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BURIAL III. IN ZOROASTRIANISM

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The Zoroastrian faith teaches that the earth, one of the seven holy creations, belongs to the *aməša spənta* Spəntā Ārmaitī "Bounteous Devotion." Death being regarded as an evil brought about by Aŋra Mainyu (Ahriman), the Destructive Spirit, the corpse of a holy creature, particularly man or dog, is considered to be greatly infested by the *druj* Nasu, the creature of the Lie called Corpse-matter. Burial of "corpse matter" (*nasā-nigānīh*) would defile the earth (in the *Sad dar*, chap. 33, it is said that Spandārmad shudders when a corpse is buried) and was therefore prohibited. Equally, to exhume buried corpses was regarded as meritorious (*Vd.* 3.12).

Cremation, too, was an early practice, and Zoroastrianism similarly prohibits the defilement of the sacred creation of fire by corpse matter; one of the twenty-one kinds of fire purified in the consecration of the highest grade of temple fire, the Ātaxš ī Bahrām, is a fire used for cremation (presumably, by non-Zoroastrians, from whom it is to be rescued; see Mistree, pp. 96-99). Most human communities are particularly conservative in matters of funerary rites, so, although instances of cremation appear to have been rare in historical times, elaborate and diverse measures were taken to circumvent the strictures

against interment, and various forms of burial in the earth, or interment in tombs and ossuaries, were practiced in historical Zoroastrian communities, in Iran and Central Asia (see Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* II, pp. 54-55, 210-11).

The Avestan word *daxma-*, which later came to be used of the open, amphitheatre-like "towers of silence" in which the corpses of Zoroastrians are exposed to be eaten by birds meant originally "grave" (Hoffmann), and the *Vīdēvdād*, the only Zoroastrian scriptural authority on the disposal of the dead, requires that graves, and evidently, raised tombs as well, be destroyed. Burial in the earth was so abhorred by the orthodox Zoroastrians that interment was regarded even as a punishment for the wicked: denied exposure to the rays of the morning sun on the fourth day (Pahl. *čahārom*) after death, the soul could not ascend heaven-wards from the body and was doomed to a gloomy eternity in the underworld of shadows (see Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* I, pp. 325-30). The "towers of silence" are unattested in Iran until the Islamic period, clearly because in times of Zoroastrian sovereignty there was no need protectively to enclose places of exposure against defilers or trespassers. However, it is interesting to note that the stage of the Greek theatre at Bactrian Āy Ḵānom seems to have been used for the exposure of dead bodies, most likely after the departure of the Greeks from the area (see Frye, p. 190).

The entombing practices of the Achaemenid kings, evidenced by the free-standing tomb of Cyrus at Pasargadae and the rock-cut tombs of the other Achaemenid kings at Naqš-e Rostam, may indicate that the Achaemenids were bringing old customs into harmony with Zoroastrian doctrine, which they had probably embraced, by encasing the body in stone and protecting the earth thereby from pollution by corpse matter. Before inhumation, the body was most likely exposed for the *čahārom*. There seems to have been a general Achaemenid respect for tombs. Thus Arrian reports that Magi performed regular sacrifices for the soul of Cyrus before his tomb down to the time of the conquest of Iran by Alexander (Stronach, p. 24; Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* II, pp. 56, 290-91), and Nehemiah appealed to Artaxerxes I, "Send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' sepulchres (Heb. *qibrôṯ*), that I may rebuild it" (Neh. 2:5).

A practice difficult to reconcile with Zoroastrian regulations is the one reported by Herodotus (7.114) that the Persian queen Amestris, married to Xerxes I, propitiated "the god who is said to dwell beneath the earth" by burying alive fourteen children of distinguished Persians; the Magi buried alive nine boys and girls of the place called Nine Ways, during Xerxes' invasion of Greece. Perhaps the god in question was the pre-Zoroastrian

prototype either of Yima or of Spəntā Ārmaitī.

In the Parthian period, according to Isidore of Charax, kings were buried in royal tombs (Gk. *basilikai taphai*, at Parthaunisa; Caracalla is recorded to have sacked the tombs of later Parthian kings at Arbela), and burial in slipper-shaped ceramic coffins was also common. In pre-Christian Armenia, whose religion was particularly strongly influenced by the Zoroastrianism of the Parthians, similar forms of interment were common, the word for a coffin, *tapan*, being a loan from Middle Iranian. Such practices undoubtedly continued in Armenia into the Sasanian period, when in Iran itself methods of interment less conformable with orthodoxy were probably suppressed; hence the *Bundahišn* decries the particular virulence of the Ahrimanic practice of burial among the Armenians (see, with refs., Russell, chap. 10).

In the Sasanian period, the bones of the exposed deceased were often interred in stone or ceramic ossuaries, called *uzdāna–* in Avestan and *astōdān* in Pahlavi; some stone examples bear Pahlavi inscriptions. Literary sources suggest the Sasanian kings were interred in tombs, but there is as yet no archeological confirmation of this. Following the fall of the Sasanians, however, local rulers in northern Iran who adhered to pre-Islamic customs were interred in tomb towers, of which a notable example is the early 5th/11th-century Gonbad-e Qābūs (illustrated in *Camb. Hist. Iran* IV, pl. 5): the body of Qābūs is said to have been suspended at the top of the tower in a glass coffin on which the rays of the rising sun could fall through a small opening on the east side of the roof (see Matheson, p. 69). This would have allowed the *xwaršēd nigerišn* “sight (of the body) by the sun” on the *čahārom* to take place. Many ceramic ossuaries have been excavated on the territory of pre-Islamic Central Asia: Choresmia, Bactria, and Sogdia. Some are decorated with scenes of worship before a sacred fire, indicating that, of those interred, a number were Zoroastrians (see Grenet; on Sogdia, see Gershevitch). Boyce regards the Nuristani (Kafiri) practice of “post-excarnation” burial, i.e., exposure of the corpse in a wooden coffin on a mountain-top, as a “local derivative of Zoroastrian observance” (*Zoroastrianism* I, p. 113 with n. 24), though the Nuristanis, who do not speak an Iranian language, are unlikely to have been Zoroastrians in the past. Until fairly recent times, it was common custom in southern Ḵᵛārazm to place the dead in a sarcophagus (*sagona*) or box (*sandyk*), which was kept above ground. One reason given by informants for not interring corpses in the earth was *šafaqat*, “compassion” for the deceased (Snesarev, 1969, pp. 148-51; 1963, pp. 127-40). This seems to be a survival of the

Zoroastrian belief, noted above, that the soul of one buried in the earth cannot ascend on the *čahārom*.

In the Sasanian period, places of exposure of the dead were probably not enclosed, being merely waste tracts at a prescribed distance from dwellings, roads, and cultivated fields, but under Muslim rule enclosures became necessary. One early observer, Moḥammad b. Karrām (d. 255/869), founder of the Karrāmīya, seems to have confused the *daḵma* with a fire-temple structure, perhaps with deliberate malice, writing that, should a Muslim taste wine third-hand and die, "it would not be lawful to pray over him. But he should be cast onto a Magian fire-temple so that the birds may devour him" (Zysow, p. 583).

The custom of leaving the dead in protected open places appears to have continued for a time among the Parsis in India, which is tolerant of religious practices, for the traveler Odoric writing in 1325 noted that the Parsis exposed the dead in open fields (Firby, p. 88). Subsequent reports seem less reliable: Teixeira in the late 16th century reported from Iran that the Zoroastrians abandoned the elderly in caves to die; their bodies were then allowed to dry there. Pietro della Valle, early in the 17th century, wrote that corpses were propped up in a place enclosed by walls; other travelers mentioned exposure of corpses in the open hollows of tree trunks or on stakes in the open. (For these reports see Firby, pp. 57f.)

The reports of travelers of the late 17th and 18th centuries described more accurately the *daḵma*, its dimensions, the *nasā-sālār*s, and the manner of laying out the dead. Cornelius Le Bruyn in the 18th century wrote of the Iranian Zoroastrians that they left the bones of the dead in a mountain *daḵma* for one year, and then buried the bones (for this and other reports, see Firby). The latter inaccurately calls the *nasā-sālār*s "grave-diggers," though, as Henning showed in his critique of Onesicritus (pp. 21-23), the Persian term *gūrkan* "badger," lit. "grave-digger," seems to have persisted since ancient times.

The report of burial of bones seems to attest to a survival of the old custom of interring the dry bones of an exposed corpse in ossuaries, but it is at variance with Zoroastrian doctrine in the *Persian Rivayats*, which prescribe the manner in which the bones are to be taken from the stone biers that line the *daḵma* and placed in the *sarāda*, the central well (tr. Dhabhar, p. 108). Geleynssen described this as a brick-faced central pit, below which nails were driven into

the earth—an ancient form of purification. The *sarāda*, called *bhāndar* by the Parsis, is now filled with lime and has underground filters and channels, through which decomposed matter passes.

Many Zoroastrian communities, unable or forbidden to use *daḵma*s, inter their dead in coffins lowered into shafts lined with concrete, protecting the sacred earth of Spentā Ārmaitī from corruption. But the absolute prohibition in the *Vīdēvdād* against interment of any king is so strongly felt that Parsis are studying the possibility of disposal of corpses by such methods as acid baths and lasers, which are not quite the same as water or fire. There are problems even where *daḵma*s still exist: because of the rapid growth of metropolitan Karachi, the *daḵma*, once on the edge of town, is surrounded by densely populated neighborhoods, and there have been no vultures for 25 years. The bodies dry quickly in the hot sun of Sindh but are not stripped of their skin and have crowded the *daḵma*, whose pit cannot handle their bodies. The community of Anjoman has therefore resorted (1988) to the immediate expedient of depositing the dried corpses in an open, stone-lined square building.

Among modern Zoroastrians outside the Indian subcontinent exposure of the bodies of the dead is impossible, so orthodox Zoroastrians are buried, following the *xwaršēd nigerišn* and other necessary rites, in graves lined with concrete to prevent pollution of the earth.

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