



## BARAŠNOM

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**BARAŠNOM**, the chief Zoroastrian purification rite, consisting of a triple cleansing, with *gōmēz* (cow's urine), dust, and water, followed by nine nights' seclusion, during which three simpler cleansings take place. The rite is administered by a "purifier," Av. *yaoždāθrya-*, Pahl. *yōjdāhragar*. The cleansings are from head to foot, hence its Pahl./Persian name, from Av. *barəšnu-*, "head"; but, as this is true also of lesser purifications, the rite's full, distinctive name is *barašnom-e nō-šaba* (Darī *nō-šwa*) "*barašnom* of the nine nights." The Parsis term it *barašnom-nāhn* "the *barašnom* washing," or simply *nāhn*.

The rite is described in detail (but not named) in *Vd.* 8.37-72, more briefly in *Vd.* 9.1-37, its expressed purpose there being to cleanse those polluted by contact with *nasā*, carrion. It was administered on clean, barren ground, 30 paces from fire, water, and the *barəsmān* (see [barsom](#)). Nine shallow pits, *maγa-*, were dug in a straight line from north to south, so that the polluted person (Pers. *rīmanī*) moved from the direction of hell to that of heaven (Pahl. *Vd.* 9.32). The first six pits were a pace apart, but a gap of three paces separated them from the last three. A furrow, *karšā-*, was drawn round all nine pits, and twelve more furrows, in sets of three, inside it, the last three pits being again somewhat separated by this means. (For a plan see J. Darmesteter, *Le Zend-Avesta* II, opposite p. 102.) Stones, clods, potsherds, or pieces of wood were placed within the outer furrow before the first pit, and after the ninth, and also in the gap between the sixth and seventh pits, so that the *rīmanī*'s feet never touched the good earth (*Vd.* 9.11). The *yaoždāθrya* stood outside the



furrows, reciting Avesta, beginning with Y. 49.10.3. First he poured *gōmēz* into a metal pot fixed to the end of a rod with nine “knots,” Pahl. *nō-grih*, and reached this to the *rīmanī*, who rubbed his hands with it and then every part of his body, from head to foot, finally reciting the *Ahunwar* and *Kəm-nā Mazdā* (Vd. 9.27). This process was repeated in the next five pits, with a dog being shown the *rīmanī* after each cleansing, evidently to aid the expulsion of evil. Between the sixth and seventh pits the *rīmanī* dried his body with fifteen applications of dust, then in the last three pits the *yaoždāθrya* handed water to him, with which he rubbed himself all over, once in the seventh pit, twice in the eighth, thrice in the ninth (Vd. 9.31). Finally, on the stones beyond the ninth pit the *yaoždāθrya* censed him, and putting on fresh clothes he retired to a place of seclusion (Pahl. *armēštgāh*, Persian *barašnom-kāna*, Parsi *nāhn-kāna*). There on the fourth, seventh, and tenth mornings he bathed body and clothes with *gōmēz* and water, regaining thereby full purity.

In the ninth century A.D. Zādspram, *mōbad* of Serkān in Fārs, sought to substitute for this rite a simpler one described in Vd. 8.99-103; but his brother Manuščihr, the Persian high priest, suppressed this attempted innovation. (See *The Epistles of Manuščihr*, ed. B. N. Dhabhar, Bombay, 1912; tr. E. W. West, *SBE* XVIII, pp. 279-366, with appendices IV and V, pp. 431-58.) Detailed descriptions in the *Persian Rivayats* show the rite being administered thereafter in close accord with the *Vendidad* prescriptions (ed. Unvala, I, pp. 586-88, 594-99; tr. Dhabhar, pp. 360, 369-77). The most notable changes were that the pits had been replaced by sets of stones (in fives and threes), laid on the ground; and the arrangement of the twelve inner furrows was slightly altered. (For a plan see *Persian Rivayats*, ed. Unvala, I, p. 587; tr. West, *SBE* XVIII, p. 435.) A walled, round enclosure was now used, the *barašnomgāh*, Parsi *barsingō* (see A. V. W. Jackson, *Persia Past and Present*, New York, 1906, p. 383; M. Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* I, p. 314 n. 114; *A Persian Stronghold of Zoroastrianism*, Oxford, 1977, pp. 112-13, 118). Among the Parsis the arrangement of the stones differs again slightly (for plans see *Persian Rivayats*, ed. Unvala, I, pp. 588, 600), and they are aligned west to east (see P. K. Anklesaria, “The Direction of the Arrangement of Stones in the Barašnūm-gāh in Iran and India,” in *Sir J. J. Zarhoshti Madressa Centenary Volume*, Bombay, 1967, pp. 162-64). Nowadays the Parsi *barsingō* is usually a rectangular yard within the precinct of a fire temple.

The *Persian Rivayats* and other Zoroastrian Persian writings indicate extensive use of the *barašnom*. Every member of the community was required to



undergo the rite at least once, to cleanse the pollutions of birth (*Ṣad dar naṭr*, chap. 36.1-2, and *Ṣad dar Bondaheš*, chap. 72, ed. B. N. Dhabhar, Bombay, 1909; cf. *Vd.* 19.33); and this was general practice in the Iranian community down to the early twentieth century (see Boyce, *Persian Stronghold*, pp. 111-12, 113, and cf. pp. 125, 126-27). For women the rite was administered by women of priestly family, with a priest reciting the Avestan prayers within earshot. Contact with *nasā* and other forms of pollution necessitated the rite, and it was part of the preparation required of converts (*Persian Rivayats*, ed. Unvala, I, p. 282; tr. Dhabhar, p. 276). Every priest had to undergo *barašnom* before being initiated *hērbad* and *mōbad*, and again before solemnizing the highest rituals. This remains the custom today; but in India the **Bhagarias** of Bombay began for some reason withholding the rite from the laity there in the mid-eighteenth century. Yet nearly a hundred years later, a Parsi recorded, “it was not rare to see [lay] persons, both male and female, themselves going through the ceremony” (J. J. Modi, *Persian Farziāt Nāmeḥ . . . of Dastur Darab Pahlan*, Bombay, 1924, p. 16 n. 2). Nowadays in India it is almost entirely restricted to priests, who undergo it both for their own purity, and vicariously for lay persons. In Iran it remains theoretically available to all, but there is now a shortage of qualified *yōjdāhragars*. Reformists in both communities reject the rite.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Given in the text. See also H. Anquetil-Duperron, *Zend-Avesta*, Paris, 1771, II, pp. 545-48.

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For further photographs see S. S. Hartmann, *Parsism; The Religion of*



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