



## ĀTAŠ-ZŌHR

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**ĀTAŠ-ZŌHR**, or *ātaš-zōr* (Persian *zōr-e ātaš*, a Middle Persian term for the Zoroastrian ritual offering to fire of fat from a sacrificial animal, in which the fat caused the flames to leap up, and itself dissolved completely. The rite, now abandoned, appears to go back to at least the Indo-Iranian period, i.e., to at least the third millennium B.C., since the same offering (characteristically of the omentum, one of the fattiest parts of the entrails) was made also by the Brahmins of India (see J. Schwab, *Das altindische Thieropfer*, Erlangen, 1886, pp. 112f.; H. Oldenberg, *Die Religion des Veda*, 2nd ed., Berlin, 1917, repr. 1970, pp. 358-60). The ritual thus long pre-dates the founding of Zoroastrian temple fires, and presumably has its origin in the rewarding of the spirit of the hearth fire for cooking the household meal. Cf. *Ātaš Niyāyišn*, v. 8, where the *zōhr* is referred to as the “meal” (*-piθwa-*) of the fire. (Down to the early twentieth century the Zoroastrians of Iran followed the ancient custom of eating meat only from an animal that had been ritually sacrificed. This custom can be traced among the Parsis also down to early modern times, see the *Sanskrit Ślokas* of Aka Adhyasu, v. 10, apud M. Boyce, *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism*, Manchester UP, 1985, p. 123).

The earliest historical reference to the *ātaš-zōhr* is by Strabo, who, writing around the beginning of the Christian era, reports of the Persians (15.3.14) that “to fire they offer sacrifice by adding dry wood without the bark and by placing fat on top of it.” Some writers, he says (15.3.13), describe the fat as being a portion of the omentum. Another independent attestation of the practice is provided by a Middle Persian Manichean text of the Sasanian



period (M 95 V 1-6. see *Mir. Man.* II, pp. 28-29 [319-20] and W. B. Henning, *BSOAS* 11, 1943, p. 217 n. 7). There are numerous references to the rite in the Pahlavi books, some dateless, others (as in the writings of Manuščihr) belonging to the post-Sasanian period. From these references it appears that the rite was obligatory on the following occasions: at the enthronement of an *Ātaš Bahrām*, and regularly thereafter in the maintenance of this most sacred of temple fires; at each of the six *gāhāmbār*s; at the ceremony at dawn of the fourth day after death (see *čahārom*); at the still ill-defined *hamāg-dēn* ceremony; at various rites of expiation for grievous sins; and in thank-offering for the birth of a son (and presumably after other highly auspicious events). The offering might on occasion be made to any “fire of Ohrmazd,” i.e., any pure fire, a hearth or ritual one as well as temple fire. *Zōhr* might not be given which had been “robbed and carried off” (*duzīdag ud appurdag*), i.e., taken from a stolen animal. Cost ensured that the offering was usually from a sheep or goat; but *zōhr* from any creature of Bahman, i.e. any “clean” animal, was acceptable. Sheep, goat, pig, donkey, and cow are explicitly mentioned in connection with the *ātaš-zōhr* in Pahlavi and Persian Zoroastrian texts (see Boyce, “Ātaš-zōhr,” pp. 103-05); and horse, cow, and sheep sacrifices are repeatedly referred to in the Avesta.

Religious services performed with animal sacrifice were termed *pad zōhr*, and to provide for their celebration was held to be highly meritorious. Indeed, in the list of the “four best things” revealed by Ohrmazd to Zoroaster the second is “to give to fire fuel, incense and *zōhr*” (*ātaxš ēzm bōy ud zōhr dādan*, B. N. Dhabhar, ed., *The Pahlavi Rivayat accompanying the Dādīstān ī Dīnīk*, Bombay, 1913, chap. VIII, p. 11; E. W. West, tr., *SBE* XVIII, p. 417). In another text it is said that fire in its bodily form requires these three things of its servitors, as they in turn look to it in its spirit form for protection from powers of evil (see A. Barthelemy, ed. and tr., *Gujastak Abalish*, Paris, 1887, chap. VI.15-16).

Offerings of the *ātaš-zōhr* on most of the occasions listed above are attested in modern times. In the seventeenth century the Italian traveler J. F. Gemelli recorded the offering of “the fat of a sheep’s tail” to a temple fire in Isfahan (see Awnsham Churchill, *A Collection of Voyages and Travels*, London, 1704, IV, p. 143a); and in a long Gujarati song composed to celebrate the founding of the Bhagarīa Ātaš Bahrām at Navsari in A.D. 1765 there are adjurations to “bring a pair of goats . . . slaughter a goat for the Ātaš Bahrām” (see S. H. Chikan, *Pārsī strī garbā*, Bombay, 1879, pp. 346, 352). Animal sacrifice with *zōhr* was still performed by traditional Zoroastrians in Iran at religious services for the six



*gāhāmbārs* well into the present century; and in the nineteenth century M. Haug had found this practice still a living memory among Parsi priests (see his *Essays*, 3rd ed., London, 1884, p. 281). The offering of the *ātaš-zōhr* for the dawn-ceremony of the *čahārom* persisted in both branches of the Zoroastrian community well into the present century. Anquetil du Perron refers to the practice in Surat in the eighteenth century, with fat from a sheep (*Zend Avesta, ouvrage de Zoroastre*, Paris, 1771, II, pp. 586-87); and in 1823 the Bhagaria Anjoman of Navsari, answering an inquiry from Parsis in Bombay, laid it down that this observance was so important that maintaining it overrode the keeping of one of the Zoroastrian non-slaughtering days, should the death-ceremony and such a day coincide. The *zōhr*, it was then declared, was to be offered to an *Ātaš Bahrām* or an *Ātaš-e Ādorān*, together with frankincense and aloewood. In Surat the *čahārom* offering, from a white sheep or goat, was still made by Parsi priestly families in the 1930s; and the practice was continued a little longer in Zoroastrian villages around Yazd. As for the usage on auspicious occasions, in a Gujarati song which Parsi women of Navsari used to sing on the third day of wedding ceremonies, there is again the exhortation to “Bring a pair of goats, offer sacrifice to the *Ātaš Bahrām*” (see Chikan, op. cit., p. 407). Nowadays the conscious substitution is made on all these occasions of incense or fragrant woods.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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See also Avesta, tr. Darmesteter, I, p. lxvi; II, pp. 154, 254 n. 69.

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M. Boyce, “*Ātaš-zōhr* and *Āb-zōhr*,” *JRAS*, 1966, pp. 100-10.

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