," *Culture and Religion: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 14, no. 4 (2013): 445–62.

37
At the beginning of 2023, the St Petersburg WhatsApp group, to which I was invited in 2021 by a *khorbad* of the Zoroastrian community, numbered 64 participants and was led by two admins; a year later, there were 69 of them. The Telegram group has 94 subscribers, including foreign Zoroastrians (May 2024: 159).

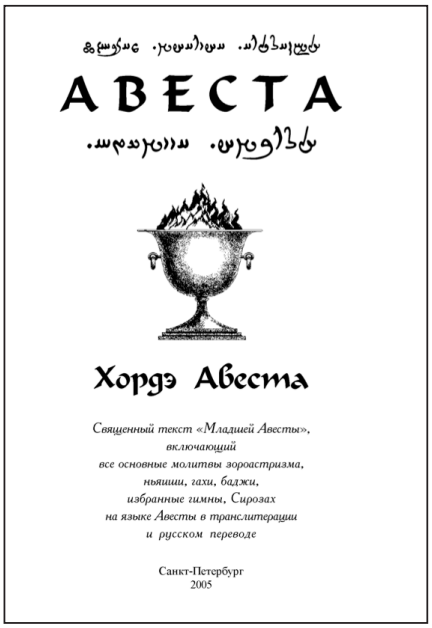

Fig. 1–2. The Russian translation of the *Khorde (Small) Avesta* by Mikhail Chistiakov, 2005, used by the *khorbad* of the community in St Petersburg during the weekly rituals and festivals. © Mikhail Chistiakov.

To sketch out the religious practices of Russian Zoroastrianism, I would like to focus on the religion of the *Zoroastrian community of St Petersburg*. Since its official establishment in 1994, this community has been an offshoot of the local Avestan astrological school and a kind of "showcase" of Russian Zoroastrianism. Some of its most constant elements refer to astrological and autochthonous interpretations of Zoroastrian beliefs and ritual practices, including those that are esoteric. Despite the tiny number of members (regular community meetings are currently held in a rented room in the northwest of the city by usually 3–5 people),[38] the consolidating ritual, which to a greater extent shapes their (Russian) Zoroastrian identity (in addition to home prayers of individual Zoroastrians), is a liturgy in front of the altar with a metal *afrinagan*-fire vase. The arrangement of the prayers was established by the first junior leader (*mladshii nastoiatel'*, literary "junior dean/rector") of the community, Mikhail Chistiakov, who was appointed to this office by Globa, the senior leader (*starshii nastoiatel'*). Globa practically did not perform any rituals except initiations at the very beginning of the community's formation. After that, he had only a remote function as a leader. Chistiakov described the structure of the Zoroastrian liturgy proper as he understood it in 2005 in his translated Russian collection of *Khorde Avesta*.[39] There, he showed that even though a Zoroastrian liturgy consists of obligatory sequences, the believers can construct some parts during home prayers. Chistiakov's book is a compilation of Ervad Maneck Furdoonji Kanga's *Khordeh Avesta* (1993), with transliteration and Russian translation from English. The priest in charge of the Zoroastrian community, Chistiakov's successor, continues to follow the same order. According to him, the liturgy usually begins with the tying of the sacred girdle *kushti* and *Srosh baj*, followed by a *Gah* (a prayer for one of the five periods of the day, most often *Uzerin*) and *Yasht* (a hymn to the deity of the day [Solar calendar], the so-called *central* prayer of their liturgy). *Ahuna vairyō* and other Zoroastrian

38 Aleksandra Zasiad'ko, "What Does It Mean to Be a 'Russian Zoroastrian'?: Mimetic (Re)Creation of 'Tradition' in 'Zoroastrians of St Petersburg' Community" (master's thesis, European University of St Petersburg, 2023), 18, in Russian.

39 Mikhail Chistiakov, trans, *Avesta. Khorde Avesta (Mladshaia Avesta)* (Sankt-Peterburg: n.p., 2005), 14ff, in Russian.

*manthra*s are an integral part of diverse sequences. The routine ceremony concludes with reciting final prayers and blessings, such as confessions to Ahura Mazda and the Zoroastrian faith (*Doa Nam Setayesh* and *Din-no-Kalmo*). Some lines of Avestan prayers are duplicated in the Russian language. Generally, the junior leader or a *khorbad* takes the lead in the ceremony in the community space. [40] He stands closer to the fire and reads prayers from a book while the rest of the participants try to pray with him. This is not always possible because the "lay people" often do not know the prayers by heart. The liturgy, called *bogosluzhenie* (divine service), or *ritual* (ritual), ends in communion with a sip of red wine. The second part of the "meeting" in the community, as explained on the website, consists of a tea party, where, among other things, a "tea drink from Rosebay willowherb (*Ivan-chai*), collected in ecologically clean places"[41] is offered to the community members and their guests. This tea, an "original Russian beverage," is a favorite of Russian New Agers and ecovillagers close to neopagan groups; it is widespread among *Anastasians*.[42] Currently, this liturgy is performed collectively every week and on various Zoroastrian holidays, such as the Spring New Year Nouruz, or six seasonal festivals, such as *gahanbar*s, and translated on the *Telegram Messenger* channel *Zoroastriitsy Sankt-Peterburga* (St Petersburg Zoroastrians) with 159 subscribers.

Even though the Zoroastrian community was founded as a truly independent, "traditional" religious organization and is declared as such in its official documents and statutes, it cannot be considered in isolation from its environment, which is understood both in a broader sense as a socio-political, in this case Russian, post-Soviet background, and in a narrower but no less critical sense as part of the permanent *cultic milieu* or a milieu of *Avestan astrology* groups. We cannot foresee the extent to which Russian Zoroastrianism will disappear in just one generation or experience another revival in the future, as the adherents hoped and continued to wish for in their interviews in 2023.[43] However, it is clear that after the flourishing of the *Avestan astrological schools* in the 1990s and their gradual decline in the 2000s, the number of people who consider themselves Russian Zoroastrians has also declined sharply to a few hundred at most. The inflow of new, younger community members is relatively negligible. This gradual decline seems to be continuing.

Fig. 3. The *khorbad* of the Zoroastrian community, performing a communal ritual with a live translation on the community's Telegram channel, 2024. Photograph © *Zoroastriitsy Sankt-Peterburga.*

Russian Zoroastrianism in Context of the (Post-)Soviet New Age

The tendencies and parameters characterizing this type of Russian Zoroastrianism (also called Astro-Zoroastrianism[44]) in the St Petersburg Zoroastrian community are diverse. Its esoteric component(s)—even if seemingly essential to the untrained eye—do not indicate a specific type of "Zoroastrian esotericism"; rather, they are just a few of the identity markers[45] that bring it closer to the particular forms of local *New Age* religiosity that emerged in the Soviet urban underground in the 1970s and spread in the 1990s. This *New Age* religiosity is first and foremost obliged to intellectual history and the reading and reception of popular occultism, mysticism, and philosophical literature that spread in imperial Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century and has been preserved in the Soviet Union in libraries and private

40 An innovative spelling from Middle Persian *hērbed* or *hērbad* (corresponding to modern *ervad* in India and *mobedyar* in Iran), the lowest grade of the Zoroastrian priesthood in modern times. See Philip G. Kreyenbroek, "Hērbed," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, December 15, 2003, accessed August 10, 2024, https://iranicaonline.org/articles/herbed.

41 See https://zoroastrian.ru/node/1027.

42 Julia Andreeva, "Traditions and the Imagined Past in Russian Anastasian Intentional Communities," *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* 15, no. 2 (2021): 25–42, esp. 33 ff.

43 Aleksandra Zasiad'ko, "In Search of 'Community,' " Unpublished Seminar Paper (St Petersburg, March 7, 2023), in Russian.

44 Tessmann, "Astrozoroastrismus,"; Stausberg, "Para-Zoroastrianisms," 250.

45 Yet once again, it is not limited to it alone because it also contains "traditionalist," elements shared with Parsis and Iranians.

collections. It also used to exist in the circulation of esoteric *samizdat* self-published and secretly copied or reprinted literature.[46]

During the Soviet period, esoteric groups, as well as any other organizations offering an alternative to state structures, which were based on the philosophy of materialism and atheism, were persecuted for ideological reasons. As a result, most people interested in any kind of religion or mysticism had to rely on finding and reading such literature.[47] Born in the early 1950s, Globa was an active seeker in the late Soviet cultic milieu.[48] According to some testimonies, he participated in groups and "spiritual" training in the Moscow underground in the 1970s and gradually gained ground as an astrology teacher and, then, as a charismatic leader of many astrological groups scattered throughout the post-Soviet space.[49] In the early 1980s, he and his colleagues began to meet in private apartments, where they discussed occult literature or organized paid astrology courses. Globa's television career as an astrologer began in the late 1980s. This was illegal because private entrepreneurship had been banned in the 1960s and was punished by the Soviet authorities since the *Law on individual labor activity*, which allowed entrepreneurship, was not passed until 1986.

Fig. 4. Tamara and Pavel Globa discussed Avestan astrology, Zervanite teaching, and theosophical races in the TV program *Around the World* on May 13, 1991.

So, looking back, the contemporary New Agers' interest in Zoroastrianism is related to at least two aspects. The first is an attraction for non-European, Oriental religions in general, a process known as the "Easternization" of the European religious space.[50] The second aspect, in particular, is the long tradition of European reception of the Zoroastrian religion as an exoticism, especially regarding the figure of Zoroaster portrayed as a mystic who gained secret knowledge and possessed a special gift of divination.[51] Both were intensified from the *fin de siècle* until World War I and found their expression in the literary, philosophical, and historical works of the time. These tendencies are also found in the publications of French occultists and the transnation-

46
See for this period, Ryan, W. F., *The Bathhouse at Midnight: An Historical Survey of Magic and Divination in Russia* (Stroud: Sutton, 1999); Faith Wigzell, *Reading Russian Fortunes: Print Culture, Gender, and Divination in Russia from 1765* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Julia Mannherz, *Modern Occultism in Late Imperial Russia* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2012).

47
Boris Falikov, "Books Instead of Lineage: Mystic Underground in the USSR (1960s–1980s)," *New Age in Russia*, July 24, 2022, accessed August 10. 2024, https://newageru.hypotheses.org/?p=6614.

48
Colin Campbell, "The Cult, The Cultic Milieu and Secularization," in *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* (London: SCM Press, 1972), 5:119–36.

49
Cf. Aleksandr Zaraev, *The Way to the Stars: When Horoscopes Come True* (Moscow: Ėksmo, 2017), 47, in Russian.

50
Steve Bruce, *God Is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 118.

51
Michael Stausberg, "Zarathustra Post-Gathic Trajectories," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism,* ed. Michael Stausberg, Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina with Anna Tessmann, 69–81 (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2022[2]), 71, 73; Jenny Rose, *The Image of Zoroaster: The Persian Mage Through European Eyes* (New York: Bibliotheca Persica Press, 2000); Michael Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathushtra. Zoroaster und die europäische Religionsgeschichte der Frühen Neuzeit* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998).

al *Theosophical Society* (a harbinger of the New Age Movement of the 1970s). The founders of the Theosophical Society, Helena P. Blavatsky (1831–1891) and, especially, Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907), were interested in the Zoroastrian religion and tried to link it to their vision of occultism through public lectures, which attracted many followers among Parsis.[52] We find many of their ideas in later theosophical works. For instance, Annie Besant (1847–1933) saw Zoroaster in the chain of other great sages of humanity as the "World Teacher of the third Aryan sub-race, who initiated the Aryanization of Persia."[53] At the beginning of the twentieth century, Theosophy also inspired astrology. This was characterized by the "affinity of many of its practitioners with theosophy and with the gradual transition from an event-oriented to a psychologizing practice,"[54] and this "double affiliation" affected literature on the astrology of the period.

Fig. 5. Zarathushtra's Mountain at the confluence of two rivers, Kama and Chusovaya, Perm Krai, Russia, 2005. © Oleg Lushnikov.

Yet, once again, the discourses on Zarathushtra and the Zoroastrian religion developed after World War II. They spread in the mass culture of Western societies and globally from the late 1960s onwards. Moreover, we should not underestimate the further "end products" of the appropriation of the Zoroastrian religion in the twentieth century by various discourses, not only religious discourses, and especially at the beginning of this century, as significant structural and technological changes were taking place. Simultaneously, the desire for radical change and rebellion are precisely the qualities that symbolize the Nietzschean Zoroaster figure, highly influential among intellectual elites throughout the twentieth century. In this regard, the Russian Empire and the Soviet state were no exception. In the post-World War II period in the Soviet Union, such ideas were transmitted secretly through *samizdat* literature.[55]

The contextual account sketched out above, while necessary for

52 See Kreyenbroek, *Living Zoroastrianism*, 48; Stausberg, Die *Religion Zarathushtras*, 2:112ff; Prods Oktor Skjærvø and Daniel J. Sheffield, "Zoroastrian, Scriptures," in *Islam, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism*, ed. Zayn R. Kassam, Yudit Kornberg Greenberg, and Jehan Bagli (Dordrecht: Springer, 2018), 790–804, 809.

53 Isaac Lubelsky, "Mythological and Real Race Issues in Theosophy," *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, ed. Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2013), 335–55, 349.

54 Olav Hammer, "Astrology V: 20th Century," in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter Hanegraaff et al. (Leiden, Brill Publishers, 2006), 136–41, 139.

55 Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, ed., *Nietzsche in Russia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

historically grounded studies of religions, is not comprehensive,[56] but we must understand how the trans-European reception of ethnic Zoroastrianism and the figure of the Prophet Zarathushtra attracted the attention of post-Soviet New Agers and became the motivation for the creation of a new religion. This should help us to understand the context-text intersections and set up some esoteric elements and structures, which I will examine at the simplified but interconnected levels of (1) belief, (2) practice, and (3) institutionalization among the St Petersburg Zoroastrian community.

56
John P. Burris, "Text and Context in the Study of Religion," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 15, no. 1 (2003): 28–47, esp. 29f.

Spiritual Leadership, Exclusivity of Belief, and Multiple Levels of Secrecy

Doubtlessly, the "original" meaning of Zoroastrianism in Globa's and his followers' eyes has been contingent upon several historical works devoted to the studies of ancient Zoroastrianism.[57] The discussion of "authentic" or "proper" Zoroastrianism has taken one of the central places in the pages of the magazine of the Zoroastrian community, *Mitra* (1997–2017), and Globa's seminal books *Living Fire* (1996, 2008) and *Teaching of the Ancient Aryans* (2007), the anonymous booklet *Zervan-Zoroastrianism* (1997), inspired by theosophical ideas of races in a compilation edited by one of Globa's students, and many other sources such as astrological and Zoroastrian conference speeches.[58]

In his recent study on secrecy, analyzing the *Theosophical Society*, Hugh Urban inferred that "Blavatsky's secret doctrine remains among the clearest examples of the central paradox inherent in most forms of religious secrecy. This is the paradox that we can call the advertised secret, as the active cultivation of a public reputation of concealed knowledge. This paradox involves not only the use of a complex 'language of secrecy' and 'occult rhetoric' but also the cultivation of an entire occult personality—an occult *habitus* or mode of being that includes dress, comportment, mannerisms, and speech that generates the aura of secret knowledge and hidden power."[59]

This paradox of the "advertised secret" explains some strategies of contemporary astrologers with their prognoses in the public sphere, as well as Globa's active public promotion of Zoroastrianism as a "secret wisdom." The self-presentation and construction of his teaching with different spheres and levels of accessibility strongly resemble theosophical ideas in their older, *fin de siècle* fashion.[60] Globa's "occult habitus" manifests itself in dress and gestures and a certain modus operandi of rhetorical silence. In other words, he consciously worked on his own image as a "spiritual teacher," who, in public speeches and numerous interviews, turned out to be much higher than the "spiritual level" of his students. Some of his former colleagues and followers have mentioned experiencing a special state of mind during Globa's astrology lectures, even after listening to them on tape recordings. Although they have criticized his fickle assertions and prediction mistakes, most also recognized Globa's extraordinary visionary abilities.[61]

In a very similar "theosophical" way, Globa distinguished two levels in teaching Zoroastrianism: inner and outer, *esoteric* and *exoteric*. At this point, it should be noted that on the level of references, Globa draws on texts that were themselves held as authoritative by theoso-

57
Especially in the translations into Russian like Mary Boyce's *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (1979; repr., London: Routledge, 2002), in Russian, the book was published four times: in 1987, 1988, 1994, and 2003; Robert Charles Zaehner was also very influential with his studies *Zurvan: A Zoroastrian Dilemma* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955). Zaehner's book *The Teachings of the Magi: A Compendium of Zoroastrian Beliefs* (University of Michigan: Allen & Unwin, 1956) was translated and published by Globa's followers with his preface criticizing the idea of Zurvanism as "Zoroastrian heresy" in the early 1990s.

58
Pavel Globa, *The Living Fire* (Moscow: Vagrius, Iauza, 1996; Ėksmo, Iauza, 2008), in Russian; Pavel Globa, *The Teaching of the Ancient Aryans* (Moscow: Ėksmo, Iauza, 2007); Pavel Globa, "Zervanism is a Clandestine Teaching of Zoroastrianism," *Mitra* 2, no. 6 (2000): 6–13; Pavel Globa, "A Course Toward Zervano-Zoroastrianism," *Mitra* 9, no. 13 (2007): 57–65. See also the discussion in Tessmann, *On the Good Faith*, 50, 52ff.

59
Hugh Urban**,** *Secrecy: Silence, Power, and Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 76.

60
Urban**,** *Secrecy*, 76.

61
For instance, A.M. (Interviewed by the author, St Petersburg, November 25, 2018).

phists and some Parsis, such as the *Dasatir*, a mystical compilatory work published in the Persian Sufi milieu in the sixteenth century.[62] In reaching the first level, he asserts the importance of genealogical affiliation to the secret ancestral tradition, especially in relation to his somewhat legendary grandfather, Ivan N. Gantimurov, whose maternal ancestors were supposed to be of Iranian descent (and, he believes, of Zoroastrian, or even particularly "secret Zoroastrian" or so-called *Zervanite* descent).[63] According to Globa, his grandfather, who tried to build the first Zoroastrian temple in Russia, was supported by Iranians and Azerbaijanis living in St Petersburg, but the idea was never realized.[64] For his students who, of course, cannot claim to belong to the priestly class of secret *Zervanite*s as he did or even to be Zoroastrian by birth, this level of involvement in Zoroastrian teaching is inaccessible. It was understood that Globa's Russian followers could improve their knowledge and practice rituals, but in his opinion, their potential would remain very limited.

Surprisingly, the Western and traditionalist construction of *Zoroastrianism* as a religion based on the sacred scriptures (the *Avesta*) and transmitted by Ahura Mazda through his prophet Zarathustra to the people, also plays out on the level of the invention of Russian Zoroastrianism. Similarly, Globa articulated a special, true doctrine (*Zervanism*) that manifests itself through a book (*Zervan-namag*) (or rather, he transforms and adds to what is already known from books). Globa appeared as a New Age prophet who taught people how to distinguish the *true* teaching from the *false* teaching and *make a (proper) choice* at the beginning of the coming new (*Aquarian*) era.

In the 1990s, Globa insisted on the exclusivity of his *Zervanite* belief in relation to the historical perspective; later, it gradually faded into the background, especially in public speeches. Similar to many other esotericists operating in the vivid post-Soviet "religious market," he offered a version of Zoroastrianism that was interpreted as descending from "ancient secret knowledge."[65] Thus, in Globa's opinion, Zoroastrianism was divided into two main currents: *Zoroastrianism/Mazdeism*[66] and *Zervanism* (spelled as *Zurvanism* in academic works). Even though Mazdeism can be understood as a prototype of contemporary Zoroastrianism, its valuable essence was "esoteric Zoroastrianism" or *Zervanism*,[67] the teaching that was named after the main deity *Zervan*, conceptualized in two guises as *finite* and *infinite time*. The esoteric tradition of *Zervanism* had to have a particular canon and rituals, which differed from the "orthodox" Zoroastrian tradition but is completely hidden. In terms of religion and in strict opposition to his followers, Globa describes himself as the only "real" *Zervanite* and mage in the entire territory of the former Soviet Union. He also emphasizes that he cannot exclude some *Zervanite*s "allegedly living in Tajikistan." He was convinced that there is also an Iranian *Zervanite* community that continues to exist near Tabriz in Iran.[68]

62
Pavel Globa, "Zervanism," 9. See Kreyenbroek and Munshi, *Living Zoroastrianism,* 49.

63
Tessmann, "Astrozoroastrismus," 58.

64
Tessmann, *On the Good Faith*, 79.

65
Demyan Belyaev, *Geographie der alternativen Religiosität in Russland: Zur Rolle des heterodoxen Wissens nach dem Zusammenbruch des kommunistischen Systems* (Heidelberg: Selbstverlag des Geographischen Instituts der Universität, 2008), 55.

66
The term *Mazdeism* goes back to the Zoroastrians' self-designation as *mazdaiiasna-* "Mazdā worshipper" in the Av. ritual texts. Cf. Michael Stausberg, *Die Religion Zarathushtras*, 1:8. This name of the Zoroastrian religion as Mazdeism was quite common in the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century in the European area.

67
Mary Boyce's school understood Zurvanism (from Avestan *zruuān*, time) as being an alternative religious current to official Sasanian Zoroastrianism, a so-called Zoroastrian "heresy" (M. Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, vol. 2, *Under the Achaemenians* [Leiden: Brill, 1982], 231f). In recent scholarly literature, it has been described as a "variant of Zaratuštrian mythology," a Zoroastrian creation myth. See Stausberg, *Die Religion Zarathushtras,* 1:245ff., 480. Shaul Shaked wrote: "The myth of Zurvan, a myth of creation which presents an alternative to the official Zoroastrian version, enjoyed great popularity in the Sasanian period but does not seem to have established itself as a distinct religion or sect, and apparently did not have the structure of a religious community." See Shaul Shaked, "Religion in the Late Sasanian Period: Eran, Aneran, and Other Religious Designations," in *The Idea of Iran*, vol. 3, *The Sasanian Era*, ed. Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis and Sarah Stewart (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008), 111.

68
Tessmann, "Astrozoroastrismus," 93.

At the beginning of his "Zoroastrian" mission, Globa explained to the students that the "philosophical foundations" of Zoroastrianism are most accurately outlined in a certain compiled Pahlavi scripture, *Zervan-namag*, which is still unknown to scholars. In this way, Globa (perhaps unconsciously) repeats the strategy of earlier esotericists, the closest example of which is again Blavatsky, highly influential in the (post-)Soviet *cultic milieu*. Blavatsky claimed that her *Secret Doctrine* (1888), translated in the 1930s by a Russian theosophist and one of the inventors of *Agni Yoga*, Helena Roerich, and distributed in *samizdat* after World War II, was nothing more than a commentary on the "secret" book of *Dzyan*/*Dzan* in which seven stanzas were about cosmic evolution (*Cosmogenesis*)[69] and twelve described the true creation of man (*Anthropogenesis*). Similarly, the *Book of Dzyan* itself was shown to Blavatsky in her own words only during a visit to a Tibetan monastery and has never been studied by any scholar.

According to Globa, the relatively old manuscript was a handwritten collection of all sorts of fragments of Persian texts, not entirely coherent, now in Globa's possession and available to no one except him. In his lectures given in the early 1990s, Globa quoted some passages and re-told myths "of the *Zervan-namag*." From the nature of the statements, this should be imagined as a (fictional) literary work compiled from the reception of mystical, Gnostic, Pythagorean, Neoplatonic, and Hinduist elements. Some of the mentioned concepts and terms can be understood only against the background of Hindu beliefs (e.g., *zarma*, meaning *karma*) or contemporary esoteric discourses and concepts.

The references to *Zervanism* and *Zervan-namag* cross the imaginary bridge to *Avestan astrology* ("every *Zervanite* was an astrologer"). As for astrological ideas and the system of horoscopes crystallized out of *Zervanite* or similar heritages, they represent a compilation of Zoroastrian mythology, modern Western astrological teachings, and original interpretations.[70] The concept of *khvarna* (from Avestan *xᵛarənah-* "[divine/royal, etc.,] glory, shine, highness, majesty" with later interpretations outside the Zoroastrian tradition, for instance, in occultism) has conventional meanings but is understood by Globa as belonging to the context of New Age holistic healing practices, "positive Cosmic energy," and the occult term *egregor* (for instance, "Zoroastrian egregor") (from Greek ἐγρήγορος, *egrēgoros* "wakeful" but reinterpreted in an occult sense by English theosophist and astrologer Alan Leo or mystic writer Daniil Andreev, who saw in it "other-material formations that arise from some psychic extractions of humanity over large collectives"[71]). This concept easily fit into the worldview of Globa and his followers and harmonized with other components. As such, however, they are primarily linked to both the late Soviet New Age milieu and its esoteric *lingua franca*.

69
The same title is given to one of the first published *Astro-Zoroastrian* transcripts of Globa's lectures: Pavel Globa, *Cosmogenesis: The Avestan School of Astrology*, Published records of lectures, 1991 (St Petersburg: n.p., n.d.), in Russian.

70
Tessmann, "Astrozoroastrismus," 99.

71
Daniil Andreev, *The Rose of the World* (Moscow: Mir Uranii, 2002), 143, in Russian.

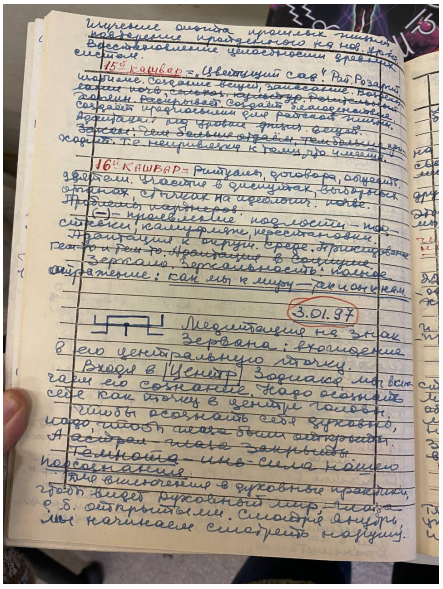

Fig. 6. Fragment of a handwritten transcript of one lecture at the *Avestan School of Astrology* in St Petersburg in 1997, describing a *Zervan* meditation. Photograph by Aleksandra Zasiad'ko, 2023, © The Zoroastrian Community of St Petersburg.

Practicing Avestan Astrology

Even though astronomical and astrological elements in Young Avestan, and especially in Pahlavi texts, occupy a prominent place, they are neglected in most scholarly works. The reason may have been the premise that "astrology has been an implicit embarrassment to all views of

Zoroastrianism that take the doctrine of free will and ethical choice as the fundamentals of the religion."[72] However, according to Enrico Raffaelli's latest studies, the Pahlavi texts show that the Zoroastrian written tradition in the Sassanian and early Islamic periods retained the capacity for "intellectual creativity that had previously allowed it to include and adapt to its theological corpus notions and doctrines of multifarious type and origin," including astrological beliefs.[73] Since the late 1990s, astrology has been the subject of textual research into ancient Zoroastrianism. Still, astrology practiced inside contemporary Zoroastrianism, such as that of the Parsis, has so far remained outside the scope of scholarly consideration.

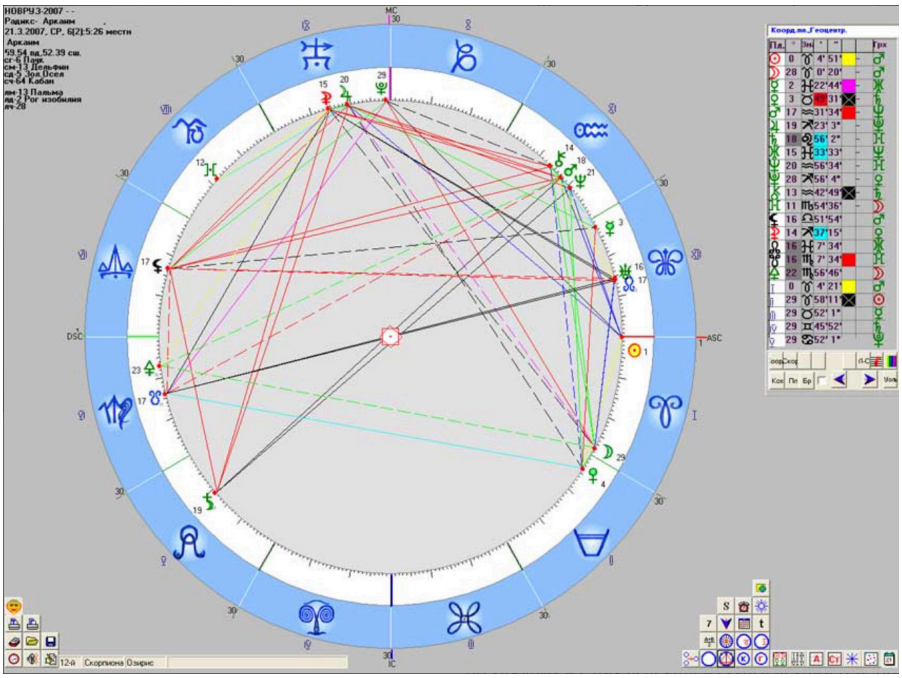

Fig. 7. Natal chart of the archaeological site of Arkaim, made with the help of the astrological program *Astro-Zero*, using particular ("Zervan-Zoroastrian") signs for some planets and Zodiac signs, on the day of Nouruz, 21.3.2007. © Pavel Volynkin.

As surprising as the "revival" of an unknown post-Soviet *Avestan astrology* may seem, this reinvention appears to me to be entirely rational in the vein of New Age spirituality and its relentless agenda to "fill in the gaps" left by academic research in the analysis of Pahlavi or Avestan astrological beliefs, and in fact to create new meanings. In the popularization of *Avestan astrology*, at least two aspects played a significant role: (1) the presence of astrological ideas and their fragments in Zoroastrian literature, which was translated into Russian by scholars, and (2) new insights into psychological and philosophical astrology in the twentieth century (reprints and translations of the influential theosophists Alan Leo [1875–1917] and Dane Rudhyar [1895–1985] were circulating in Soviet samizdat). In the lengthy discussions about free will and predicting the future, these two aspects eliminated this contradiction, transforming astrology into a therapeutic tool. Given the Soviet people's growing interest in their own "Orient"—Central Asia, impacted by Iranian culture and languages—Globa, a historian-archivist by profession and a gifted New Age bricoleur by nature, had no difficulty in initiating his own style of astrology based on the myth

72 See Michael Stausberg, "On the State," 576.

73 Enrico G. Raffaelli. "Astrology and Religion in the Zoroastrian Pahlavi Texts," *Journal Asiatique* 305, no. 2 (2017): 171–90, here 187.

of "secret Zoroastrians" and "mystical initiations." For him, astrology is a part of "clandestine knowledge" (ergo *Zervanism*), "language of God," "sacral science," and at the same time, "sacred art," which helps to make the "proper choice" for the "right" position in the world, also for the Zoroastrian religion.[74] Although in recent *YouTube* videos, Globa insists that he "developed (earlier, he used to say that he inherited this astrological tradition and was just sharing it with others [*A.T.*]) the *Avestan astrology* in the past 45 years,"[75] *Avestan astrology* was presented in the early 1990s as a revival of lost "traditional" knowledge. As to the New Age milieus, they have often been characterized by the "integration of older divinatory practices (astrology, tarot, and I Ching) with standard psychological counselling,"[76] which also aptly describes the occult knowledge transmitted in the *Avestan Schools of Astrology*. Also, supposedly "Avestan" symbols of planets, Zodiac signs, and Zervan signs, actively recommended to all students of Avestan schools of astrology for casting various horoscopes or making magical talismans, are nothing but innovations within the local New Age movement.

74
See, for instance, P. P. Globa's interview *About Nowruz and Beyond*, to the TV company "Mir." *Globaastra,* March 18, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wyteHDZOpQA.

75
Pavel Globa: Forecast—The Hague, Xi Jinping; M. Reger, I. Shishkin, March 23, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=haqv_cLwEZ8.

76
Melton, "New Age movement."

A Question of Authority in a New Age Zoroastrian Community

Initially, the first Zoroastrian community in St Petersburg construed itself as a religious organization with a charismatic, almost autocratic leader at the helm. For this purpose, the members have chosen a structure of the "traditionalist" and "revivalist" (or represented as such) community, emphasizing the unique position of Globa in the Russian Zoroastrian doctrine and his authority as the only "spiritual" and "senior" leader of the community.[77] At the same time, Russian Orthodox Christian and *New Age* connotations can be traced in the designation of hierarchy and spheres of activity in the official statute of the community. It was open not only to students of astrological courses but also to other seekers, sympathizers with the Zoroastrian religion, and random guests. It remains so to this day and is often a meeting place for passing Parsi visitors or young Iranians studying Russian in St Petersburg.[78]

The idea of autocratic leadership which is understood as "traditional Zoroastrian" leadership, could never be realized. The reasons were various: Globa's permanent absence from the city (he has lived in many places and many countries, but most of his life in Moscow), his alleged disinterest in practical leadership as well as his ongoing pursuit of his core business of traveling and giving astrological lectures for *Avestan Schools of Astrology* throughout the entire post-Soviet space, holding talks via mass media, casting horoscopes, and writing books.

The performance of collective liturgies described above, the teaching of common prayers and rituals, and the organization of Zoroastrian festivals according to the specific Astro-Zoroastrian calendar developed by Globa and his students rested on the shoulders of the *khorbad*s, second-rank clergy within the Zoroastrian community initiated by Globa. In the mid-1990s, there were about a dozen of them. As the community began to hold frequent (at the beginning, twice weekly) ritual gatherings ("divine services"), Globa blessed one *khorbad* for the primary role onsite as a "junior leader," who served until 2015.

Although the community had been autonomous for many years

77
Stausberg and Tessmann, "The Appropriation of a Religion," 452.

78
Zasiad'ko, "What Does It Mean to Be a 'Russian Zoroastrian'?," 61.

and its leader Globa had ceased to visit it in the early 2000s, the lay people and the rest of the *khorbad*s tried to maintain this link by coming to Moscow for advice for various reasons, as they did not consider themselves entitled to make certain decisions (for instance, conceptualizing a new issue of the magazine *Mitra*) without Globa's permission. Since the late 2000s, the reference to *Zervanism* as a name for a particular type of Zoroastrianism has faded. This was probably due to the gradual growth of the community's autonomy, as external contacts with Iranians and Indians through travel and guest visits strengthened the community members' identity as Zoroastrians. After a conflict between the community members in 2019, which can be described as somewhat generational, one part of the community obtained a new official registration in 2022 as the "Zoroastrians of St Petersburg," where neither *Zervano-Zoroastrianism* nor Globa were mentioned as spiritual authorities.[79] The latest statute stated that the new community should be regulated by the General Meeting of the members and the Council (5.1). In contrast, the belief of the community is based on "Avesta-teaching," which includes "Avesta, Gathas, and Avestan astrology" (1.3). Over time, the idea of authority in the community has evolved from the absolute rule of the spiritual leader to the co-governance of several *khorbad*s and finally to the virtual disappearance of the governing body. This unstable dynamic differs from Zoroastrian ethnic communities, where hierarchical relationships are clearly expressed and maintained, and is certainly like other contemporary New Age communities, such as *Anastasian*s and Neopagans.

79 Zasiad'ko, "What Does It Mean to Be a 'Russian Zoroastrian'?," 53.

Concluding Remarks

The reflexive view of Russian Zoroastrianism implies that, despite common elements and possible overlaps in doctrines and ritual practices, the narrative of the believers and its vernacular character are determined by the historical and cultural contextual uniqueness of the religion in which they are involved. As previously mentioned, in the view of many scholars of Zoroastrianism, any contemporary form of self-ascription to "Zoroastrian religion" had to inevitably acquire validation as a subject for academic research. *Living* religions, even modern Parsi Zoroastrianism, may also contain mystical or occult elements or strands of esoteric discourses—created, borrowed, or (re) interpreted—that must be distinguished in each case and specific context. However, such a contextual understanding does not allow accurate and valuable conclusions to be drawn about other "varieties" of Zoroastrianism by analogy because of differences in social and cultural conditions. It is therefore worth asking how necessary it is to have a field of research such as Zoroastrian esotericism, where there are not many exponents of para-traditions, as opposed to, for example, the broad field of Islamic esotericism (at least large complexes of Shīʿī and Ismāʿīlie esotericism, Sufism, and Traditionalist Islamic esotericism).[80] What would be the practical use of such a field for studying religions? While the study and description of different types/discourses of esotericism—depending on the definition—can still be understood as a research program, what about comparison? I thus believe the only way out for researchers is to describe in detail what they observe or

80 Liana Saif, "What Is Islamic Esotericism?" *Correspondences* 7, no. 1 (2019): 1–59.

what other studies ignore, namely the dynamics of esoteric, occult, or *New Age* elements and discourses and their correlation with others that believers consider to be (appropriated) "traditional" components, as described in the example of the St Petersburg Zoroastrian community.

Returning to the questions posed at the beginning of this essay, it is worth noting that the local believers' categories (including the esoteric) vary. They also are unstable and can be replaced by others or by further analogies gained through conversations with fellow Zoroastrians and New Age seekers, through studying various kinds of literature, or through acquiring specialized knowledge from the Internet. The range of the sources is wide and probably inexhaustible: from special religious instructions in the spirit of Parsi traditionalism to esoteric instructions. Nor should we exclude non-religious discourses, such as political or economic discourses, with their vocabularies and practices, which significantly impact the lives and identities of community members. Can we provide a clear answer to the question as to what extent the use of occult or divination practices, such as casting horoscopes, can make the religion of the Russian Zoroastrians completely esoteric, or can consider it to be so? Can we determine whether it contains a specifically *Zoroastrian* type of esotericism? Instead, we do not. Since *Avestan astrology*, theosophy, neopagan, and other elements and discourses cover only part of the needs of the individuals and the community, they are still complementary to their religious pursuits. Thus, esoteric ideas or practices are not incorporated into liturgies and daily prayer rites, for which other authorities, texts, and *YouTube* videos of Iranian and Persian Zoroastrian priests are used. We can only state that if Russian Zoroastrianism is supposed to represent a kind of "para-tradition," then such a para-tradition is hardly comparable in its relationship to the source of inspiration, i.e., ethnic Zoroastrianism and, to a greater extent, possesses the characteristics of its cultural and religious environment.

Based on careful linguistic study, we observe hermeneutic polyphony in analyzing heterogeneous beliefs and their fragments, even at the level of texts. The Avestan and Middle Persian Zoroastrian scriptures—which may trace quite different "versions" of Zoroastrianism, depending on time and place—contain some elements that we might interpret as popular divination practices or magical formulae. In the living tradition, they can undoubtedly be regarded as no less essential components of the Zoroastrian religion(s), despite the fact that they contradict the basic provisions of the "Zoroastrian ethos" so consciously reconstrued by scholars of past generations.[81] Considering Zoroastrian texts and practices within the framework of *New Age* spirituality, which can be presented as "a set of tools from which each individual New Ager can select and combine elements ad lib,"[82] we can see that only individual experience, *living religion*, is determinative. It is this, and not necessarily the mechanism of community control (which is minimal in the case of the St Petersburg Zoroastrians), that is decisive in interpreting the scriptures and creating one's own idea of the "ancient hidden knowledge" and its practices. Most likely, after thirty years, we can still observe in Russian Zoroastrianism the co-existence of various fluctuations and trends in ideas and rituals, and at the level of the institution, which are far from complete.

81
Antonio Panaino, "Magic I. Magical Elements in the Avesta and Nērang Literature," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, July 20, 2008, accessed August 10, 2024, https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/magic-i-magical-elements-in-the-avesta-and-nerang-literature.

82
Olav Hammer, "New Age Movement," 860.

Forbidden Ecstasy: Pre-Zoroastrian and Zoroastrian Esotericism in Iranian Black Metal

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Abstract

Charuk Revan and Magus Faustoos are two Iranian artists who have pioneered the Iranian Black metal scene, using their music to promote Zoroastrianism and pre-Zoroastrian esotericism. Unfortunately, their passion for music led them to flee Iran, where they faced severe persecution for their art. Magus, a musician with a PhD in Theology, was imprisoned and tortured for his work, while Charuk, a female Black metal artist raised in an Azeri family, was forced to leave Iran when her music and psychology school was shut down by the government. Today, they reside in Germany as political refugees. While Western Black metal often incorporates ancient legends and esoteric traditions, musicians in religiously authoritarian countries face severe penalties for doing so. In Iran, Black metal is considered a sinful form of art. Magus and Charuk have a particular fascination with occult practices within Zoroastrianism and pre-Zoroastrianism wisdom. They aim to revive ancient Persian tales and mysticism by making use of a diverse range of traditional folk instruments and teachings that date back to the pre-Islamic era. They view their performances as an expression of the occult, an act of mystic transcendence shared with their audience. Other Iranian Black metal musicians often incorporate pre-Islamic Neopagan themes and practices, but scholars have yet to explore this connection. Through narrative interviews, I am investigating how Iranian Black metal musicians reinterpret, redefine, and revive Zoroastrian and pre-Zoroastrian esotericism while resisting the Iranian government.

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Introduction

Heavy metal music has both battled religion and danced with it. Alternative religions, and religious practices, have traditionally inspired bands at odds with organised religion.[1] Often, this association is promoted by conservatives, but it is no secret that some musicians have explicitly endorsed occult practices as well as Satanic and other anti-Abrahamic beliefs and practices through their music.[2]

The British band Black Sabbath pioneered heavy metal during the 1970s.[3] Many subgenres followed, including Black metal. Based on contrasts between harshness and harmony to create dark atmospheres, Black metal is an extreme form of music. Bands belonging to the genre often wear black-and-white makeup known as corpse paint along with bullet belts, anti-religious symbols, studs, and weapons typical of medieval times.[4] As part of their aggressive image, they promote pagan practices while rejecting Christianity.

Over the past few decades, scholars have paid considerable attention to the relationship between alternative religions and Scandinavian Black metal. Nevertheless, it is imperative to keep in mind that metal music, including Black metal, is a global phenomenon, popular even in contexts where playing it can lead to capital punishment. This is the case in Iran. Iranian Black metal artists engage in pre-Islamic traditions in the same way their Western counterparts promote pre-Christian practices. Consequently, the Iranian authorities consider their music blasphemous. In response, musicians use it as a form of resistance.

In Iran, this genre of music is illegal for a multitude of reasons: 1) the regime prohibits the production of metal music as a whole, 2) the promotion of non-Islamic beliefs is criminalised, and 3) the regime is worried about Iranians who are disenchanted with Islam and are turning to other religions, including Zoroastrianism.[5] While the constitution recognises Zoroastrians as a religious minority, there have been many reports of oppression against them since the establishment of the Islamic Republic.[6] Within this context, Black metal music becomes a powerful and dangerous tool against the Islamic Republic.

Among the most vocal Black metal artists from Iran are Magus and Charuk. Drawing inspiration from Zoroastrian and pre-Zoroastrian wisdom, including Mithraism, they view their performances as a representation of the occult and a manifestation of mystical transcendence, a transformative experience they endeavour to share with their audience by means of their music.

Through narrative interviews, this article examines how Iranian Black metal musicians use Zoroastrian and pre-Zoroastrian esotericism to resist the Iranian government.

Method

As a method of collecting data, narratives told during interviews have a long history and are very common in the social sciences.[7] Currently, narrative studies are not confined to one scholarly discipline. In numerous fields of study, including history, anthropology, folklore, psychology, sociolinguistics, and communication studies, narration has embraced narrative as a research tool.[8] The definition of narrative is

1
Marcus Moberg, "Popular Culture and the 'Darker Side' of Alternative Spirituality: The Case of Metal Music," *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 21 (January 1, 2009): 130–48, https://doi.org/10.30674/scripta.67347.

2
Kennet Granholm, "Ritual Black Metal: Popular Music as Occult Meditation and Practice," *Correspondences: Journal for the Study of Esotericism* 1, no. 1 (2013): 5–33.

3
Andrew L. Cope, *Black Sabbath and the Rise of Heavy Metal Music* (London: Routledge, 2016), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315569499.

4
Michelle Phillipov, "Extreme Music for Extreme People? Norwegian Black Metal and Transcendent Violence," *Popular Music History* 6, no. 1 (May 14, 2012): 150–63, https://doi.org/10.1558/pomh.v6i1/2.150.

5
"Disenchanted Iranians Are Turning to Other Faiths," 2021, https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2021/01/21/disenchanted-iranians-are-turning-to-other-faiths.

6
Navid Fozi, *Reclaiming the Faravahar: Zoroastrian Survival in Contemporary Tehran*, Iranian Studies Series (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2014).

7
Anna De Fina, "Narratives in Interview—The Case of Accounts: For an Interactional Approach to Narrative Genres," *Narrative Inquiry* 19, no. 2 (December 18, 2009): 233–58, https://doi.org/10.1075/ni.19.2.03def.

8
Catherine Kohler Riessman and Lee Quinney, "Narrative in Social Work: A Critical Review," *Qualitative Social Work* 4, no. 4 (December 2005): 391–412, https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325005058643.

part of a long tradition and has evolved and morphed according to the discipline. As noted by Riessman and Quinney,[9] a narrative, according to sociolinguists, is a unit of discourse that answers one specific question and is arranged temporally. To social scientists, a personal narrative typically includes extended accounts of lives developed over multiple interviews.

Narrative analysis can be challenging and intriguing at the same time. In structured and semi-structured interviews, the researcher asks questions and receives answers with a specific research topic in mind. It is important to recognise that in the narrative approach, objectives may change or evolve throughout data collection, depending on what the narrator reveals.[10] I met my interlocutors during my work on a different project. While collecting the data, the subject of mysticism and esotericism within Zoroastrianism as well as pre-Zoroastrianism came up several times. Since this theme has proven persistent and influential in their experiences and represents a new layer of Iranian music as a form of resistance, I decided to explore it further.

The interviews were conducted between 2021 and 2023 in English. Since Charuk and Magus are political refugees and have experienced trauma, establishing a trusting relationship was essential. Because narrative analysis requires the researcher to be a good listener, I ensured that the participants did not unintentionally divulge more information than they were comfortable with. I achieved this by maintaining a transparent line of communication. I often reminded them to indicate material as "off the record" whenever they believed something was not intended for public disclosure. I conducted the interviews remotely. The process was protected by secure encrypted tunnels from both ends. I then transcribed and coded the data, journaled my reflections and feelings regarding the analysis, and solicited participants' feedback on my interpretations.[11]

9
Riessman and Quinney, "Narrative in Social Work," 391–412, https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325005058643.

10
Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson, *Doing Qualitative Research Differently: Free Association, Narrative and the Interview Method* (London: SAGE, 2000).

11
William E. Smythe and Maureen J. Murray, "Owning the Story: Ethical Considerations in Narrative Research," *Ethics & Behavior* 10, no. 4 (October 2000): 311–36, https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327019EB1004_1.

The Lure of Neopaganism in Heavy Metal

Music is innately and universally capable of inspiring and manipulating listeners. Its ability to provoke and influence has been the topic of research for quite some time. Whether it is Christian worship songs or obscure Black metal, religious and popular forms of music have always been closely related, as expressed through dialogue or conflict. According to Partridge,[12] some of the lures of popular music are directly related to the sacred, arising from its function in society, formation of groups, and class identity. Thus, music is of interest to a wide range of scholars for a multitude of reasons, and in a wide range of fields, from comparative studies to sociology, not to mention religious studies.

For Eurich,[13] music opens a world beyond the mundane, in which a person's identification is accepted as a new experience of the possibility of arranging it subjectively; thus "from the view of a sociology of religion, pop music has become a competitor with religion." Eurich asserts that this experience is not only philosophical but also physiological, given that music affects our bodies. Our central nervous system is stimulated by amplifying instruments, resulting in feelings of ecstasy like those associated with mysticism. In this sense, extreme metal music is probably the most amplified, heavy, and aggressive

12
Christopher H. Partridge, *The Lyre of Orpheus: Popular Music, the Sacred, and the Profane* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199751396.001.0001.

13
Johannes Eurich, "Sociological Aspects and Ritual Similarities in the Relationship between Pop Music and Religion," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 34, no. 1 (2003): 57–70.

popular music, distinguished by aggressive and distorted guitar riffs, fast drumming, and screaming vocals. It has become extremely popular worldwide, despite its fascination with subjects that most consider dark, such as alienation, or polarising[14] themes like esotericism, paganism, and Satanism.[15]

Furthermore, metalheads' refusal to embrace hegemonic ideologies and their possession of an ethos of freedom of expression makes religion one of the core topics of this music, with Moberg and Partridge having produced some of the most insightful research in this area. Partridge theorises that despite secularisation in the West, spiritual and paranormal interests are still popular. While some may think it trivial to look at popular music when examining the fascination with this topic, it is becoming increasingly clear that popular music can indeed contribute to socially significant constructions of the sacred and the profane.[16] This point is particularly relevant to this article, since researchers who use heavy metal as a case study are frequently branded "fans" who romanticise their fandom; this is despite examples of excellent research.

Alternative religions are gaining popularity in non-Western countries, as well as in nations with religious authoritarian governments such as Iran. These religions challenge traditional practices and include new religious movements, esoteric traditions, and non-traditional spiritualities.[17] Moberg[18] researched how metal groups in the Nordic countries actively engage with dark alternative spiritual themes and ideas and, as a result, spread values associated with those themes and ideas within metal culture as a whole. To him, dark spiritualities are focused on individuals and their self-sacralisation and development. Furthermore, alternative spiritualities tend to place a high value on continuity with ancient traditions, such as Celtic Druidism or the pre-Christian Norse religion, accompanied by a strong sentiment against organised religion. It is here that the most extreme metal groups can be found, where the prevalent attitude is individualism and an appreciation for ancient traditions.

Manea,[19] similarly to Moberg, examines how Nordic and Scandinavian bands reinvent heritage through Neopaganism. Here, I concentrate especially on the Black metal community's interest in Neopaganism, which, as Manea explains, is not confined to religious movements alone, but rather aims to reconstruct and reinterpret pre-Christian heritage. Using religion and mythology as symbolic currency to accumulate cultural capital, Black metal offers an alternative to modernity and conservative mainstream culture.

The artistic vision of Scandinavian Black metal bands reflects a fascination with pre-Christian spirituality. This phenomenon first emerged in Europe in the second half of the 1980s, especially in Norway and Sweden with bands like Bathory and Celtic Frost.[20] The second wave of Scandinavian Black metal (bands such as Mayhem, Burzum, Emperor, and Marduk) further embraced neopagan values and blamed Christian conversion for ending the Pagan golden era. According to their perspective, Christianity caused a rift between Europeans and their cultural and spiritual origins.[21] Van Vikernes, who is considered one of the most prominent artists of the Black metal movement, has been convicted of multiple crimes. In 1994, he was sentenced to

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It is also worth noting that while most might consider Occultism and even Satanism as obscure themes, they tend ultimately to bring light to hidden knowledge.

15
Moberg, "Popular Culture and the 'Darker Side' of Alternative Spirituality," 130–48, 110.

16
Partridge, *The Lyre of Orpheus*, 7.

17
W. Michael Ashcraft, *A Historical Introduction to the Study of New Religious Movements*, Routledge new religions (New York: Routledge, 2018), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315163321.

18
Moberg, "Popular Culture and the 'Darker Side' of Alternative Spirituality," 130–48.

19
Elham Manea, "In the Name of Culture and Religion: The Political Function of Blasphemy in Islamic States," *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 27, no. 1 (2016): 117–27, https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2015.1114241.

20
Jonathan Cordero, "Unveiling Satan's Wrath: Aesthetics and Ideology in Anti-Christian Heavy Metal," *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 21, no. 1 (March 2009): 1–15, https://doi.org/10.3138/jrpc.21.1.005.

21
Miroslav Vrzal, "Pagan Terror: The Role of Pagan Ideology in Church Burnings and the 1990s Norwegian Black Metal Subculture," *Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 19, no. 2 (June 9, 2017): 173–204, 174, https://doi.org/10.1558/pome.33472.

twenty-one years in prison for the murder of Øystein Aarseth, a rival Black metal musician, and a series of church burnings.[22] While these crimes were committed by one person, they have inevitably created a negative image of the genre. Ultimately, the Norwegian Black metal bands of the 1990s were composed of teenagers who lived in a safe country without many obstacles to overcome. As Khan-Harris explains: "It seems likely that scene members were engaged in a process of one-upmanship, in which each attempted to be more transgressive than the other, therefore."[23] The 1990s Black metal pagan "warriors" hold a significant place in the history of Scandinavia's forgotten pagan heritage. Though many view them as a symbol of rebellion and a nod to a bygone era, I argue that their legacy has been romanticised to a great extent by their fans. Nevertheless, Black metal was an expression of resistance against conservatives; this process began in the 1980s when the pioneers sang about themes that inspired the actions perpetrated by the second wave of musicians.[24]

Neopaganism still thrives in Western extreme heavy metal, taking on new forms of resistance against mainstream culture. Some of these more recent expressions, particularly representations of Norse mythology and heritage, have found a wider audience due to more popular cultural productions.[25] Extreme heavy metal engaging in Neopagan ideology is not isolated to the West. Despite little interest from scholars, it is a fascinating topic to explore. In the pages that follow, I will argue that an examination of this phenomenon within the Islamic Republic reveals intriguing patterns of Neopaganism transgressive revival.

22
Ryan Buesnel, "National Socialist Black Metal: A Case Study in the Longevity of Far-Right Ideologies in Heavy Metal Subcultures," *Patterns of Prejudice* 54, no. 4 (August 7, 2020): 393–408, https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2020.1800987.

23
Keith Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge* (Oxford: Berg, 2007).

24
Vrzal, "Pagan Terror," 173–204, 182.

25
Nina Urholt Nielsen, "From Black Metal to Norse Revival?: Mournfulness, Memories, and Meanings of Wardruna's Rune Music," in *Musikk og Religion: Tekster om Musikk i Religion og Religion i Musikk*, ed. Holm Henrik and Øivind Varkøy, Cappelen Damm Forskning, 2022, https://doi.org/10.23865/noasp.177.

Transgression Within the Iranian Black metal Scene: Blasphemous Neopaganism

Iranian music suffered greatly in the wake of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Music performances, radio, and television broadcasts of foreign and Iranian music were prohibited. The official position of the regime was that non-religious music was a drug and a vice that changed people. Music, however, continued to thrive in the family circle despite all efforts to eradicate it.[26] All Western-style instruments (guitar, piano, percussion, etc.) were banned.[27] Music had to circulate in a secretive way: cassettes, video cassettes, and CDs were illegally smuggled in and purchased from illicit underground vendors, and concerts were performed privately.[28]

In 1979, most Iranians began to live a double life, where the public and private spheres were completely different. In this atmosphere of secrecy, heavy metal bands formed underground in the early 1980s, playing mostly cover songs. The 1990s saw the rise of a scene where many bands played their music. Metal bands primarily played extreme metal genres such as thrash, death, and Black metal. In particular, Black metal musicians began to incorporate Persian musical scales, ethnic instruments, and Persian history into their lyrics.[29] As with Black metal musicians in Scandinavia, who felt that Christianity had cancelled their pagan traditions, Iranian Black metal musicians perceived the Islamic Revolution as the negation of their roots. This was not only a perception; in the early days of the Islamic Republic,

26
Ameneh Youssefzadeh, "The Situation of Music in Iran since the Revolution: The Role of Official Organizations," *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 9, no. 2 (2000): 35–61.

27
Daniel Ahadi, "Against All Odds: Making Underground Music in Iran," in *Phenomenology of Youth Cultures and Globalization: Lifeworlds and Surplus Meaning in Changing Times*, ed. Stuart Poyntz and Jacqueline Kennelly (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015).

28
For example see: Pasqualina Eckerström, "Extreme Heavy Metal and Blasphemy in Iran: The Case of Confess," *Contemporary Islam* (August 12, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-022-00493-7; Laudan Nooshin, "Underground, Overground: Rock Music and Youth Discourses in Iran," *Iranian Studies* 38, no. 3 (2005): 463–94; Mark LeVine, *Heavy Metal Islam: Rock, Resistance, and the Struggle for the Soul of Islam* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2022).

29
Pasqualina Eckerström, "Resistance and Counter-Memories in Persian Black Metal," *Journal of Middle East Politics & Policy* (March 2023).

everything that called to mind, attested to, or celebrated the pre-Islamic era was banned. For instance, Iranian publications on folklore were discontinued.[30]

Rather than glorifying pre-Islamic Iran as the last Shah did, the Islamic Republic emphasises the Islamic civilisation and Iranians' role in Islamic history. Ferdowsi's epic poem, the *Shāhnāmeh*, or the Book of Kings, was rejected by the regime despite its being widely considered as a masterpiece of Persian language and literature. In addition to being the Shah's favourite epic poem, it represents what the regime wanted to erase. Parts of *Chand Dāstān-e Bargozideh az Shāhnāmeh*, a selection of stories from the *Shāhnāmeh*, were censored; for instance, certain phrases referring to "joy," "dance," "wine," and "woman" such as "and they all played music and were merry, ate and danced."[31]

The *Shāhnāmeh* is of particular interest here, as it is also important to adherents of Zoroastrianism, who traditionally consider it to be historical.[32] In conversations with Iranian metal artists over the years, they often mention *Shāhnāmeh*'s historical attributes. The *Shāhnāmeh* covers three major Iranian dynasties: the Peshdadian, the Kayanian, and the Sasanian. Much of Zoroastrian religious history took place during the Peshdadian and Kayanian dynasties, with the biggest event being the advent of Zarathustra. For Zoroastrians, labelling this period as mere mythology negates the most important period of Zoroastrian and pre-Zoroastrian history.[33] It is, therefore, not surprising that the *Shāhnāmeh* has become a symbol of resistance for Iranian intellectuals and artists, since it serves as a token of what the regime has attempted to suppress.

As evidenced by the censorship/repression of the *Shāhnāmeh*, the regime's repressive policies are causing alienation from Islam. As Partridge notes,[34] there has been a noticeable trend towards spirituality, away from organised religions. The shift in recent times has meant that people are placing greater importance on personal experience rather than relying on external authority. Consequently, there has been increasing interest in esotericism and other mystical beliefs. This trend is not limited to the West alone. For instance, in Iran, there is a growing interest in minority religions as well as pagan beliefs. Zoroastrianism, in particular, is gaining popularity. Based on the 2020 survey conducted by GAMAAN, titled "Iranians' Attitudes Toward Religion," 32% of the population identifies as Shi'ite Muslim, while approximately 9% identify as atheists, 8% as Zoroastrians, 7% as spiritual, 6% as agnostic, and 5% as Sunni Muslim.[35] Several people support the faith because of its indigenous roots, its mystic lure, its Persian heritage, and its hostility to Islam, which they consider a foreign invasion. Even though Zoroastrians are a protected minority, this has raised concern among authorities, who continue to discriminate against them. As an example, Zoroastrian-style weddings, conducted with Persian prayers around a fire, were so popular that they were banned in 2019.[36] I explained above how some artists refer to Zoroastrianism not solely for religious reasons, but also as an anti-regime political stance. Intriguingly, the oldest religion has evolved into an anti-religious movement. Besides the fascination with Zoroastrianism, there is an increased interest in pre-Islamic Iranian identity mostly among Iranian youth, scholars, and intellectuals.[37]

30
Ulrich Marzolph, "Persian Popular Literature" in *Oral Literature of Iranian Languages: Kurdish, Pashto, Balochi, Ossetic, Persian and Tajik; Companion Volume II to a History of Persian Literature*, ed. Philip G Kreyenbroek and Ulrich Marzolph (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 208–364.

31
Alireza Abiz, *Censorship of Literature in Post-Revolutionary Iran: Politics and Culture since 1979* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2021).

32
Abbas Amanat and Farzin Vejdani, eds., *Iran Facing Others: Identity Boundaries in a Historical Perspective* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

33
"Shahnameh & Stories from It," *Ramiyar Karanjia* (blog), accessed October 1, 2016, https://ramiyar-karanjia.com/stories-from-the-shahnameh/.

34
Partridge, *The Lyre of Orpheus*, 113, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199751396.001.0001.

35
Ammar Maleki and Pooyan Tamimi Arab, "Iranians' Attitudes Toward Religion: A 2020 Survey Report," The Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in IRAN (GAMAAN), 2020, https://gamaan.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/GAMAAN-Iran-Religion-Survey-2020-English.pdf.

36
"Disenchanted Iranians Are Turning to Other Faiths," *The Economist* (January 21, 2021), https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2021/01/21/disenchanted-iranians-are-turning-to-other-faiths?utm_medium=cpc.adword.pd&utm_source=google&ppccampaignID=18151738051&ppcadID=&utm_campaign=a.22brand_pmax&utm_content=conversion.direct-response.anonymous&gad_source=1&gclid=EAIaIQobChMI_JrPprW3hgMVmBqiAx-1duwkxEAAYASAAEgIrnfD_BwE&gclsrc=aw.ds.

37
Navid Fozi, *Reclaiming the Faravahar*, 172.

As we will discuss in more detail later, Iranian extreme metal bands, especially Black metal musicians, derive inspiration from ancient pre-Islamic practices, composing songs inspired by Iranian folklore. Detached from rigid rules, musicians and fans seek what Partridge defines as a "pagan active space" and an "affective space,"[38] mental zones in which people can reflect and are encouraged to act in certain ways. Zoroastrianism is significant to many Iranian metalheads in their quest for spaces of freedom. It represents a rejection of the religious regulations imposed by the authorities and a pursuit of what has been suppressed since 1979.

Due to this phenomenon, as well as the advocacy for pre-Islamic heritage, Black metal is considered one of the most dangerous musical styles in the country. Despite the risks, however, a scene developed around musicians who from the start have been aware that they may face persecution, and who have in fact faced severe consequences, including being charged and prosecuted for blasphemy or apostasy. Magus and Charuk are just two of the many metal musicians who have faced such persecution.

38 Christopher Partridge, "Emotion, Meaning and Popular Music," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Popular Music*, ed. Marcus Moberg and Christopher Partridge (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017), 23–31.

Material Transgression for Social Change

Now that I have identified the use of Neopaganism in both Western and Iranian Black metal, it is important to define what I mean by transgression. Any form of heavy metal, including the most extreme, is no longer considered transgressive in most secular countries. Although these forms may be construed as provocative, they do not violate any laws.[39] In its most basic sense, transgression means exceeding or crossing a boundary or limit. Generally, these limits are established by laws, rules, and social norms that are formulated, maintained, and justified by different political organisations or institutions. This results in relying on these institutions while opposing them.[40] Therefore, transgression depends on the context in which it occurs. Transgressions are not universal; rather, they depend on the country and socio-legal system in which they are committed.

According to Kahn-Harris, Western extreme metal is provocative, although metalheads refute the implications of their actions when questioned about their ideologies. Kahn-Harris describes this behaviour as "reflexive anti-reflexivity,"[41] which refers to the reluctance of Black metal enthusiasts to acknowledge the genre's connection with, for instance, political implications. My experience as a musical journalist has allowed me to observe this behaviour. Many Western Black metal bands are provocative, yet when asked about their actions, they "play innocent." Despite ripping a bible apart onstage minutes before, when interviewed, many bands claim to be purely about music and not about politics or religion. On the other hand, Iranian musicians proudly claim their transgressive acts as forms of institutional and social criticism.

Additionally, distinguishing provocation from transgression is important here, in my opinion, since the provocative act of a Black metal band in secular countries is protected by the principle of freedom of expression. By contrast, in Iran, the same act is considered blasphemy and is punishable by law.[42] Paradoxically, religiously authoritarian

39 Keith Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge* (Oxford: Berg, 2007).

40 Ted Gournelos and David J. Gunkel, *Transgression 2.0: Media, Culture, and the Politics of a Digital Age* (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2011), http://grail.eblib.com.au/patron/FullRecord.aspx?p=831519.

41 Keith Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal*, 145.

42 Eckerström, "Extreme Heavy Metal and Blasphemy in Iran," https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-022-00493-7.

countries fail to limit transgressive acts by imposing harsh penalties. As Gandolfo[43] explains: "The transgression of limits is not something society seeks to avoid by imposing and enforcing taboos; being dialectically inextricable from taboo, transgression, or at least the threat of it, ensures that we remain engaged with what lies beyond the prohibition, exceeding it but not destroying it."

There is a long history of theoretical discussion regarding this paradoxical relationship between limits and transgression. The topic of transgression is perhaps best known from the work of Georges Bataille. In his view, exceeding limits arises from the desire to "complete" life;[44] in its paradoxical manifestation, disobedience strengthens limits, since it reinforces concerns about rules when they are violated.[45] Echoing Bataille, Michel Foucault states that this strange relationship is inextricably linked to the idea that, if a limit cannot be crossed, then it does not exist, and the existence of transgression has no meaning.[46]

It is worth noting that I documented the results of my analysis during the Woman, Life, Freedom protests in Iran. These protests showcase the determination and longing of those living under oppressive laws to push boundaries. In Iran, actions such as removing the veil and creating music that is deemed blasphemous are considered forms of "material transgression," which are non-violent. As Joke Hermes and Annette Hill state,[47] material transgressions can even be understood as supporting rather than threatening societal needs. As well as challenging power and norms, transgression can also revive moral frames discursively and materially. While some might perceive breakdowns as negative, they might lead to positive outcomes.

The analysis will reveal that Iranian Black metal musicians transgress in using pre-Islamic esotericism in search of social change; that is, a country where freedom of expression and religion prevail. Furthermore, using two criminalised tools, pre-Islamic esoteric practices and heavy metal, they create a unique double transgressive tool, as I visualise below (Fig. 1).

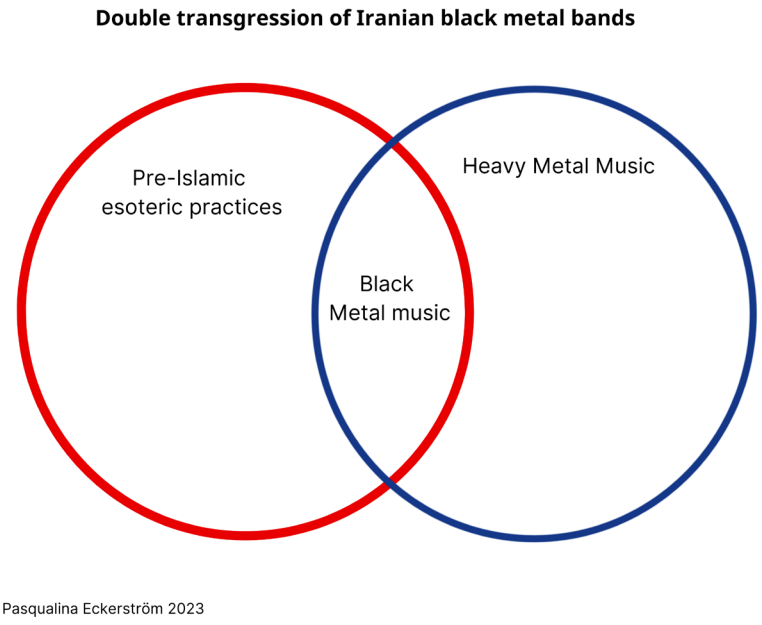

Fig. 1. Double transgression of Iranian Black metal bands.

43
Jörg Plöger, review of *The City at Its Limits: Taboo, Transgression, and Urban Renewal in Lima*, by Daniella Gandolfo, *Journal of Latin American Studies* 42, no. 4 (November 2010): 881–83, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X10001604.

44
Chris Jenks, *Transgression*, Key Ideas (London: Routledge, 2003).

45
Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death & Sensuality* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986).

46
Michel Foucault, "A Preface to Transgression," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 29–52, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501741913-003.

47
Joke Hermes and Annette Hill, "Transgression in Contemporary Media Culture," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 24, no. 1 (January 2021): 3–14, https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877920968105.

Magus and Charuk: Persecuted Shamans

Magus's father was a Zoroastrian from Iran, while his mother was Israeli[48] and Pagan. His parents died as a result of the Iran-Iraq conflict, which lasted from 1980 to 1988, leaving him an orphan. Thus, he lived with relatives, mostly Zoroastrians, yet he had the opportunity to experience different religious settings, as he narrates:

> "My father was Zoroastrian, I lived in different tribes, and I witnessed these tribes who live simply. I experienced different cultures. I felt like a tourist. I was in religious and super modern families, who had music in their homes. I started to compare these cultures, from the extreme to the modern. I took the best from all of it."

As a result, he immersed himself in studies of Mithraism, Zurvanism, and local Buddhist traditions.[49] This combined with his love for music, as Magus explains:

> "In my projects, we concentrate on two levels: one is the ancient and the second against the current religion, society, and politics. We critique the current religion and politics because we see that it's chaos, so we don't want it for the next generation. Because of my family heritage, I had vinyl of the golden era of Persian music and those are fascinating, complicated, and beautiful harmonies and opera too. That combination makes my music now."

He combined this Persian folk music with the harshness of heavy metal, which he discovered thanks to popular illegal sellers, who offered what was considered Western music, including metal. "I combined the harshness I got from these tapes and the classical Persian music, and I started to cover it in funeral doom style."[50] Metal music came with a price. Magus was arrested multiple times while playing his music: "You accept it, you get arrested, a few lashes and it's fine!," he states. For instance, he was arrested with his band Tears of Fire at the Ziggurat at Chogha Zanbil when he and his group were invited to play at a Zoroastrian celebration.

One of the most serious arrests was during the last installation of his group Warrior of Peace, at the Reza Abbasi Museum. The exhibition was sponsored by the Cultural Heritage and Touristic Organization, the Organization for Defending Victims of Violence, and the United Nations of Iran.[51] Despite this, the police stopped the exhibition and arrested Magus. He was brutally abused by the guards for multiple days. Once out he fled the country, reaching India as a political refugee, and eventually Germany.

Charuk met Magus in India. She also had to escape from Iran. Born into an Azeri family, she was raised by her parents as a pagan in secret, to avoid the risk of persecution. She grew up in an environment where music and dance were taken very seriously and used to perform rituals, as she explains:

48 Acknowledging the sensitive nature of some passages of the narration, I refrained from asking for details that were not directly relevant to my research inquiry.

49 Pasqualina Eckerström and Titus Hjelm, "The Unintended Consequences of State-Enforced Religion: 'Blasphemous' Metal Music as Secondary Deviation in Iran," *Religion* (February 19, 2024), https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2024.2316158.

50 Funeral doom is a sub-genre of doom metal. Funeral doom's tempos tend to be slower, conveying a sense of sorrow and depression. Vocals can range from growls to melodic singing.

51 Eckerström and Hjelm, "The Unintended Consequences of State-Enforced Religion."

> "There is a double world in Iran, my family had to obey the society on the surface, for example when you go out you have to cover, you have to act conservative, and talk conservative. But when I entered my home, there were completely other rules. You just take off everything. My father was a traveller, and my mother was working with the theatre. We had seasonal ceremonies and rituals with dance and music. I was brought up as a musician to perform in those kinds of ceremonies, to entertain and to make people dance."

This environment that nurtured art as an essential spiritual ritual impacted Charuk immensely. She developed a purpose, which left her free to set out on a path of discovery, as she describes below:

> "I became aware/conscious and eventually I practised to become the living existence of what was hidden, suppressed or simply unconscious so to remember what has been dismembered. These hidden particles of ultimate self are like pieces of a puzzle, the complete image of who I am, and I'm going toward, or better to say inward, to fulfil and put the scattered pieces together. This awakening process only can be achieved by hard work of body-mind-energy, a multi-disciplinary approach to push the limits, which are the constructed fears that black the vision. Every time I'm on stage, it's an initiation and celebration of the complete self. I'm not delivering information of sounds but the experience of being a complete self. This is associated with Zen, Chán,Jān,[52] the pre-Zoroastrian practice of becoming one and none. The instant realisation that time is an illusion, not thinking but becoming timeless. In this state the outer world is like a blurry mirror to collect information and the actual vibrating world truly exists and manifests where I stand. I'm the centre of this axis . . . In this manner every human being, every living being, is a world, but not everyone spins on their centre where the most powerful and unbeatable generator of energy resides. The collision of these focused masses together can create what was once called magic. I'm the practitioner of this discipline, and my performances are the rituals where I revive this ancient technique, by being in a timeless and spaceless state of Jān. I become the ancient shaman and together with Magus, another spinning world shaman, our music becomes the tool to relocate everyone else in their centre and create a mass of worlds spinning and therefore magic happens."

Charuk was trained as a classical musician and has a deep understanding of how art can impact one's body and soul. She used all her money to open a school of music and psychology:

> "For eight years we worked there, and we built a choir and orchestra. It was a very revolutionary thing to do because in Iran we only had two orchestras, one national and one philharmonic. Because in Iran, every artistic activity should be under the law of the government. This was an underground centre. So

52 Equivalent to Buddhist *Zen*, Chinese *Chán*, Persian *Jān.*

> many musicians and artists from all over Iran came over there and we created a network. We decided to not ask for a license because in this school we did not want to obey the Islamic Law. We had no veil and both women and male were together. This in Iran is forbidden."

Eventually, the school was reported by a Muslim neighbour, as Charuk recalls:

> "They lied and said it was a whorehouse. The police collected the testimonies and took them to the court. They closed the place after eight years of activity and they sealed it. I lost my money, and for three years I was isolated in my home. I had nothing. I lost everything that I built and I had an open case now. While I was isolated at home, I wrote a poem book about the feminine energy sensations. I can say it was erotic in some ways. So, when I decided to send it to a publication I faced some troubles for that also."

Charuk understood she was in danger of being arrested any day. She left Iran and travelled to Turkey, Armenia, and eventually India, where she met Magus.

Performance as an Ancient Temple: Ecstasy-inducing Mantras and Sounds

Charuk and Magus have several musical projects together, such as Darkestrah, epic Black metal with folk influences; Nashmeh, folk Black metal; Paganland/Sarmoung Ensemble, a native folk metal band based on ancient wisdom; and Mogh, Black metal. Their music features aggressive guitars they fuel with acoustic instruments. As Magus states:

> "I heard from our audience that if they knew what we were playing, they would have taken acid because we create such an atmosphere that takes the soul of people. That's our purpose, we play acoustic instruments that have a special tuning not amplified and we mix them with electronic ones. We recreate a theatre. In ancient times there was no electricity and after the Industrial Revolution, we have extra waves and fields in our bodies and minds that destroyed our energy. Then we use for example the natural skin drum which has a different sound from the modern drum kit. When your body hears the natural skin drum it just affects your heartbeat and makes it very effective rather than the e.g., a metal drum."

Charuk describes their stage as a Mithraeum temple:

> "Our stage is no different from the ancient Mithraeum temple dedicated to practising this mass transformation, where we are not separated lonely individuals wandering, pursuing our ego, but we unite worlds together with elements of nature, fire, water, earth, and air, being part of the cosmic order ASHA,

> RTHA. Each play a powerful role to shape the destiny of the whole."

While this is true for all their projects, here I will concentrate especially on the Paganland/Sarmoung Ensemble (Fig. 2) because Charuk and Magus mentioned it several times in our conversations. The group describes it as "a shamanic Iranian band based in Berlin who believe in bringing life to ancient sounds and rites by their narrative music performed by Persian primitive and rustic oriental instruments and movements."[53] Everything in their performance is combined to reach an ancient state of ecstasy,[54] as Magus explains: "For example, we use the singing bowl, as it's known today, but in the original wisdom it was used to extract liquid from the roots. The liquid was mixed with milk and blood, water, and salt. This made such a unique elixir. From a medical tool, it turned to an instrument."

Fig. 2. Promotional photo of the Paganland/Sarmoung Ensemble.

Furthermore, they use mantras, based on the five Old Avestan *Gāthā*s, also known as "hymns." They are a collection of liturgical texts, typically ascribed to Zarathustra and composed by Iranians living in the north of modern Afghanistan, probably in the first half of the second millennium BCE. They are the core texts of Zoroastrianism.[55] As Magus explains: "It's all lyrics, songs so it's a text with sounds if we look at it from a modern point of view. There is a musical note within the musical text. The melody and the drum are already in the text. It's so interesting to me. Was he a musician? How was he able to write texts that have music and intonation?"

Through research and contact with experts, each song is based on this written note in the language. Furthermore, using acoustic folk instruments and focusing on mantras instead of contemporary lyrics lets Magus and Charuk reach out to a listener's soul and create a meditative state. As Charuk explains:

53
Paganland (Sarmoung Ensemble), accessed April 7, 2024, https://paganlandsarmoungensemble.bandcamp.com.

54
I had the opportunity to attend a concert in Turku, Finland in 2024. I witnessed not only how they achieved a sense of unity within the band but also the impact it had on their audience. The musicians managed to captivate even those from distant cultures, creating a unique experience that one might define as an ecstatic musical state.

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Prods Oktor Skjærvø, "The *Gathas*, a Forgotten Masterpiece," in *A Companion to World Literature*, ed. Ken Seigneurie (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2019), 1–13, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118635193.ctwl0020.

> "This perspective is long rooted in ancient Iranian esotericism, which also manifests itself in mystic writings/poems as well as practical rituals such as the whirling dance where one creates the whirlwind of energy by spinning on a centre of their axis, bending the defined laws of existence and common belief system and stepping beyond the limits."

The whirling dance, as mentioned by Charuk, has its roots in the tradition of mysticism. Some scholars believe that its origins are linked to the cult of Mithra;[56] a similar ritual is known as Sufi whirling or Sama, through which Sufis attain a state of spiritual ecstasy, seeking a union with the divine.[57] Furthermore, despite dancing being condemned by the Regime, it is still an important ritual among Iranian Zoroastrians that is used to educate young people about Zoroastrian ethics and rituals.[58]

One of the core ideas permeating through Magus and Charuk is the importance of feminine energy. To Magus, this is imperative and as such Charuk is fundamental to his art: "Whatever you talk about, from Satanism, spiritualism, occultism, esotericism, you name it, everything comes from female energy. We have many evidences." To Magus, while Islam undermines the role of women, ancient Persian teachings instead celebrate strong women figures. For instance, he often mentions Shatana as one of the inspirations for his music. Shatana is one of the most important figures in the entire Nart saga. These tales are an integral part of the mythology of many tribes, such as the Abazin, the Abkhaz, the Circassian, the Ossetian, and the Karachay-Balkar. Thus, it is not surprising that both Magus and Charuk consider this figure as the ultimate symbol of woman power. As Magus notes: "That's the person who can bring the warrior child. She was powerful! In our history we have queens who were ruling the empire. We have a lot of strong women examples." According to Charuk, Islam fears women:

> "Women are more connected in natural roots. They have powerful sensations, and intuitions. Women can create things that are very powerful. Islam is totally against women and women in power mostly. The Qurʾan says you have to beat women when they are not obeying you. You have to cover women and they have to stay home. They shouldn't work outside and so on. I don't say that in Iran women are staying at home. For sure they are going outside and working and educating themselves and all that, but still in a very restricted framework."

Magus and Charuk celebrate Shatana, as a symbol of the power of womanhood that is a constant presence in their music. The focus on the strength of womanhood is especially intriguing in Iran, as discrimination against women has persisted in various fields, including the music industry. It is currently forbidden for female musicians in Iran to perform solo. After the Iranian Revolution, many well-known Iranian singers were forced to flee their country. Others had to resort to unorthodox means of earning a living, such as disguising their voices to sound like children and performing for children's programmes.[59] Fur-

56
Mohsen Zahabi, "Reflection of Martial Arts in the Iranian Performing Arts," *SCIREA Journal of Sociology* 8 (March 5, 2024): 90–115, https://doi.org/10.54647/sociology841266.

57
June-Ann Greeley, "Sufi Turning and the Spirituality of Sacred Space," *Journal for the Study of Spirituality* 12, no. 2 (July 3, 2022): 108–19, https://doi.org/10.1080/20440243.2022.2126138.

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Abdolhossein Daneshvarinasab, Melasutra Md Dali, and Mohd Yaacob, "The Contribution of Leisure to Religious Continuity among the Zoroastrians," *Anthropological Notebooks* 21 (January 1, 2015): 61–81.

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Armaghan Fakhraeirad, "The Female Voice of Iran," *Ethnomusicology* 67, no. 3 (October 1, 2023): 482–84, https://doi.org/10.5406/21567417.67.3.16.

thermore, learning from the teaching of ancient tales, they currently promote unity between men and women to reappropriate the harmony that, to them, the Islamic Republic has destroyed. The description for the album "Naart Kaachitaa," (Fig. 3) recorded with their project Paganland/Sarmoung Ensemble and published in 2022, shows that the musicians, while far away from their country, are in tune with what the Iranian population has felt since 1979. This is how they describe the album on their Bandcamp webpage:[60]

> "For many centuries the stories of Shahnameh and Nar in Iranshahr were part of our small or big ceremonies depicting heroes, raising our inner strength and keeping our minds awake. Today the Iranian revolution against the most hideous beasts is the new Shahnameh filled with myth of people who have been raised from the stories raised like Phoenix from the ashes to once again bring the fire of a thousand years. We dedicate this musical piece to all the tears that shall become rivers, blood that shall irrigate the land, and unity of men and women that shall offer a newborn as a god who is nothing but a powerful awakened human . . . *Naart Kaachitaa* is a collection of Musical Tales inspired by the oldest Shahnameh, the Book of Kings called 'Stories of Nar' from the now Ossetian region in the Caucasus. The Music is a Narration based on Allanian Text, Scythian Breathing Techniques, and Sarmatian Healing Methods."

Fig. 3. Album *Naart Kaachitaa* by Paganland (Sarmoung Ensemble).

Here they call for the rise of men and women against the Iranian authorities. In the same year, 2022, the protest movement "Woman, Life, Freedom" in Iran witnessed a remarkable show of solidarity from people hailing from different religious backgrounds and gender identities, all coming together to demand their basic rights and freedoms from the authorities.[61]

These musicians have one goal within their music: to share their deep knowledge of the ancient heritage. As Magus states, he uses esotericism within Zoroastrianism and pre-Zoroastrianism to find that "the unique inner path with an inheritance of ancient maps/technic is endarkening."

Conclusion

This study is emic in nature, as I aimed to understand the cultural beliefs, values, and practices from the perspective of the participants themselves.[62] Magus and Charuk understand pre-Islamic teachings, such as Zoroastrianism and pre-Zoroastrianism, as leading to the use of music as a sacred form of expression. These teachings highly value free expression and recognise the inherent strengths of women. Magus's "inner path" is both spiritual and cultural, emphasising the importance of discovering spirituality on one's own instead of simply following imposed teaching. This path stands in opposition to the societal norms imposed by the Islamic Republic.

As a result of their Zoroastrian and pagan upbringing, Charuk and Magus found power in legends, history, and beliefs that the Islamic Republic had eradicated. They aim to gain and share insights

60 "Naart Kaachitaa, by Paganland (Sarmoung Ensemble)," Paganland (Sarmoung Ensemble), accessed April 7, 2024, https://paganlandsarmoungensemble.bandcamp.com/album/naart-kaachitaa.

61 Arastoo Dabiri, " 'Woman, Life, Freedom': A Movement in Progress in Iran," *Dignity: A Journal of Analysis of Exploitation and Violence* 8, no. 1 (March 1, 2023), https://doi.org/10.23860/dignity.2023.08.01.05.

62 Madhu Bala, G. R. B. Chalil, and Amit Gupta, "Emic and Etic: Different Lenses for Research in Culture; Unique Features of Culture in Indian Context," *Management and Labour Studies* 37, no. 1 (February 2012): 45–60, https://doi.org/10.1177/0258042X1103700105.

from the pre-Islamic spiritual heritage through their music. As a result, they find themselves on an esoteric path to discover and share "special knowledge"[63] found within these traditions. In doing so, they have risked their lives and been forced to leave their home, never to return. Nonetheless, their unwavering commitment to advocating for the inheritance they hold dear has persisted.

Furthermore, Charuk and Magus represent what Russell[64] refers to as one of the esoteric aspects of Zoroastrianism, the belief that spiritually advanced believers employing mystical techniques might acquire special knowledge and revelations already described in the Gathas, where mantra recitations are used to induce these revelations.

What is interesting is that, as Asprem and Strube[65] observe, "deviant" and "anti-establishment" forms of knowledge are frequently connected by esoteric scholars. In the case of Iran, esoteric practices considered pagan are defined in law as deviant. As a result, young people are even more inclined to engage in Paganism. For example, during the ongoing Iranian protests, on the occasion of Chaharshanbe Suri, a celebration with Zoroastrian roots that involves jumping over a fire, young protesters took to the streets and chanted anti-government slogans.[66] The regime warned against it. Consequently, the commander of the Greater Tehran Police Force, Abbas Ali Mohammadian, said police officers would use mosques for arrests[67] because the Islamic hardliners view the national tradition as a pagan relic. The regime kept their promise: more than 50 people were arrested, at least 19 people died, and 2,800 were injured.[68] Echoing Bataille and Foucault's understanding of transgression and limit as interviewed, the risks of severe consequences did not deter people from celebrating this event, also known as the "Festival of Fire." It is evident that pre-Islamic heritage is still prevalent in Iran, and some Iranians use pre-Islamic esotericism to transgress against the regime. This is particularly prominent in the extreme Iranian metal music scene. For example, Sina, a Black metal musician from the Wasteland, was forced to migrate to Norway because he risked being arrested. His music is entirely influenced by Zoroastrian tales.[69]

The members of Arsames, another metal band who celebrates the pre-Islamic heritage, were arrested in 2020;[70] Akvan/اکوان, Black metal has produced several albums on the same topic, and the band Jawzael produces music concentrating on occult and esotericism.

Neopaganism is a contemporary movement that seeks to revive the practices and beliefs of ancient religions, often incorporating modern elements. Iranian extreme metal bands provide a notable example of this trend by promoting the revival of pre-Islamic history and esotericism. However, this phenomenon remains largely unexplored beyond Western borders due to the secrecy of practitioners and the severe consequences they face, including imprisonment or even death. Nonetheless, it is possible to gain insight into this hidden world. This study illuminates the crucial role that popular culture plays in shaping religious and cultural evolution.

Studying religion and popular culture offers perspectives on how religion can function outside of traditional institutional settings, which is one of its major contributions.[71] Moreover, as Partridge observes, popular culture such as music matters in religious experiences: "We

63
Egil Asprem, "Reverse-Engineering 'esotericism': How to Prepare a Complex Cultural Concept for the Cognitive Science of Religion," *Religion* 46, no. 2 (2016): 158–85, https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2015.1072589.

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James R. Russell, "On Mysticism and Esotericism among the Zoroastrians," *Iranian Studies* 26, no. 1–2 (1993): 73–94, https://doi.org/10.1080/00210869308701787.

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Egil Asprem and Julian Strube, *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, Supplements to Method & Theory in the Study of Religion, vol. 17 (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

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Babak Dehghanpisheh, "Iranians Use Fire Festival to Revive Anti-Government Protests," *The Washington Post* (March 14, 2023), https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/03/14/iran-protests-fire-festival-chaharshanbe-suri/.

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"Tehran Police Warn Against Protests Ahead Of 'Festival Of Fire,' " *Iran Wire* (March 13, 2023), https://iranwire.com/en/news/114729-tehran-police-warns-against-protests-ahead-of-festival-of-fire/.

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"Iran's Fire Festival Claims 19 Deaths and 2,800 Injuries," *Iran International* (May 15, 2023), https://www.iranintl.com/en/202203166806.

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Eckerström, "Resistance and Counter-Memories in Persian Black Metal."

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Robert Pasbani, "Iranian Band Arsames Escape Their Country after Being Sentenced to 15 Years for Playing Metal," *Metal Injection* (August 14, 2020), https://metalinjection.net/news/metal-band-arsames-escape-from-iran-after-being-sentenced-to-15-years-in-prison?path=news/metal-band-arsames-escape-from-iran-after-being-sentenced-to-15-years-in-prison.

71
Egil Asprem and Granholm Kennet, *Contemporary Esotericism* (London: Routledge, 2014), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315728650.

can be moved by the Orphic power of their art to such an extent that the encounter becomes invested with a particular significance for which religious language seems peculiarly appropriate."[72] Today, occult and esoteric symbolism is often used for aesthetic or superficial reasons in extreme heavy metal, particularly Black metal.[73] The complexities of the situation in Iran cannot be ignored, as the symbols utilised in protests are intentionally designed to push against and challenge those in power. Music plays a vital role in the country's culture of dissent, as songs often embody a powerful message of resistance and protest. Without fail, each protest in Iran is accompanied by a song that serves as a unifying anthem for the movement. The use of music and poetry to convey subversive meanings is a longstanding tradition in Iran's history, dating back to pre-Islamic times. Music has been revered as a therapeutic medium for centuries.[74] In response, the Regime has attempted to cancel these practices. Interestingly, popular culture, particularly music, provides evidence of alternative spirituality in Iran. Musicians have traditionally resisted Islamic control and performed their music in secret. Due to the secretive nature of these practices, the association of esotericism with hidden knowledge in Iran takes on a new level of meaning. Thus, much more research is called for. It would be beneficial for future research to examine the perceptions of Zoroastrian metal music among Zoroastrians, particularly Iranians, with a specific focus on those who currently reside in Iran. It is worthwhile to investigate whether there is any opposition from traditionalist groups towards the concept of Zoroastrian metal.

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Dedicated to the courageous people of Iran. Your bravery and resilience are an inspiration to us all.

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72 Partridge, *The Lyre of Orpheus*, 237, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199751396.001.0001.

73 Jacob Christiansen Senholt, "Radical Politics and Political Esotericism: The Adaptation of Esoteric Discourse within the Radical Right," in *Contemporary Esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm, 244–264, Gnostica (New York: Acumen Publishing, 2012).

74 Mohammad Hashemimehr and Mahboobeh Farkhondehzadeh, "Music Therapy and Its Status in Iranian Medical Texts and Knowledge: The Association Between Music and Medicine," *Journal of Research on History of Medicine* 11, no. 1 (2022): 17–32.

Heterography:

Zoroaster Superstar

Sara Ferro and Chris Weil (ARTOLDO)

Centro Studi di Civiltà e Spiritualità Comparate
fondazione Giorgio Cini onlus

Zarathustra or the ultimate taboo

In 2018, we, the creative duo of ARTOLDO (Sara Ferro & Chris Weil), went to a colloquium at the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei in Rome to discuss our proposal of shooting a documentary about the so-called Verginelli-Rota collection, consisting of rare books and manuscripts from the fifteenth to the twentieth century, all inherent in hermetic philosophy. We had already moved ahead with the pitch, so it was a matter of meeting in person and actually agreeing on interviews and filming logistics. What remains of that particular morning is the remarkable memory of an audience with the scholar who just a few years later would be awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics—not that we knew this then; otherwise, we probably wouldn't have launched into a presentation of the enterprise, which started with Pindaric flights between quantum physics and alchemy, a chutzpah nevertheless welcomed, a sly smile gave the nod.

What makes the collection so special, in addition to the collectors themselves, is the catalogue, ironically titled "quite reasoned"—indeed, it is the first catalogue of hermetic books in Italy, initiated in the 1920s and curated for sixty years by the cataloguer himself, Vince Verginelli, an erudite high school professor of Italian and Latin, together with his brotherly "hermetic" friend, Maestro Nino Rota. Verginelli was also a brotherly friend and adept of the master of neo-Egyptian hermeticism, Giuliano Kremmerz, founder of the Schola Philosophica Hermetica Classica Italica, MIRIAM (or MYRIAM) Therapeutic-Magical Brotherhood, formed on the model of the ancient Egyptian Isiac brotherhoods and arcane mystery cults—and the collection extensively features this author.

All was fine until the arrival of a harried librarian who wanted to remind everybody that the collection also contains texts about Zarathustra and that, well, danger zone, it goes without saying how inept it was to think of offering them to a broader audience without prior scientific analysis. Maybe the honourable ladies and gentlemen didn't remember?

In our opinion, they had already been given enough time to ignite at least a spark of academic research, the bequest from 1987 totally disappointing Verginelli's expectations, namely that multitudes of scholars would immediately begin to study them. Go figure—one of the texts in question is the *Clavis Artis*, an illuminated manuscript purportedly of the Rosicrucian environment, in which the frontispiece, title page, and preface refer to Zoroaster as the text's author, naming him "the Rabbi and Jew." The images paramountly display the magus, but Zoroaster also appears elsewhere in disguise, scilicet an illustration of the book entitled *Uraltes Chymisches Werk*, a sylloge of alchemical texts by the fictitious author Abraham Eleazar, otherwise unknown, or better known as Julius Gervasius of Schwarzburg, i.e., the editor as well. A book which incidentally happens to open the alphabetical part of the catalogue of Verginelli-Rota and which bears the image of Zoroaster "himself." In any case, Rota's copy of the *Clavis Artis* was allegedly translated in 1238 from Arabic and is pretendedly from the year 1996—as can be seen in the inscription on the front page—and is also likely something from a Paracelsian milieu (as for all the other existing versions, illuminated or not, in Italy, Germany, or the Czech Republic). In librarian terms, a "pseudo-Zarathustra."

In any case, the bibliothecary imposed a very heavy and final veto.

Luckily, internet archives and online encyclopaedias remain open to the public, even when some cultural institutions restrict access to the original analogue source files—long live the digital "wisdom blowers."

Needless to say, from that moment we have been haunted by the *Clavis Artis* and Zarathustra, who appears to us again and again as the very last taboo in Western society, and arguably beyond, let alone when Zarathustra feat. Kremmerz and all becomes Ur-political.

Zerdust, Zerdast, Zaradast In Zarathustra We Trust

(Voltaire's entry in the Encyclopaedia regarding Zoroastrianism reportedly mentions Zoroaster's older names, being "Zerdust," "Zerdast," "Zaradast," or "Zaratustra"—the newest is *Ziggy Stardust* [1972]. Then there is a Z connecting rockstars via stage attire, and here we come in a "Flash" [1980] to Freddie Mercury. Voltaire is besides "zigzag Zadig," linked to Casanova, and Casanova to Fellini, and Fellini, in turn, to Rota. And here the circle is rounded out—like an Ouroboros.)

From the epochal *And Thus Spoke Zarathustra* onwards, the descent (of the transcendent God?), the "rise and fall" to and from the mountain of the most outdated prophet, and *The Man Who Fell To Earth* (2012) have not been halted, instead the protagonist updating himself at every step, whereas pop icons such as David Bowie, alias Ziggy Stardust, have projected the prophet of the prophet, Nietzsche, into the new millennium; unsuspecting Zoroastrians like the missing more than the royal royalties, Sir, Queen of the Night and King of Queen, the rock star Freddie Mercury, with his stage costumes and emblematic lyrics manifested arcane symbols of his faith unbeknownst to a worldwide audience and to his awareness; undisputed geniuses like Federico Fellini and Nino Rota in their interpretation of Casanova, both spasmodic masters of all the most sublime arts; and together with the Maestro of the Love Art (ars amatoria), the art of all three of them, as great Maestri, followers of the Magician Maestro of the Magi, created new worlds or interconnections among them which are traversed by that magick that, in turn, in their own lives enchanted and bewitched each of them in their own exquisite ways, then recasting that magic in their oeuvre. Worlds that the artistic collective ARTOLDO brought to life in a virtual reality spectacle, inviting you to travel through Bowie's universe, Mercury's spiritual stage, and Casanova's fantastic and magically staged Venice, to discover not only holograms of these gigantic personalities, but also hidden messages concealed in brands such as Tesla, Mazda, and Zadig & Voltaire, and other references to Zoroastrianism as the religion in the cultural matrix incorporating so much of the extant, revealing the intertwined threads of art, magic, and Zoroastrianism.

Our weave has developed itself from an instinct towards pop-culturally querying and pseudo-archeologically digging into the mysterium "ZARATHUSTRA" to unearth his remains sown and layered in such a diverse variety of trivial discourses and so rarely dispersed in a diffuse variety of cultural debris. An intuition: the persona in question cannot have disappeared so perfectly synecdochically from the earth's

surface; he must have transformed himself into an overwhelming hologram, so highly settled in the extra-mundane that the rays from his rarefied presence hit hallowing personalities who are at the edges between different arts.

We identify Zarathustra's presence in some artists who, each in a peculiar way, were at that edge between the arts: Casanova between Traditional arts, ars amatoria, and rhetorical arts; Fellini between comic art and the seventh art and in search of the seventh heaven; Nino Rota, between the purest tonal music and hermeticism or Ars Magna and music and cinema once again; David Bowie, between pop music, performance, and visual art; and Freddie Mercury, between rock music, opera quality, and stage.

Fig. 1. Zoroaster Superstar VR - Hologram — ARTOLDO (2023)

The virtual reality installation can be accessed on Desktop, Tablet and Smartphone running directly in the browser: ENTER VR

The project infused with the above said insight and developed in association with RedMagicBlue unfolds in a 3x11-minute virtual reality experience, offering a unique blend of music, fanpics, esotericism, occulture, and spiritualism.

How to play: The VR installation opens up with the holy Zoroastrian perpetual flame, the atar, which will burn for eternity—it will never be *Ashes to Ashes* (1996)—first visibly then invisibly; hence, after all the component visual elements of the installation have been loaded, allowing the viewer to enter each world—how quickly depends on your internet bandwidth, to build the scene, keep the faith. Last but not least, click the screen with your pointer to look around, once the music starts to play. Enjoy!

Bowie: Around Bowie's supposed occultism a whole literature has flourished online, fed by his fans on one hand, and on the other, esotericists and conspiracy theorists—whose intuitions have nourished the former—but no solid evidence has ever been provided to definitively ascertain the consistency of its actual more-than-decidedly only sporadic, occasional, and above all superficial adherence to practices or theories of the occult milieu (White, 2019).

Fig. 2. Zoroaster Superstar VR: David Bowie — ARTOLDO (2023)

Bowie + Nietzsche: Anyway, while Nietzsche-as-Zarathustra in playing the prophet came to get himself accepted as one, Bowie-as-Ziggy-Stardust in playing, in parodying the popular image of the rock star turned himself into one, so that in doing so the historical figures have become displaced in the popular imagination by their avatars (Hill, 2007). Speaking of the devil, nay, of prophets in a realm between philosophy and religion, the two worlds, prophets who were themselves prophets of rock&roll or of teachings from the cosmic outer space, with the digital experience created, ARTOLDO fancied reproducing a Merton's self-fulfilling prophecy by depicting Ziggy Stardust as a novel Zoroaster—despite the line or because of it: "I'm not a prophet or a stone age man, just a mortal with the potential of a superman" in *Quicksand* (1971), though in an interview he stated that "everybody was convincing me that I was the messiah." For the traces are scarce and perhaps just philological—it may be just the Z the three of them (Ziggy, NietZsche, Zarathustra) have in common! Because as for Zarathustra/Nietzsche, it is all about making out of it a cult for being heard, "so softly a superman cries"; then Ziggy

Stardust is the larger-than-life persona who makes Bowie worthy of being heeded. To make him a rock god. His astral body becomes indeed an angelic presence (and in being so, androgynous as Ziggy), a star, a self-daemon, which as Koenig (1995–2023) asserts, is similar to the heavenly alter-egos of tradition men in Manichaeism and prior in Judaism; or to astral travel like in many of Theosophy's books, with all the hints about outer-of-body-experiences and travels (Koenig 1995–2023; White 2019).

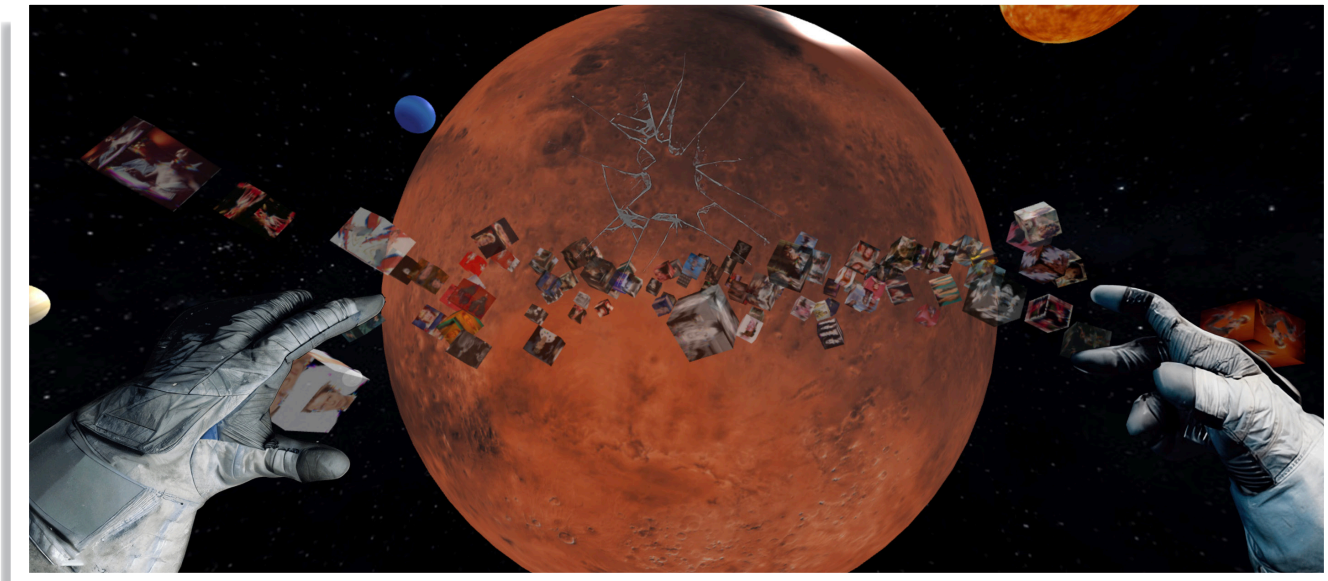

Fig. 3. Zoroaster Superstar VR: David Bowie - Mars (Red Planet) — ARTOLDO (2023)

Far more interested in plastically conveying the idea of such a reception of Bowie's work and artistic figure than in providing evidence as befits historical work, with an approach similar to the average fan searching for hints in his lyrics, winks in his photos, and symbolism in his stage clothing—clues in the interviews of his partners and companions and at large in his life lived according to that scene—ARTOLDO has chosen to put on a show and reenact a Bowie whose imagery is assumed clearly informed by that semantics. Moreover, supposing that his creative rendering of the wide symbolic apparatus that adorns and substantiates everything esoteric was so original and sui generis precisely because it was that of a highly heterodox personality that couldn't strictly adhere to such, by definition, strict, severe traditions, due to what was erratic in his nature and thus, was just temporarily "fanatic" about it.

Fig. 4. Zoroaster Superstar VR: David Bowie - David Bowie Straße — ARTOLDO (2023)

In the installation, we look through the broken glass of an astronaut's helmet, "a crack in the sky" (in "Oh! You Pretty Thing!," 1971, or was it *The Crack in Space* by P. H. Dick, 1966?)—maybe Bowie's "Major Tom" or an Elon Musk space tourist or his Mars colonist (does Musk's beloved X stand for that sixth sense which Colin Wilson in *The Occult: A History* [1971] states as a sign of an allegedly "superior man"? We noticed that the book cover bears such an explanation on it. A book that Bowie might have read, according to Koenig). Anyway, a Tesla prototype still crashed against a space rock, another is flying to the Red Planet, querying, "Is There Life on Mars?" (1971). Would that spaceship know like Major Tom, "Which way to go"? Anyway, "far above the Moon/Planet Earth is blue," the same Earth from which the cubes with Bowie's apotheoses on them are departing. What showmanship!

Fig. 5. Zoroaster Superstar VR: David Bowie - Tesla feat Major Tom — ARTOLDO (2023)

And “There is a Starman waiting in the sky” (1972) (for descending on Earth like a novel “leper” messiah? A second coming of Christ? A novel Gnostic Gospel? Meanwhile, “let the children boogie”)—in Manichaeism, all men and women were once stars (Koenig, 1996-2023)—with an alien worldview on humanity, telling us, “Don’t blow it, it’s all worthwhile.” In the cosmic battle between the good god Ahura Mazda and the evil god Angra Mainyu, humans had to help the good god in this battle (Harari, 2014): may that Starman be a reminder, a token standing for that religious principle? Anyway, as White (2019) states, as Bowie explored alternative religious traditions in the 1990s he might have read *The Gnostic Gospels* by Elaine Pagels (and in the *Nag Hammadi* Gospels, Zoroaster is traceable, see Lütge, 2009), a reading later on indicated, among his 100 favourite books, together with the famous *Transcendental Magic, Its Doctrine and Ritual* by Eliphas Lévi and *Zanoni* by Edward Bulwer-Lytton—where Zoroaster is indirectly mentioned “to have discovered the arts which your ignorance classes under the name of magic.” Hence, Bowie might have been somehow exposed to the “spell” of Zoroaster through his general interest in magic and attraction to gnosticism, upon which Zoroastrianism, according to Harari (2014), exerted its influence like on almost all subsequent Middle Eastern and Central Asian religions. As the lines: “Homo Sapiens have outgrown their use/You gotta make way for the Homo Superior” can allude to.

Nietzsche's portrait becomes Bowie's as on the cultic album cover *Aladdin Sane* (1973), the one with the red z-formed flash and a blue outline—Aladdin, the next persona into which Ziggy shifted.

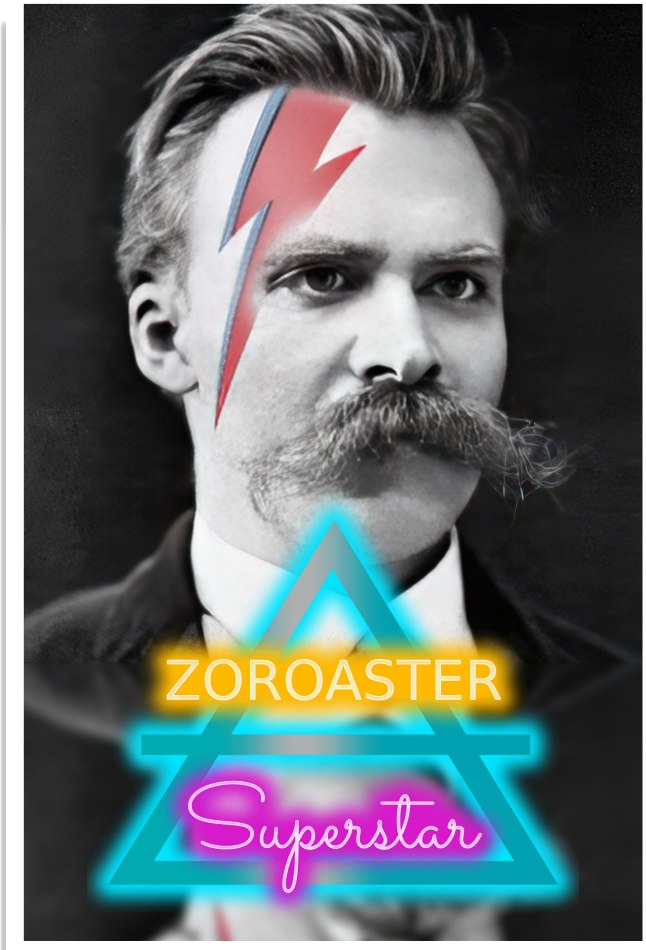

Fig. 6. Zoroaster Superstar VR: Poster — ARTOLDO (2023)

Fig. 8. Clavis Artis - Video Art — ARTOLDO (2023)

Two Bowie's signs of life: the street sign with which the city of Berlin paid homage to him, *David-Bowie-Straße*, in the phase he went "straight," and the Londoner plaque at the Trident Music Studios, as well his Hollywood red star on the Walk of Fame and the *Black Star* (2016), "how many times does an angel fall?" The soundtrack includes the pop songs "The Superman" (1970) and "Major Tom" (1969) by David Bowie and refers to the tone poem "Also Sprach Zarathustra" by Richard Strauß (1896), used in the *Clavis Artis Video Art installation* (2023) by ARTOLDO and made famous by Stanley Kubrik for the theme of his film *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

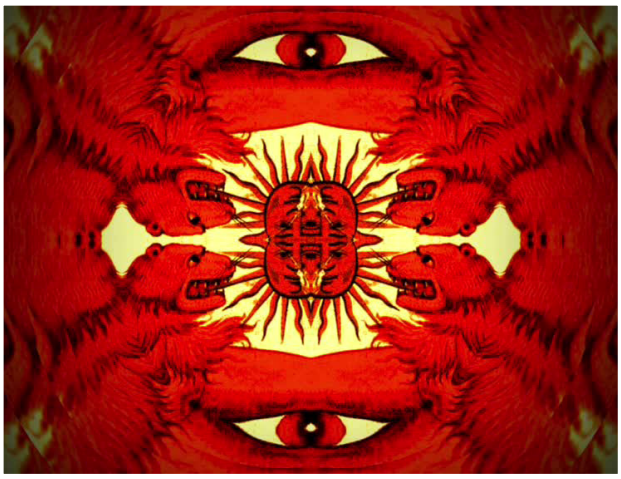

Fig. 7. Clavis Artis - Video Art — ARTOLDO (2023)

Clavis Artis: algorithmic recombination of more than 800 video artworks created by ARTOLDO based on the alchemical Clavis Artis, inspired by Zarathustra, reunited in more than 700,000 possibly different video loops of seventy-eight minutes each.

Along the inclination to occultism, in the distinguishedly Westernised fashion originally enhanced by Asian religious traditions, paradigmatically in Thelema, in Bowie's case it's peculiarly another culturally alternative movement that flourished in the late 1950s, i.e., ufology, forming there the cosmic space of "Space Oddity" (1969), outer space above all, round trip between the ascent to Mars, apprenticeship there and return to an earthly pop stardom under diverse cyberzoological forms. *Heteropoda davidbowi*e (Zuckerman, 2017), the Spiders from Mars, apostles of the orange-haired alter ego, Ziggy Stardust. If the baby-boomers were the first who, to a certain extent, massively experimented with spiritual ideas capable of rewriting the code of the search for the divine, the holy, and the metaphysical beyond the depleted dogmas and weary forms of faith and believing that within Christianity, the partaking in such beliefs on Bowie's side was hardly odd and distinctive in its inception, but very much in his artistic interpretation. Yet, what is peculiar is that we are looking for clues and subsequent confirmation that he was really deep "into." However, nearly every verse in his lyrics that could resonate with broader occult reference is never really and fully replete, rather a weak hint that possibly refers to or is a strategy to hit(ting) a particular public of the occult scene or to mimic and emulate the Beatles or Led Zeppelin in their genuine involvement with Indian spirituality or Thelemaic strains or other Brit pop bands as well as, in general, the climate and zeitgeist of the counterculture that is, again, his very audience (White, 2019). Definitively, he took an interest in Zen and Mahayana Buddhism and Tibetan black magic throughout his life. All the same, at times he even dismissed all that could sound close to an alternative spiritual quest towards occultism, as satanist, as "bad trips" aguishly recalling to him his periods of alienation due to drug consumption. He didn't precisely differentiate this but was simply more interested in the ambience than in distinguishing an esoteric current or stimulus from the others. White (2019) points out the presumptively juxtaposing elements drawn from occultism with material from Tibetan Buddhism and with references to Nietzsche and, likewise, that he used esoteric sigils, some sephirah ("Station To Station," 1976), and the Tree of Life (as in a famous photo-shoot by Steve Shapiro), alongside magic circles, also just for protection, and with apotropaic undertones and overtones mostly. Bowie enhanced his originality by widely using the cut-up method, and the arcane was a part of the puzzle; it could originate from conversations, encounters but also from fantasy literature and films, fiction, science-fiction (e.g., by Olaf Stapledon and John Bloodstone, interspersed through many of his lyrics), common discourses, and folklore. Furthermore, Koenig (1996–2023) states Bowie crafted his public persona by assimilating different aspects of contemporary occultism, "adding another layer of complexity to his artistic vision." Anecdotes in interviews with his pals reveal that, to overcome the angst that someone could harm him out of envy or revenge due to his popularity, he was used to utilising tools like penta-grams, hexagrams, candles, grimoires, and circles, depicting them on walls and the floor, and a kabbalistic apparatus used for summoning cosmic powers to combat demons. For the rest, if it's an alluring joke, some titles really made it possible to believe that there is indeed even a gnostic inspiration—for instance, "The Man Who Sold the World" (1970)—or that he was in circles prone to ritual magic; see "The Width of a Circle" (1970).

Fig. 9. Zoroaster Superstar VR: Spiders from Mars — ARTOLDO (2023)

Because Bowie sourced from the rhizomatic influences of the occult milieu of his time, mainstream in some subcultures, he has also been sourced in turn by that milieu that has grown up beyond expectations out of a wild concoction whose basic ingredients are somehow focused on matters as the flipside of science, religious heresies, holistic medicine, alternative life modes (ancient or totally unprecedented), and the paranormal; in brief, the quest for suppressed and radical belief systems and non-conformist weltanschauungen. It was, in fact, the Age of Aquarius and against that backdrop, to make his mark as kindred soul for fan folk who desperately fancied finding some figure to identify with in pop culture, one so charismatically calling for outer life, another life horizon already extant in Eastern spirituality, paganism, spiritualism, supernaturalism, theosophy, and analogous underground currents under the umbrella of the Western esoteric traditions. A praxis of "a pick and mix" of rejected narratives, self-experimenting, invented traditions and radical, or to some extent revolutionary, life forms, for the sake of an aestheticising fashion in which that seeking, querying, and crafting took shape.

Fig. 10. Zoroaster Superstar VR: Freddie Mercury — ARTOLDO (2023)

Mercury: The question is often formulated as to whether Freddie Mercury's Indian Parsi roots and his parents' Zoroastrian faith had an influence on his character, worldview, career, and persona. Even more than his lyrics, his stage clothing has been scrutinised, so that brightly evident evidence have also been found out and pinned down. Colours and symbols mostly, but also the very shapes and fashion, have all been indicated as a "smoking gun."

"Flash, aha, saver of the universe, he'll save, everyone of us."

Fig. 11. Zoroaster Superstar VR: Freddie Mercury - Night Sky — ARTOLDO (2023)

Mercury: Under "The Hall of Stars in the Palace of the Queen of the Night," Karl Friedrich Schinkel's 1815 set design for *The Magic Flute*, two cylindrical sections moving in opposite directions, one featuring the Zoroastrian Fire Temple in Yazd, the other a string of different coloured banknote denominations Switzerland had dedicated to him—for sojourning in Montreux. On the bottom, a traditional Zoroastrian flying carpet, cubical placeholders showcasing Freddie Mercury on stage, and classical Zoroastrian imagery, a car by the Japanese Mazda Motor Corporation, the Mercury self-crafted heraldic image for the band Queen itself, and the coloured globes from the album cover of *Innuendo* (1991).

Fig. 12. Zoroaster Superstar VR: Freddie Mercury - As kid and on stage — ARTOLDO (2023)

Fig. 13. Zoroaster Superstar VR: Freddie Mercury - Mazda — ARTOLDO (2023)

The musical score includes Queen tracks, such as “Bohemian Rapsody” (1974–1975) and “A Kind of Magic” (1986). “Bohemian Rhapsody” bears witness to Mercury’ respect for his parents’ beliefs by incorporating a distinctive phrase—“good thoughts, good words, good deeds”—directly from the “Three Good Things” principle in the Avesta, the sacred text of his family’s faith (Lee, 2018).

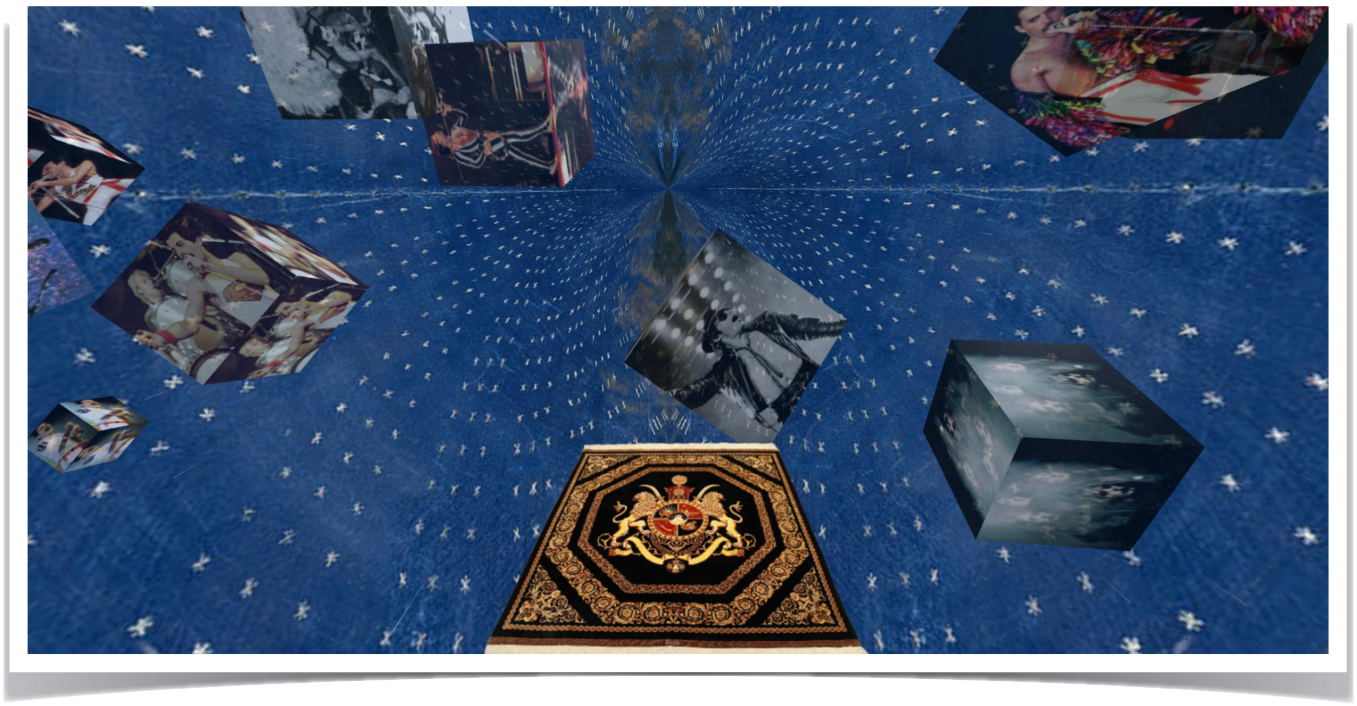

Fig. 14. Zoroaster Superstar VR: Freddie Mercury - Flying carper — ARTOLDO (2023)

A speculation is that he refrained from revealing the hidden significance of his stage attire, aligning with Zoroastrian beliefs that prioritise discretion; while he privately embraced his faith, he chose not to publicly practice it, a sentiment echoed by his mother in interviews. Under the lens there are: 1) favourite colours, all of them significant in Zoroastrian rituals and with a strong symbolic reference: white (purity and truth), yellow (sun), red (warriors, fire, in Persian athra/atarsh/atash), and blue (sky, spiritual life); 2) symbols like lightening (one of the “Five Fires or Energies” as referenced in the Avesta and earlier Zoroastrian texts), arrows (like tiwaz runes, “tir,” the name for the planet Mercury in ancient Persian; in the Anglo-Saxon and Proto-Germanic context: the spiritual fighter-god for order, equilibrium, justice, faith, will; his arrows jacket as exemplar, analogous to Mozart’s Papageno), panthers, and roses (pursued perfection); and 3) garments traditionally worn during rites of passage, like the kushti (Mercury, aged eight, participated in a Navjote, a Zoroastrian coming-of-age ceremony [Lee, 2018]), the sedreh vest, on stage and in his private life, or the gaunacka/gauna fur coat; accessories like the bull-horned cap (in the “Book of Creation” or Bundahishn, the bull is created by Ahura Mazda and killed by Ahriman; “The Praise of the Holy Bull” serves as the introduction to “In Praise of Water”). Moreover, Mercury’s bare chest is linked to that tradition, relating vulnerability, analogous to the salamander on his t-shirt, bought for a Superman, yet in Persian mythology stands for righteousness and faith overcoming the flames of passion.

In this regard, here we find Mercury akin to Bowie's adagio, "I'm just a mortal with the potential of a superman."

Some symbols glimpsed in his outfits precisely refer to that cultural frame of things related to ancestors and the concept of ancestry and, apparently, Mercury wanted to allude to them not blatantly but by means of a symbolic "Innuendo" (1991), as can also be seen in the album cover from J. J. Grandville's piece "Juggler of Universes." The creation of the planets is then visualised in the VR installation. "It's a kind of magic" that things linked to Zoroaster have remained so disguised.

Fig. 15. Zoroaster Superstar VR: Freddie Mercury - Innuendo cover: Juggler of Universes — ARTOLDO (2023)

Fig. 16. Zoroaster Superstar VR: Casanova — ARTOLDO (2023)

Casanova: The Count of Seingalt met both the Count of Saint-Germain and Cagliostro, emblematic figures of the eighteenth-century—its esoteric side with a penchant for the more intelligible rationalising and enlightening facet, a brilliant hyperstition; indeed, obscuring more than a Momentary Lapse of Reason—acquaintances he later attacked publicly, an attitude that of demeaning, once by himself highly regarded subjects (he did it again and in turn against the once-esteemed Voltaire), thereby endorsing the interpretation that, to him, the arcane sciences were just other means for scheming to gain the mesmerised attention of the powerful on whom his whole life depended. Even so, taking into account the power of fascination of those "means," he was somehow subjected to their charm, he who never shied away from seduction, but rather invoked and evoked it. Therefore, his practice of occult sciences and his interest in Freemasonry, esoteric brotherhoods, and, furthermore, encounters with their members (he also knew Mozart through his helping with the libretto of *Don Giovanni* [Stefanovska, 2020]) could not be missing either: although he preferred not to underline the issue too much, Casanova practiced an abundance of forms of "theurgic" and "cabbalistic" mantic magic (Catalano) and absorbed ideas and rituals disseminated through Masonic lodges or gleaned in notorious treatises and manuals like the *Salomon's clavicula* (Stefanovska, 2020).

Often a penniless conman, he was also forced to indulge in other manipulations, of a chemical nature and coinable, whereas he took classes in chemistry with a certain interested regard for alchemical experiments whereby he then duped his affluent subsidisers, be they, in turn, the Marquise d'Urfé—notably an alchemist herself—the Signor Bragadin, or others. Alchemy thus served to create the invented belief in Casanova's magical capabilities or phony knowledge in the cabbala, worthy of a trickster, a make-believer of his rank. This is how to read the short reference he makes in his memoirs, translated into English by no

less than the weird fiction writer and occultist Arthur Machen (an author much beloved by David Bowie, a significant sympathy here, which manifests the logic of this project), writing about Zoroaster with a style marked by an uncommon and astute nonchalance: “Next comes Mercury, then the Moon, then Jupiter, and then the Sun. It is, you see, the magic cycle of Zoroaster, in which Saturn and Mars are omitted”; an arcane which for sure intellectually seduced the Marquise. Stefanovska (2020) also noted the many mercurial aspects of Casanova: He had to cure his syphilis with mercury without the metal causing him acute poisoning, a notorious side effect of this dangerous medicine; he temporary embodied professions traditionally associated with Mercury/Hermes as a god, as he was often a quasi thief, merchant, traveller and pimp; “his relationship with Mercury is only one example of such a ‘mutual trade’ between chemistry, magic, alchemy, medicine and the other alchemy—that of the verb, as Mallarmé called poetry” (Stefanovska, p. 95), a constant communication between and transcending disciplines, as expedient in his life and disparate narratives, where boundaries are much more criss-crosses and roundabouts.

Under the aegis of Mercury, as Freddie and Casanova

Fig. 17. Zoroaster Superstar VR: Casanova - Fellini + Roll — ARTOLDO (2023)

Fellini's Casanova: Immersed in a Canaletto's postmodern diorama, an artist coeval with Casanova, in the embryonic waters of the initial scene of the film *Fellini's Casanova*: Zoroaster sits on a gondola—as he appears in the Verginelli-Rota's Clavis Artis—then, a display of books by or on Casanova, such as his memoirs, "Historie de ma vie," the novel *Casanovas Heimfahrt* (Casanova's Homecoming) by Arthur Schnitzler (1918), Casanova's half fairy tale and half ante-litteram science fiction prose, "Icosaméron" (1787), Casanova's translation of the libretto by Louis de Cahusac for the trágedie en musique *Zoroastre* by Jean-Philippe Rameau (1747–1749), the tragicomedy "Zoroastro" by Carlo Goldoni (1760)—Casanova and Goldoni lived in roughly the same times and lodges—and the commodification (in nothing less than a seductive perfume) by a fashion brand of Voltaire's novella and work of philosophical fiction "Zadig or, The Book of Fate" (1747), which tells the story of Zadig, a Zoroastrian philosopher in ancient Babylonia. Voltaire was a pivotal presence in the life of Casanova, who aimed to be recognised as a man of the Republic of Letters, and a figure he actually happened to meet once thanks the contributions of Marquis d'Urfé (who is quintessentially depicted by Fellini in the eponymous film).

On the superior hemisphere three rings orbit: one is the frontispiece of *Histoire de ma fuite des prisons de la République de Venise qu'on appelle les Plombs* (1788), the central display cases showing iconic pics of Federico Fellini, Nino Rota, and Gustavo Rol, the higher, and the pediment of the Saint Magdalene Church in Venice, which was built by the theorist architect Tommaso Temenza of Masonic creed (Rampazzo, 2023; Favilla and Rugolo, 2009)—legendarily initiated by none other than Casanova, according to rumours—and there are several hovering icosahedrons. The soundtrack is "O Venezia, Venaga, Venusia" by Nino Rota (1976).

Fellini + Rota:

The life-long collaboration between the two maestri—Federico Fellini and Nino Rota—might also be deep-rooted in their mutual fascination with esoteric or alternative spiritualities, whose many anecdotes recur, recalling the figure of the former via many intellectual personalities of his time and for the latter, indeed: the coventured *Bibliotheca Hermetica*, authored together with Verginelli, may be a hint.

As a matter of fact, Rota authorised other masterpieces of hermetic inspiration; for instance, the *Oratorium Mysterium* (1962), with texts again by Verginelli and influenced by the so-called apocryphal and Gnostic Gospels of the Nag Hammadi library—Rota also set to music a fairy tale about Aladdin by his alchemical friend.

Fellini's interest in paranormal and mediumistic phenomena and in the mysteries of the arcane pivotally flows together with the missing but undisputed masterpiece *The Journey of G. Mastorna*, whose screenplay exists, yet not the final film (it seems the clairvoyant Rol suggested that he halt the project), with his *Juliet of the Spirit* (1965) and with Tobby Dammit (1968) inspired by Poe's novel and from the trilogy *Spirits of the Dead* (Santoro, 2020). Even Fellini's professional reflections were influenced by consultations

with mediums and psychics, which, although neglected by academic insight, might bear witness to his curiosity for the forces of fantasy over reality and his awe for the supernatural dimension of life (Pacchioni, 2020). Three figures were decisive for his unfolding of this tendency: the "magical friend" and composer Nino Rota, with their lifetime collaboration, and the medium and seer Gustavo Rol—and the former has been captured by the latter, together with Fellini's other close collaborators from the art world, like the magical realist writer Dino Buzzati. But first and foremost, the psychoanalyst Ernst Bernhard (Pacchioni, 2020), who "blended Jungian theories, mystical Eastern traditions, and a cabalistic vision of the universe by which every event is endowed with a symbolic meaning" (Pacchioni, 2020); he also led therapeutic sessions enhanced with LSD with the Freudian psychoanalyst and parapsychologist Emilio Servadio (Kezich, 2007).

The technology we used for the 360° journey through those artists, intellectuals, and prophets and their esoteric tendencies made it possible to look around in a circular way, as emblematic of the eternal return of such a quest, for it is in all respects, human, all too human.

Fig. 18. Zoroaster Superstar VR: Casanova - Fellini + Rota — ARTOLDO (2023)

A few words about ARTOLDO

ARTOLDO (est. 2015) is a creative collective featuring Sara Ferro (M. A. in Sociology of Media) and Chris Weil (ARD.ZDF Media Academy) with a focus on esoteric arthouse movies, cinema XR, documentaries, experimental and essay films, moving images arts, poetry film, video art, and virtual reality.

Notable works (esoteric films): *All Is One* (2024), *Embassy of the Free Mind* (2024), *Secropolis* (2024), *C. G. Jung on Alchemy* (2023), *Clavis Artis* (2023), *Black Sudo Rising 360°* (2022), *The Luther Blissett Legacy - Satanic Panic* (2022), *Hauntology of the Retrodromomania* (2021), *Frammenti di una Festa Furiosa: Furio's Furious Fragments & Friends - Furio Jesi* (2021), *Vespertilio Spillover* (2020), *Timor Panicus* (2020), *MicroGnosing* (2019), *WhimSeaCall - Nocturnal Sea* (2019), *Ugo Dossi - Art and Space* (2018) and *The Ritman Library - Amsterdam* (2017). Publications: "But Who Was Bernus?" (*Anthropos & Iatria* | Anno XXIV no. 1 [pp. 86–98]). Translations: *La Pagana* (2024) + *Venere in Pesci. Romanzo Astrologico* (2023) (Bella Germaniae). Poetry: *Sineddoche Torino* (2024) (Kurze&Pos - poismetto).

Official website: https://artoldo.com | Permalink: https://artoldo.github.io

Project link – Zoroaster Superstar VR: https://artoldo.com/zoroaster

Permalink (Use this link to embed or share online): https://artoldo.github.io/zoroaster

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Book review

Mark J. Sedgwick
Traditionalism: The Radical Project for Restoring Sacred Order

New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. Pp. IX, 410. Hardback: ISBN 9780197683767, US$29,95

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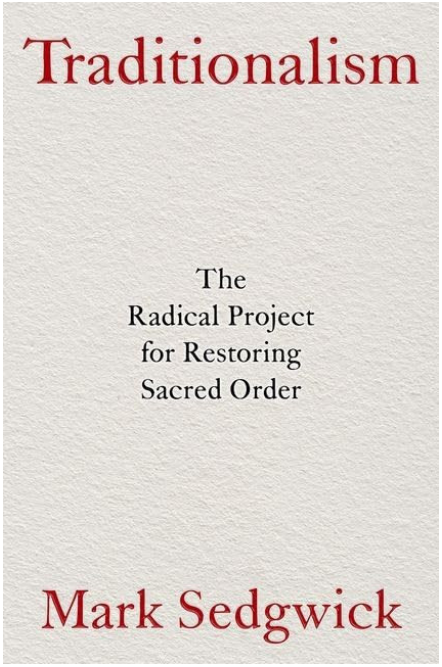
In this work, Mark Sedgwick seeks to introduce a traditionalist philosophy that remains relatively unknown and highlights the particularities of a radical traditionalist project that aims to restore a sacred order. Traditionalism is a polymorphic and multidirectional thought that claims an eternal, immutable, and transcendental metaphysical lineage. This book offers an intellectual history of traditionalism, from its beginnings in Europe in the early 1910s up to the present day. At the intersection of religious philosophy and political ideology, traditionalism remains a complex subject due to the philosophical and metaphysical notions it mobilizes, as well as the plurality of its uses, in ecological struggles or interreligious dialogue, for instance. It is also a sensitive subject due to the radical movements that claim association with it, notably with fascist and racist inclinations. M. Sedgwick offers a comprehensive perspective of the discursive realm of traditionalism and seeks to systematize its thought.

"Tradition" is understood here as a set of sacred teachings transmitted to humanity since its origins, with the aim of maintaining the sacred order of the world. The association with perennialism, the idea of a *Sophia perennis* as the philosophical foundation of traditionalism, traces back to the very essence of humanity and therefore to a meta-historical reference point. However, it also has historical roots tracing it back to the Italian Renaissance with Marsilio Ficino, who had already engaged with this idea to merge Neoplatonic philosophy with Christianity (pp. 28–29).

Functioning as an inverted mirror, traditionalism opposes the idea of modernity projected onto European and English-speaking societies, especially since the Renaissance era. Modernity is understood as the triumph of positivism and individualism based on a secularized model, contrasting with the traditional and sacred order. The traditionalist thought adopts a historical viewpoint that challenges the notion of modernity as a source of technical, moral, and social progress. It modifies the tripartite periodization of history (p. 71) to put forward the notion of the decline of the world—"for Traditionalists, modernity represents not recovery, but a continuation of the Fall (p. 68)." From the Ancients to the Middle Ages and the modern period, history is perceived as a witness of this departure from tradition. Moreover, in addition to its critique of modernity (pp. 93–96), the anti-modernism underpinnings of traditionalism align with a political opposition to liberal and democratic models, situating it in a political position underlined by the metaphysical foundations it defends. Its political rejection of modernity also makes traditionalism a radical political ideology that takes the form of an intellectual project more than an organized, institutionalized structure.

The difficulty in "grasping" traditionalism can be illustrated through the following statement: "All Traditionalists are perennialists, but not all perennialists are Traditionalists (p. 359)." Indeed, Sedgwick emphasizes that traditionalism is first and foremost what the actors make of it. Like in any discursive register, some elements coincide and coexist, but do not occupy the same places, do not arrange themselves in the same ways, and are composed, decomposed, and recomposed from one version to another. The diversity of approaches to religion among traditionalists is particularly emblematic. René Guénon and



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then Julius Evola gave little significance to religion, which they associated with an "exoteric" dimension, perceived as "sentimental" and of lesser importance. This could be seen as a form of anti-religious traditionalism. However, Guénon himself revisited these considerations by making the "exoteric" a pathway to the "esoteric," albeit in a secondary role. Then Schuon, with his "Transcendent Unity of Religions" (pp. 184–91), sought to rehabilitate religion, to merge this dualistic vision, and to establish himself as a religious figure (p. 197)—the religious dimension is articulated among Traditionalists both within Christianity with Jordan B. Peterson and within Islam with Seyyed Hossein Nasr. Criticism of the modern world underlines the works of traditionalists, analysts of the modern world but also researchers and cultural agents, such as Guénon—who used to openly express his apoliticism, his rejection of academic intellectual methods and approaches—as well as Mircea Eliade, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, or Huston Smith. It is also visible in the works of Alain de Benoist, advocate of the French *Nouvelle Droite* who did not adopt perennialism but subscribed to the criticism of the modern world while engaging in an intellectual and political form of activism. At the time of the publication of *Against the Modern World,* Jean-Pierre Brach mentioned that Sedgwick's work constituted a valuable contribution in its assessment of the impact of traditionalism and its prolificacy in European and North American societies as well as in Turkey and Iran. He emphasized that the evolution of traditionalism has been oriented towards a greater "practical involvement" of religious, cultural, or political domains answering to new imperatives of "public visibility," at times leading to proselytizing or "citizen participation" endeavors.[1]

Rather than providing a somewhat biased introduction to traditionalist philosophy, Sedgwick situates this movement within contemporary intellectual (and political) debates, and refuses to reduce it solely to a thought framework on a disembodied eternal wisdom. The originality of this work lies in the attention given to the prevalence of traditionalism within the issues animating present-day societies and in demonstrating the interconnections at play. Likewise, the corpus of sources used in this work consists of a wide range of textual material in addition to oral sources. Combining historical inquiry and anthropological investigation, Sedgwick adopts a "field historian" approach. This book proves its fruitfulness and its necessity as "the field eventually reveals itself as an archive," through oral inquiries, direct observations, and contemporary uses of the researched subject.[2] The sources used for this work reflect research conducted since the 1990s, beginning with Sedgwick's encounter with traditionalism in Cairo while researching Sufism. While in Italy, he became aware of a form of traditionalism within the Sufi brotherhood of Shaykh Abd al-Wahid Pallavicini, where he noticed a stronger connection with Western philosophy than with Sufis from the Muslim world. He encountered several issues. Firstly, Traditionalists do not openly identify as such, making it a more challenging movement to pinpoint. Secondly, they do not aim to reach a broad audience and form a small, elitist circle. Finally, they are part of other discursive traditions that intersect, sometimes complement or hybridize each other, and simultaneously "blur" identification categories, as seen in the case of Sufism, for example.

1
Jean-Pierre Brach, "Avant-propos," in *Contre le monde moderne: Le traditionalisme et l'histoire intellectuelle secrète du XXe siècle*, by Mark Sedgwick (Paris: Dervy, 2006), XII.

2
Augustin Jomier end Ismail Warscheid, "Pour une islamologie historienne," *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 73, no. 2 (2018): 314.

The findings from his research on traditionalism resulted in the publication of *Against the Modern World*, which laid the basis of an intellectual history of the twentieth century, tracing its origins, development, and dissemination since Guénon, offering an intellectual genealogy of traditionalism. About twenty years later, he revisited his initial conclusions: the decrease in traditionalist intellectual production did not lead to its decline. While Guénon had been the major reference point of the 20th century, Evola became prominent within the political movements of traditionalism.[3] This can be observed not only in Aleksandr Dugin's bestseller *Foundations of Geopolitics* (1997), but also in the works of Gábor Vona and his Jobbik party in Hungary, or in the public statements of Donald Trump's campaign manager, Steve Bannon.[4] The rise of traditionalist philosophy in right-wing political movements can also be explained by the decline of moderate parties, both left and right, making room for new parties, which engage with other ideologies, including traditionalism. This resonance of traditionalism in current political events, the fact that it influences and inspires new forms of (post-) traditionalism, attests to the vitality and pervasiveness of this movement, in contrast to others that have failed to leave a lasting legacy.

His analysis of traditionalism unfolds in four stages. The first part focuses on the foundations of traditionalist thought, which represent a common ground across its various expressions, relying on structural ideas and developed perspectives. Among these foundations, perennialism plays a central role based on the idea that all (religious) traditions share a single timeless and esoteric tradition—and thus constitute derived traditional forms—connecting human beings to this sacred order. Next is the traditionalist historical perspective, positing the decline of the world and humanity since the transition to modernity, leading to a departure from the traditional sacred order. The thesis of the decline of the modern world justifies criticism through a metaphysical argumentation, diametrically opposed to the positivist narrative, which sees emancipation through reason, moral, and technical progress, as well as individualism—although this definition of modernity is merely a projection, it nonetheless stands as a foundational idea. Finally, the traditionalist "solution" articulates thought and action within society, with the ambition of instigating a restoration of the lost sacred order.

The second part of the book focuses on the main projects of traditionalism, unfolding across three fields of human activity: self-realization, religion, and politics. Sedgwick revisits the various traditionalist approaches, their (re)configurations, and ramifications, as well as the wide range of positions towards these fields, which helps the reader grasp the volatility and versatility of traditionalism—despite the prevalence of these fundamental ideas.

The third part delves into other traditionalist projects from the same perspective as the previous section, exploring how Traditionalists think, appropriate, and express themselves on common grounds—here art, gender, nature, and interreligious dialogue—within societies, and drawing from a traditionalist philosophy. These two parts exemplify the tour de force of this work by incorporating marginal movements into the intellectual discourses and spaces of expression within contemporary societies. This section highlights the shift in the cen-

3
For the works of Guénon's European influence, see below: Jean-Pierre Laurant, *Guénon au combat: Des réseaux en mal d'institution* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2019); Francesco Piraino, "L'héritage de René Guénon dans le soufisme du XXIe siècle en France et en Italie," *Religiologiques* 33 (printemps 2016); David Bisson, "Soufisme et tradition: L'influence de rené Guénon sur l'Islam soufi européen," *ASSR* 140 (octobre-décembre 2007).

4
Anton Shekhovtsov and Andreas Umland, "Is Aleksandr Dugin a Traditionalist? 'Neo-Eurasianism' and Perennial Philosophy," in *The Russian Review* 68, no. 4 (October 2009).

ter-periphery relationship of traditionalism according to specific fields of action. As per the issue of interreligious dialogue, it can be a valuable ally with the idea of the unity of traditions in the *Sophia perennis*. Similarly, the protection of nature, seen as sacred, provides room for traditionalists to engage in the fight against climate change, where they constitute a subversive, controversial, yet equally marginal movement in the political sphere.

Finally, the fourth part focuses on the extensive and adaptable aspect of traditionalism through the concept of "post-traditionalism." Thus, the focus is placed on newer generations, while observing closely the discursive references of traditionalism in political and radical right-wing circles. From the *Nouvelle Droite* in France to identitarian movements or mere identifications among politicians, the author seeks to understand who the political beneficiaries of post-traditionalism are, and for what purposes.

The ambitious challenge of this work is met by presenting readers with a comprehensive approach to traditionalism that accounts for its theoretical foundation without confining itself to it. Hence, this book can be seen as a manual of applied traditionalism. The numerous case studies applied to various societal domains illustrate how the traditionalist intellectual project has intersected with specific struggles, manifested in concrete actions, and been supported by a significant diversity of (political) actors. It demonstrates how, from one actor to another, from one form of traditionalism to another, a structuring element becomes itself structured, an authoritative figure is established as a pioneer or even sacralized, and in other cases is relegated to the background, contradicted, or even appears non-existent. It would be interesting to extend this analysis to consider the case of French Muslim traditionalist movements with mystical tendencies, which contrast with the French political movements analyzed by the author in this work. The specific forms of criticism of the modern world and perennialist thought relayed in these circles are shaped by an effort to translate and publish works of known Traditionalists such as Lings, Burckhardt, or Chittick.

This work ultimately invites us to reflect on the complex nature of traditionalism, which appears to undergo a tension between doctrinal rigidity and the adaptability of its applications revealed by the cross-reading of current uses and its initial expressions.

Book review

Farzaneh Goshtasb
Āzar Kayvān: Zendegī Nāme, Āthār va ʻAqāʻed

Tehran: Pazhūhishgāh-i ʻUlūm-i Insānī va Muṭālaʻāt-i Farhangī, 2021. Pp. 392. Paperback: ISBN 9786227689372, IRR 2000000 (US$47,50)

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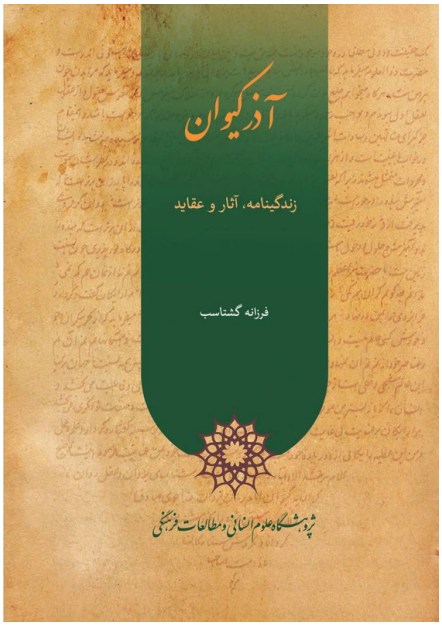
In her book, *Āzar Kayvān: Zendegī Nāme, Āthār va ʻAqāʾed* (Āzar Kayvān: biography, accomplishments, and ideologies), Farzane Goshtasb provides a detailed analysis of the life and achievements of Āzar Kayvān (1533–1618) the founder of the "Āzar Kayvān school," who lived in Safavid Iran and Mughal India during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The book is divided into four chapters, followed by an appendix that includes six additional sections (pp. 257–99). The introduction (pp. 11–20) provides an overview of the previous studies on Āzar Kayvān from the eighteenth century to the present. The second chapter is a comprehensive examination of the life of Āzar Kayvān, his disciples, and their writings (pp. 21–98). In chapter three, the interactions between followers of the Āzar Kayvān's school and various rulers, religious groups, and philosophers within the context of India's pluralistic religious society are examined (pp. 99–156). The final chapter of the book presents the belief system of the Āzar Kayvān school, including their views on the creation of the world and on the afterlife (pp. 157–255).

The initial chapter provides a concise overview of Āzar Kayvān and his followers, as presented in the works *Dabestān-e Mazāheb* (hereinafter *Dabestān*) and *Sharestān-e Chahar Chaman* (hereinafter *Sharestān*), which constitute the primary sources that the author uses to reconstruct the history of the Āzar Kayvān school. The author then proceeds to illustrate the prevailing scholarly position on Āzar Kayvān and his school, which can be broadly classified into two categories. The majority of scholars regarded Āzar Kayvān as a Zoroastrian or even a high Zoroastrian priest of Fars and considered the books produced by his disciples to be a valid source for reconstructing aspects of Persian history or for examining them to understand modern Zoroastrianism (pp. 12–14). The author finds these studies unconvincing, as there is a paucity of compelling evidence in the writings of the followers of Āzar Kayvān that would support the claims made in these studies (p. 10). Another frequent topic of discussion regarding the Āzar Kayvān school pertains to its relationship with Eshraqi philosophy (p. 19). This chapter concludes with a synopsis of the most recent research conducted by Takeshi Aoki and Daniel Sheffield (p. 20). The author frequently cites and challenges Aoki's research, which proposes the Zoroastrian background of Āzar Kayvān while simultaneously justifying the dearth of references from Zoroastrian sources in the surviving manuscripts of Āzar Kayvān's followers. The work of Daniel Sheffield examines the influence of religious movements in the Safavid era on the Āzar Kayvān school. His second area of interest concerns the influence of Āzar Kayvān's concept of Universal Religion on Akbar Shah. While Sheffield's research could provide a valuable source for the author's arguments, there is a lack of direct references to his work.

The second chapter is divided into five sections, the last three of which comprise lists of names. The first section provides a list of the names and biographies of Āzar Kayvān followers (pp. 33–49), while the subsequent section offers a comprehensive account of the manuscript information for eight books of the Āzar Kayvān school (pp. 49–82). This chapter finishes with an additional list of manuscripts, which includes the names of lost books that are referenced or quoted in part by other available manuscripts (pp. 82–98).



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In the initial two sections of the second chapter, Goshtasb presents a biography of Āzar Kayvān and his followers, drawing upon *Dabestān* and *Sharestān*. According to these books, Āzar Kayvān was originally from the province of Fars and spent the majority of his life in Shiraz, where he had numerous disciples and convened meetings for discussions. Goshtasb challenges the genealogical attribution of Āzar Kayvān. While *Sharestān*, written by Āzar Kayvān's disciple Bahram Farhad (d. 1624), locates the city of Estakhr as Āzar Kayvān's original residence before Shiraz, Goshtasb posits that this attribution is symbolic. She argues that this city, the former capital of the Ancient Persian Empires, was entirely destroyed by the time of Āzar Kayvān (p. 22). Similarly, she postulates that the genealogy of Āzar Kayvān as presented in *Dabestān*, which links him to the early mythical Persian kings, is fictitious (p. 24). The followers of Āzar Kayvān (*Āzarian* and *Ābadian)*, who designated themselves as Parsi (plural: Parsians), distinguished themselves from other Iranians and Zoroastrians of Iran and India (pp. 29–31). The Indian Zoroastrians were regarded as inauthentic Parsis, as they were perceived to feign adherence to Zoroaster's teachings while neglecting the traditions of the ancient Persian kings. The true Parsis, on the other hand, were those who interpreted (*Ta'wil*) the teachings of the Zoroaster and compared them to *Dasātīr*, the heavenly book that was sent to Mah Abad (p. 32).

The third chapter of the book concerns the interactions between Āzar Kayvān and other religions, thinkers, or philosophers, as well as rulers. A significant number of extant manuscripts belonging to the Āzar Kayvān school include a comparative analysis of other religious groups. As these descriptions are not polemical in nature, Goshtab postulates that their objective was to elucidate the shared tenets of these religions with that of Āzar Kayvān's followers (p. 100). In both *Dabestān* and *Sharestān*, the authors devoted a portion of their work to the sayings of philosophers and thinkers. This, according to Goshtab, demonstrates their depth of knowledge and their interest in this subject matter. Furthermore, these books include the Indian and Iranian thinkers and philosophers who were contemporaries of Āzar Kayvān and his followers, with whom they engaged in dialogue and from whom they acquired knowledge (pp. 112–13). Among these philosophers, Surawardi occupies a significant position (pp. 104–07).

Two of Goshtasb's principal arguments are discussed in this chapter. First, she posits that although the majority of scholars who have written about Āzar Kayvān have considered him to be a Zoroastrian or even a Zoroastrian priest, her analysis of all *Āzarian* sources does not corroborate this argument. This is because none of the sources refer to Āzar Kayvān as being a Zoroastrian, nor do they include any Avestan or Middle Persian sentences or any Zoroastrian texts. The author states that the adherents of Āzar Kayvān acknowledged Zoroaster as a prophet, yet did not regard themselves as the followers of his teachings (pp. 118–23). Second, the author emphasizes the relationship between Āzar Kayvān and Akbar Shah (1556–1605), during whose rule Āzar Kayvān migrated to India. This is discussed in the context of the universal religion *dīn-e elāhī* (p. 126). Goshtasb asserts that the accounts of meetings between Āzar Kayvān and Akbar Shah in *Sharestān*, as well as the suggestion that Akbar Shah adopted ideas from

Āzar Kayvān as proposed by some scholars, lack substantiation due to the absence of corroborating evidence in the historical sources from Akbar Shah's era.

The final chapter focuses on the beliefs and practices of the Āzar Kayvān school. It addresses a number of topics, including the creation of the world, reincarnation, abstinence, and the possibility of a universal religion. Goshtab identifies numerous parallels between the teachings and beliefs of the Āzar Kayvān school and those of earlier historians and philosophers. One illustrative example is the principle of reincarnation, which is a central tenet of Āzar Kayvān and his followers (p. 165). The author cites a passage from *Sharestān* on reincarnation and posits that the text represents a concise summary of Suhrawardi's commentary on the subject (p. 167). Furthermore, the author suggests that these ideas were additionally shaped by the influence of other Muslim thinkers (pp. 168–75). Another significant aspect of their belief system is the reliance on the *Dasātīr*, the heavenly book of Āzar Kayvān's followers written in an invented language known as *Āsmānī* (pp. 161–89). Goshtab highlights the emphasis of *Dabestān* on the teachings of Zoroaster, which are conveyed in a mysterious language (Avesta and *Zand*) that people can read but cannot fully comprehend. However, she fails to acknowledge the argument put forth by Sheffield[1] prior to her book, which posits that the writings of Āzar Kayvān followers' exhibit a structural resemblance to Zoroastrian sacred books.

Goshtasb's study offers a comprehensive account of Āzar Kayvān's biography and his contribution to medieval Iran and India. Although the introduction is clear, the overall conclusion is lacking. It is evident that the author's objective in writing this book is to argue that there is no evidence to substantiate the claim that Āzar Kayvān was a Zoroastrian. This argument is repeatedly emphasized throughout the book. Furthermore, she underscores the impact of the Mughal Indian milieu and the pivotal role of Persian nationalism in the ideologies of Āzar Kayvān and his followers. To reinforce this argument, the author could have referred to the previously mentioned study of Sheffield on the influence of the *Hurufi* and *Nuqutawi* schools in Safavid Iran on the genesis of the Āzar Kayvān school.[2]

Although Goshtab's book is well researched, it regrettably lacks a comprehensive structure and a clearly delineated methodology for assessing the credibility of its sources. For instance, none of the chapters in this book includes a conclusion or a clearly articulated argument to guide the reader through the book. Moreover, Chapter Two contains a lengthy list, including the names of Āzar Kayvān's followers and their writings. Goshtasb does not include the majority of the cited literature in this chapter in her subsequent analysis. This is because the writings lack clear dates, rendering them unreliable as historical documents. The allocation of so many pages to this list is, therefore, arguably unnecessary, particularly when one considers the potential benefits of including it in a table format. Nonetheless, this book offers an extensive and detailed examination of Āzar Kayvān and his school, a field that has received scant attention from Iranian scholars.

1 Daniel J. Sheffield, "The Language of Heaven in Safavid Iran: Speech and Cosmology in the Thought of Āẕar Kaivān and His Followers," in *No Tapping Around Philology: A Festschrift in Honor of Wheeler McIntosh Thackston Jr.'s 70th Birthday*, ed. Alireza Korangy and Daniel J. Sheffield (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2014), 161–83.

2 Sheffield, "Language of Heaven," 161–83.