



## ĀΘRAVAN-

---

**ĀΘRAVAN-** (Avestan) “priest” (strong stem *āθravan-*, weak stem *aθaurun-*), Mid. Pers. *āsrōn*. Its Vedic counterpart is *átharvan-* (for the phonetic development of *\*aθarvan-* to *āθravan-*, cf. Vedic *aramati-*, but Av. *ārmaiti*). Attempts have been made to connect the term with Avestan *ātar-* “fire” (not attested in Vedic); but these have been prompted by what is probably a mistaken assumption of the importance of fire in the ancient Indo-Iranian religion. The evidence points rather to fire having acquired such importance later, in India through the part played by fire (*agni-*) in the cult, in Iran through Zoroaster’s reform. Even in Zoroastrianism, however, the temple cult of fire does not appear to have been established until the fourth century B.C. (see further under *ātaš*); and it was only with the development of this cult that priests were appointed whose sole office was tending the sacred fire. The probability is therefore that the word *āθravan* has a different derivation. (H. W. Bailey, *TPS*, 1956, pp. 88-90, has suggested connection with Av. *āθi-* “terror.” The *āθravan* could then be assumed to be in origin an apotropaic, one able to ward off supernatural evil.)

In the Avesta, *āθravan* is regularly used to designate the priests as a social “class,” one of the three into which ancient Iranian society was theoretically divided; and in the pious schematizations by which the “classes” were related to the prophet himself, homage is offered to Zoroaster as “the first priest (*paoiryāi aθaurune*), the first warrior, the first herdsman” (*Yašt* 13.88). The priests as a group were further set under the symbolic leadership of his eldest son, Isaṭ.vāstra, Pahlavi Isadvāstr (*Bundahišn*, p. 235.7-13; tr. chap. 35-56,



*Indian Bundahišn*, ed. F. Justi, Leipzig, 1868, repr. Hildesheim and New York, 1976, tr. p. 45, text p. 79). Apart from these artificial associations, the tradition recognizes Zoroaster as having in fact been an *āθravan* (see *Yašt* 13.94), while in the *Gāthās* he refers to himself as a *zaotar*, that is, as a fully qualified priest, one able to solemnize all ritual acts.

The oldest attestation of the word *āθravan* is in the *Yasna Haptanḡhāiti*, where the worshippers honor “the return of the priests who go afar (to those who) seek righteousness in other lands,” that is, it seems to *āθravans* acting as Zoroastrian missionaries (*Y.* 42.6). In due course, by their endeavors, Zoroastrianism, first established in eastern Iran, reached western Iran also, to be adopted there by the hereditary priests of the Medes and the Persians, known to the Greco-Roman world as the “magi.” Accordingly under the Achaemenids the standard word in western Iran for a Zoroastrian priest came to be *magu*. Under the Parthians, who represented an eastern tradition, an old Avestan term, *aēθrapati*, meaning apparently a learned priest or teacher, seems to have been widely used, in the form *ērbed* (*ēhrbed*), as an honorific for a leading priest, side by side with Middle Persian *magbed* (*mogbed*) “chief priest;” and these two words, in their later forms of *hērbad/ērvad* and *mōbad*, survive as the titles of Zoroastrian priests today. The Pahlavi term *āsrōn* or *āsrō* (a learned descendant of *aθravā*, cf. *ašō* “righteous” from *ašavā*) is never recorded as a title; but it occurs frequently in the Pahlavi books, always, it seems, in connection with priests as a social “class,” with the abstract *āsrōrōnīh* denoting the priestly office. As *athornan* the Avestan word is regularly used by Parsi priests to denote a member of their own fraternity, and it is sometimes rendered by them into English as “fire priest.”

The term is not attested in Old Persian (like many other Zoroastrian terms); however, it has been proposed to interpret several words in Elamite script from the Persepolis treasury and fortification tablets as transcriptions of an Old Pers. *\*aθarva*, thus I. Gershevitch in the case of Elam. *ad-da-ir-ma* and *at-tar-ru-ma*, *ha-tur-ma* and *at-tur-ma* (*an-tar-ma*), and *at-sa-ir-ma* (*at-sa-ma*) (in *Studia Classica et Orientalia Antonino Pagliaro Oblata*, Rome, 1969, pp. 189f.; *TPS*, 1969, pp. 186f.; see also M. Mayrhofer, *Onomastica Persepolitana*, Vienna, 1973, nos. 8.14, 148, 499; and W. Hinz, *Altiranisches Sprachgut der Nebenüberlieferungen*, Wiesbaden, 1975, p. 50); and *ha-tur-ma-bat-ti-iš* (and other spellings), which he interprets as *\*aθarva-patiš* (*TPS*, 1969, p. 170; cf. Hinz, op. cit., p. 50). However, in view of the ambiguity inherent in the Elamite rendering of Iranian words a possible etymology does not alone prove the



correctness of an interpretation otherwise unsupported, e.g., by the context—note Gershevitch's first interpretation of Elam. *ad-da-ir-ma* as \**a-darma-* “the undiminishing” (*StudiaClassica*, p. 189)—so that the only certain attestations of the term in Iranian are in the Zoroastrian scriptures, the Avesta and the Pahlavi books.

See also [Class system](#).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

See also *AirWb.*, cols. 65-66.

M. Mayrhofer, *A Concise Etymological Sanskrit Dictionary* III, 1974, p. 626.

Modi, *Ceremonies*, index s.v. *athornan*.