



# ĀB I. THE CONCEPT OF WATER IN ANCIENT IRANIAN CULTURE

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Zoroastrians, it has been said, could as justly be termed worshippers of water as of fire; and in revering this element they plainly continued an even more ancient tradition. The ancient Iranians respected water as the source of life, which nourished plants, animals, and men. In their cosmology water was the second of the seven “creations” (Pahl. *dahišnān*) into which the world was divided. Water filled the lower half of the spherical “sky,” all of it thus lying beneath the earth. There was one great sea, called in Avestan Vourukaša (Pahl. Varkaš or Fraxvkard), which was “the gathering place of the waters.”<sup>1</sup> *Vd.* 21.15. This was fed by a mythical river, \*Harahvatī Arədvī Sūrā (see ANĀHĪD i. Ardwišūr Anāhīd); and two other rivers flowed out from it, the Vaṇhvī Dāityā (Pahl. Veh Dāiti or Veh Rōd) to the east and the Raṇha (Arang) to the west. According to *Bundahišn* 11.100.2 and 28.8, these rivers, which encircle the earth, were cleansed in the tidal sea Pūtika (Pahl. Pūtīk); and their waters then flowed back into Vourukaša.<sup>2</sup> *Vd.* 5.18-19; *Bd.* 10.8-9. In the center of Vourukaša rose the mountain Us.həndava, around whose summit gathered vapors which were scattered as rain clouds.<sup>3</sup> *Bd.* 9.8. Hence all the water that flowed in or descended on the earth came from Vourukaša, and the smallest spring or dewdrop could be regarded as representing the whole creation of water. Since the creation was essential to their life, the ancient Iranians evidently made



offerings to it, to keep it pure and vivifying.

The use of water in libations has continued in Zoroastrianism up to the present (see Āb-zōhr). It is poured on the ground before a sacrifice or at the beginning of certain acts of worship. Because of its sacredness it should never be drawn from well or stream during hours of darkness, which are demon-haunted; nor can *āb-zōhr* ever be offered by night. Apart from the *āb-zōhr*, made directly to water itself, other sacrifices (including the blood sacrifice) were offered to divinities connected with water, namely, Ābān, Apām Napāt, and Arədvī Sūrā. In Zoroaster's own teachings the creation of water was assigned to the guardianship of Haurvatāt (*Hordād*); its ancient sanctity was thus reinforced.

See also [Āb-zōhr](#), [Ābān](#), [Āban Māh](#), [Ābān Yašt](#).

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