



AVESTAN PEOPLE

AVESTAN PEOPLE. The term Avestan people is used here to include both Zoroaster's own tribe, with that of his patron, Kavi Vištāspa, and those peoples settled in Eastern Iran who, though not all "Avestan" speaking, were "of the Avesta" in that they shared in transmitting, and in part composing, the holy texts. Of these texts, the linguistically later ones were handed down in fluid oral transmission—it seems well into the Achaemenian era—and reflect accordingly social conditions from over a long period, often anachronistically blended. Only Zoroaster's *Gāthās*, strictly memorized from the time of their composition, provide evidence for a particular period and place; but since they form only a small body of texts, their data have generally been interpreted in the light of more abundant Younger Avestan materials.

With regard to Old Avestan society, i.e., that reflected in the *Gāthās*, W. Geiger, studying it in the nineteenth century, saw it as a simple, archaic one, divided essentially between priests and other men, with "every peasant . . . at the same time a fighting man, who was ready to defend his property against enemies in times of danger" (*Civilization of the Eastern Iranians in Ancient Times*, tr. D. P. Sanjana, London, 1886, II, p. 64). Subsequent linguistic studies established that the "other men" were not in fact peasant-farmers but cattle-tending pastoralists, Zoroaster's terms for them being "herdsman, pasturer" (*vāstrya*, *vāstar*, *vāstrya fšuyant*). Archaeologists have shown that some farming was practiced on the Inner Asian steppes (presumed to be the homeland of the proto-Indo-Iranians) already in the third millennium B.C., as well as a mixed pastoralism (with cows, sheep, goats, camels, and horses); but a parallel has



repeatedly been drawn in this respect between the Indo-Iranians and certain East African tribes, who also have a mixed pastoral economy, but for whom too the cow is of unique social and even religious importance (see B. Lincoln, *Priests, Warriors and Cattle*, University of California Press, 1981, pp. 13ff. with nn. 38-40 for earlier studies). These African tribes are likewise divided into two social groups, priests and warrior-herdsmen. The Younger Avestan people recognized, however, three social divisions, priests, warriors, and herdsmen-farmers (*āθravan*, *raθaēštar*, *vāstryō.fšuyant*); and attempts were subsequently made to transfer this clearly and frequently articulated pattern to Old Avestan society also, notably by supposing that *nar* “man,” used on occasion, it seems, by Zoroaster (Y. 28.8) to mean “brave man, hero,” could also (Y. 48.10, cf. 40.3), mean in the plural specifically “warriors,” and so be a class-designation (see C. Bartholomae, *AirWb.*, col. 1048; E. Benveniste, “Les classes sociales dans la tradition avestique,” *JA*, 1932, p. 122; contra, M. Boyce, “The Bipartite Society of the Ancient Iranians,” in *Societies and Languages of the Ancient Near East: Studies in Honour of I. M. Diakonoff*, ed. M. A. Dandamayev et al., Warminster, 1982, pp. 33-34; J. Narten, *Der Yasna Haptanhāiti*, Wiesbaden, 1986, pp. 276-79). In 1930 G. Dumézil put forward the theory that the tripartite divisions of Younger Avestan and Vedic society shared a proto-Indo-Iranian origin, despite the wholly different terminology (Vedic *brahmán*, *kṣatriya*, *vaśīya*) (“La préhistoire indo-iranienne des castes,” *JA*, 1930, pp. 109-30). Ergo, Gathic society must have known the same divisions, even if again differently named. Against Dumézil, E. C. Polomé maintained that a classless society would have been characteristic generally of Indo-European peoples in their pastoral period: “The trifunctional hierarchization of society . . . [has] to be viewed diachronically as part of a dynamic process of development In the older pastoral society, we rather expect *unranked* descent groups. As the community grows and *diversifies*, the extended family “swarms” for economic reasons; moving to establish new settlements leads to profound social changes with ranked descent groups and full-time craft specialization” (“Indo-European Culture, with Special Attention to Religion,” in E. C. Polomé, ed., *The Indo-Europeans in the Fourth and Third Millennia*, Michigan, 1982, p. 170). The *Gāthās* appear indeed to mirror ancient Iranian society still at this pastoral stage, the community of “cattle and men” (*pasu vira*, Y. 31.15, 45.9), experiencing violent changes but not yet driven to the “swarming” represented by the great migrations from the steppes southwards into Iran, which led, it seems, to the evolution of social classes (with a parallel but independent development in Vedic India).



For the priesthood the *Gāthās* yield, frequently, the word *karapan*, generally held to designate ordinary working priests who performed rituals and were castigated by Zoroaster (presumably because they were hostile to his teachings and supported those whom he regarded as wicked); once, *zaotar*, for an officiating priest (Y. 33.6); and, repeatedly, *māθran*, for one uttering inspired words. *Usig* also occurs once, on which see below. There is nothing to indicate whether or not the priesthood was hereditary; but the *Gāthās* attest the existence of a learned, subtle, technically complex religious poetry, whose cultivation clearly required years of study. (The widespread composition also of secular oral poetry may be assumed from allusions in the Younger Avesta to ancient epic themes.)

The *Gāthās* have two series of terms for social groupings. One is *xvaētu* “family,” *vərəzəna* “community,” *airyaman* “clan” (Y. 32.1; 33.3; 46.1; 49.7). (Attempts to equate this series with YAv. *āθravan*, *raθaēštar*, *vāstryō.fšuyant* were justly criticized by Benveniste, art. cit., pp. 121-22.) The other is *dāmāna* “dwelling,” *vīs* “settlement,” *šōiθra* “district,” *dahyu* “land” (Y. 31.18, cf. 31.16, 46.4). The last term presumably defined that region lived in or wandered over by related clans. There are no allusions to towns or commerce. Payments for services were by gifts of livestock (cf. Y. 44.18; 46.19). The importance of family and communal ties is emphasized particularly in Y. 53.4, where the prophet pledges his daughter, on marrying, to serve not only father and husband but also “herdsmen and family” (*vāstryaēibyō aṭčā xʷaētaovē*); and in Y. 46.1, where he grieves at his own exclusion from “family and clan” (*xʷaētəuš airyamanascā*). The existence of a code of laws (*dāta-*), regulating presumably both individual and communal actions, is expressly indicated in Y. 51.14; and Zoroaster makes recurrent use of the concepts of judgment and judging, wrongdoing and punishment, and draws frequently on that of the judicial ordeal by fire and by molten metal (Y. 30.7; 31.3, 19; 43.4; 47.6; 51.9).

The form of wrongdoing uppermost in his thought was evidently that of violent attack by “slayers of men, harmers of men,” on “(peacefully)-dwelling settlements” (Y. 53.8; cf. 48.10). These cruel assailants of law-abiding (*ašavan-*) herdsmen are led by “fury” (*aešma-*, Y. 29.1; 30.6; 48.7; 49.4); and as well as killing, they steal and rob (Y. 32.14), and above all harm and carry off cattle (e.g., Y. 29.1, 51.14). They are under the authority of “evil rulers” (*dušəxšaθra-*, Y. 48.10), wicked lords who themselves plunder the just man (Y. 30.11); and they are aided by priests—the *karapan* and *usig* (Y. 44.20). The latter was perhaps employed to perform special rites to bring martial success, cf. Vedic



uśij (see Lincoln, op. cit., pp. 61-62), and presumably shared in the spoils of a raid. Zoroaster uses no specific term for the raiders themselves (who are evidently fellow-Iranians), but defines them negatively as “non-herdsmen” (*avāstrya-*, Y. 31.10), “non-pastors” (*afšuyant-*, Y. 49.4), seeing them, it seems, as those who had broken away from the accepted social order to live ruthlessly from plunder alone (Y. 31.15). This suggests that for the “Gathic” people such lawless raiding was a recent phenomenon, a breach with established ways.

A terminus post quem for this social upheaval is provided by Zoroaster’s use in metaphor of “yoked” (i.e., harnessed) horses, racing ahead (Y. 50.7, cf. 30.10) and of “charioteer” (*raiθī-*, Y. 50.6). The horse-drawn chariot was evolved in the Near East early in the second millennium B.C. (see M. A. Littauer and J. H. Crouwel, “Wheeled Vehicles and Ridden Animals in the Ancient Near East,” in *HO VII.1.2.B.1*, Leiden, 1979, pp. 51ff.), and chariotry was then developed, it seems, by diverse peoples there, including the Indo-Aryan aristocrats of Mitanni, with chariot-riding noblemen coming to be widely known as *maryanni/maryannu*. F. C. Andreas suggested a possible connection here with Vedic *márya*, meaning primarily “young man” (see apud H. Winckler, *OLZ*, 1910, p. 291 with n. 1); and debate continues as to whether the Mitannian word is indeed Indo-Aryan acc. plur. *máryān* with a Hurrian suffix, or a purely Hurrian word, accidentally similar to *márya* in form and meaning (see Littauer and Crouwel, op. cit., pp. 68-71 with n. 93 for the literature). One of the specific meanings of Vedic *márya*, and its Av. cognate *mairya*, was “fighting man, warrior;” and this meaning probably attached already to proto-Indo-Iranian **marya*. As a fighter, the Vedic *márya* rode in a chariot (see W.F. Albright, “Mitannian Maryannu, “chariot-warrior”. . . ,” *Archiv für Orientforschung*, 1931, p. 220; S. Wikander, *Der arische Männerbund*, Lund, 1938, pp. 22ff.); and this was probably true also of Av. Fraŋrasyan (who lived before Zoroaster, see [AFRASĪĀB](#)) and of Arəjaṭ.aspa (the prophet’s contemporary), both fighting chieftains for whom *mairya* is a fixed epithet. Before the Bronze Age reached the Asian steppes (from ca. 1700 B.C.), the *márya/mairya*, i.e., the young warrior-herdsmen, had fought necessarily on foot, with the hunter-herdsman’s ancient weapons: club, sling-stones, bow, and arrows. With more effective, and costly, bronze weapons, and the also costly chariot (giving mobility), social revolution came to the steppes. The earliest known chariots there, from “not later than 1500 B.C.,” were found in the Sintashta graves, in the Chelyabinsk region on the eastern flank of the Central Urals (see V. F. Gening, “Le champ funéraire de Sintachta et le problème des anciennes tribus indo-iranniennes,” *Sovetskaya Arkheologiya*,



1977, 4, pp. 53-75, with French summary). The excavators found several reasons to identify the Sintashta community (which supported itself by pastoralism, with a little farming) as Iranian; and there is diversity there in ways of disposing of the corpse (i.e., burial both of the integral body, and of disarticulated bones after excarnation) which suggests differing beliefs about the afterlife, such as might have provided the seedbed for Zoroaster's new teachings. There is also a lack of any sign of class-divisions. In the associated settlement there were only large communal houses; and in the cemetery, pit-graves of the one kind were made for all alike. The presence of chariots in four tombs show that there were individuals with the means and enterprise to acquire and maintain such vehicles; but they were apparently no more than leading members of a still essentially homogeneous society. The *Gāthās* suggest, however, that gradually more and more *mairyas* (some perhaps returned mercenaries from Near Eastern wars, cf. H. M. Chadwick, *The Heroic Age*, Cambridge, 1911, pp. 444ff.) acquired chariots and the new bronze weaponry, and, attaching themselves to war-lords, the *dušəxšaθra* of Y. 48.10, began to live by plundering their fellows. Thus, it seems, were created the conditions for the Iranian Heroic Age, which, like any other, had its dark and brutal side. Eventually many Iranian tribes, some doubtless impoverished (this was also, apparently, a period of drought on the steppes, see H. H. Lamb, *Climate, History and the Modern World*, London. 1982, pp. 132-40), "swarmed," probably from around 1200-1000 B.C., moving south into Iran.

During the course of these events the more warlike "Younger Avestan" society evolved. Priest-poets equipped the gods themselves with war-chariots, and entreated them repeatedly for help in battle; and the chariot-riding *mairyas* established their social dominance. A new term was coined for these now professional fighting men, *raθaēštar*, "one standing in a chariot;" and *mairya* in the sense of "warrior" was superseded by it, as Vedic *márya* was by *kṣatríya*. (Both words survive with this meaning only in certain fixed usages.) These facts were obscured for Wikander (op. cit.) because he subordinated his study of the *mairya/márya* to trying to establish the existence of a hypothetical Indo-Iranian institution, the "Männerbund." He ignored both the *Gāthās* (because the word *mairya* does not occur in them) and archaeological evidence; and treated Iranian society as static, simply projecting Bronze Age conditions back into the early second millennium, and assuming (with others) that a professional warrior-class had existed already then. In this he was followed by Lincoln, op. cit. (For a more detailed discussion of both their works see Boyce, "Priests, Cattle and Men," *BSOAS* 50/3, 1987.) Their findings



were largely accepted by G. Gnoli (see his *Zoroaster's Time and Homeland*, Naples, 1980, index s.v. "Männerbund"), who sought to place Zoroaster in Eastern Iran about 1000 B.C., i.e., after the main migrations, thus again making no distinction between Old and Younger Avestan society (op. cit., pp. 59ff.; *De Zoroastre à Mani*, Paris, 1985, pp. 15ff.); but, all other considerations apart, it would be strange if at that epoch immigrant Iranians had been savagely raiding one another, instead of seeking to subdue the alien peoples among whom they then found themselves.

In the *Gāthās* women figure as dependent socially on men (father, husband) whom they look after (Y. 53.4), but as spiritually their equals (Y. 46.10). The Avestan people had a short initiation rite which in pre-Zoroastrian days had probably been undergone only by youths, being then as much social as religious, marking entry into adult life (see Geiger, op. cit., I, pp. 58-59). In Zoroastrianism this rite is essentially religious, and so is administered to both sexes. It is first attested in the Younger Avesta, but may reasonably be presumed to be old. It was performed at fifteen (*Vd.* 18.54, 58-59), which was regarded as the ideal age (cf. e.g., *Yt.* 8.13; Y. 9.5); and it consisted essentially of investing the candidate with a sacred girdle (*aiwyānhana-*) to be worn thereafter day and night, but untied and retied with prayers at prescribed moments. The rite remained common to priests and to the laity of both Young Avestan classes (Wikander, op. cit., pp. 67ff., was unable to produce any evidence for his postulated separate "warrior" initiation); and this is a further indication of the homogeneity of Old Avestan society. In that society marriage evidently followed on initiation, with, ideally, the speedy begetting of children, so that a man could hope to see his first grandson soon after he himself reached the ripe age of thirty. The Avestan people attached immense importance to lineage, and venerated the souls of their ancestors (see [FRAVAŠI](#)), which they believed protected them if duly worshipped (*Yt.* 13.49-52; see further Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* I, pp. 119ff., with references). Such worship was carried out in the home; and the daily prayers were said either there, before the hearth fire, or in the open. The Avesta has no words for a consecrated building or temple fire. Communal worship, with merrymaking, took place at festivals scattered irregularly through the year, which, to judge from their Young Avestan names (see [GĀHĀMBĀR](#)), were associated originally with events in the pastoral and farming year. The tradition that "spring butter" (*zaramaya- raoyna-*) was the best of all foods (*Hāδōxt Nask* 2.38) clearly goes back to Old Avestan times, and the joy of a pastoral people in fresh products from their cows after winter's deprivations. The staple food then was



evidently meat (*pitu-*), cf. the expression *arām-piθwā* (Y. 44.5) “time for preparing meat,” i.e., midday, which again suggests dependence on flocks and herds.

The Younger Avesta, though preserving many archaic elements, reflects various stages of a later, more complex society, with a different social structure and economic basis. Known regions in Eastern Iran are named (see [AVESTAN GEOGRAPHY](#)), and the three classes are firmly established, their foundation being piously attributed to Zoroaster himself (Yt. 13.88). Although the term *vāstryō.fšuyant* is used for the third class, its dominant representative is now the farmer. The merit is stressed of irrigating, draining, tilling the soil, sowing corn, and cultivating fruits (Vd. 3.4, 23-31), since all these activities reduced barrenness, in which Anra Mainyu (see [AHRIMAN](#)) was held to rejoice. “Corn (*yava-*) shall man eat” Ahura Mazdā is made to declare (Vd. 5.20), which indicates the change from meat to bread as the basic diet. In Vd. 14.7-11 the equipment is listed proper to members of each class. That of the *vāstryō.fšuyant* includes a spade, plough, and winepress, while the *raθaēštār* has spear and sword and, instead of the chariot which gave him his name, a saddle and full armor. Riding began to replace the chariot in warfare from the ninth century B.C.; and the *yašts* duly contain references to mounted *raθaēštārs* (see I. Gershevitch, *The Avestan Hymn to Mithra*, Cambridge, 1959, repr. 1967, pp. 69-70). There is still no mention of town-life, but in a late passage a fourth class is recognized, that of the *hūiti*, the craftsman or artisan (Y. 19.17). This presumably included not only smiths, but also potters, weavers, and the like, all now become specialized workers. The use of metals was evidently steadily increasing, e.g., beside the traditional stone pestle and mortar (*hāvana-*) others of metal (*āyah-*) are mentioned (Y. 22.2); but payments were still reckoned in traditional manner in units of livestock (e.g., Vd. 9.37-38). In Vd. 7.41-42 a scale of rewards is listed for physician and surgeon; and here a donkey (*kaθwā-*) appears, a southern animal unknown of old on the steppes.

Indications of a more complex political organization, with perhaps at its apex a council of chiefs of diverse “lands” (*dahyu-*) occur in Yt. 10.18, 87, 145 (see Gershevitch, op. cit., pp. 296-99) with possibly, locally at least, a parallel priestly hierarchy (Yt. 10.115, with Gershevitch’s commentary, op. cit., p. 265). Daily life included a number of observances, developed on the basis of Zoroastrian dualism as means of repelling or reducing evil. One was the regular utterance of *bāj*; another the killing of *xrafstras*, noxious or repulsive



creatures such as snakes, frogs, ants, worms (*Vd.* 14.5-6), regarded as belonging to Anra Mainyu. The dog on the contrary was highly esteemed (*Vd.* 13.39-40, 44-49), probably since the Old Avestan pastoralists had relied on herd-dogs. There was also a wide-ranging code of purity laws (*Vd.* 3ff.). Some (e.g., those relating to contamination from a corpse, or a flow of blood) are of a kind found commonly in ancient or primitive societies, and may be presumed to have existed among the Old Avestan people. Others appear to have evolved under Zoroastrianism as yet another means of countering evil. There were also rituals for recovering lost purity, with an elaborate one, *barašnom*, for serious pollutions.

According to Zoroastrianism the active struggle against “evil” (physical, moral, and spiritual) was incumbent on every believer, and was best waged by the prosperous, provided they acted justly. A rich man was considered “better,” i.e., more effective, than a poor one, a man who had eaten than one who had fasted (*Vd.* 4.47-49), since they had more means and energy to combat what seemed wrong in the world, and to extend the good. It was meritorious also to marry and have children (see *ibid.*), who would carry on the good fight. The Younger Avestan people appear accordingly philo-progenitive, energetic and purposeful, confident that they, as followers of Zoroaster, had a divinely appointed part to play in improving the world, and that they were supported in it by *x^varənah* (see *FARR*), the heaven-sent power that made them superior to all other peoples (cf. *Yt.* 19.56; *Vd.* 19.39).

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