



CORPSE

CORPSE, disposal of, in Zoroastrianism. In Zoroastrianism the corpse (Av. *nasu-*, Pahl. *nasā*) of a righteous believer was held to be the greatest source of pollution in the world, as the death of such a one represented a triumph for evil, whose forces were thought to be gathered there in strength. In particular the corpse demon (Av. *Nasu-*, Pahl. *Nasuš*, *Nasrušt*) was believed to rush into the body and contaminate all that came in contact with it. Rules for disposing of the corpse as rapidly and safely as possible are found in the *Vidēvdād* (see [avesta](#)). The Pahlavi commentary indicates the approved usages of late Sasanian and early post-Sasanian times and was much quoted in such Persian Zoroastrian works as the *Saddar Bondeheš*, *Saddar natr*, and *Persian Rivayats*. Actual practice has been attested archeologically and by foreign writers.

The first modern description of Parsi funerary customs was given by [A. H. Anquetil du Perron](#) in 1771 (II, pp. 581-85); it was subsequently adapted by Friedrich Spiegel (II, pp. xxxii-xxxviii). There followed descriptions by D. F. Karaka, Delphine Menant, K. N. Seervai and B. B. Patel (both, like Karaka, Zoroastrian laymen), and J. J. Modi. In 1904 a first brief account of Irani usages was given in Gujarati by Khodayar Dastur Sheriyar, the son of a high priest of Yazd. A. V. W. Jackson drew on this work, though his chief source was an account given him by a Yazdi layman, *Ḳodābaḳš Bahrām Raʿīs*. *Ḳodābaḳš* had spent a number of years in Bombay and seems in some particulars to have described Parsi rather than Irani practices. Khodayar subsequently published an English version of his 1904 article, and in 1969 another Irani priest, *Ardašīr Āḍargošasp*, published a general account of contemporary Irani funerary rites.



Shortly afterward Mary Boyce (*Stronghold*) offered a brief description of the traditional rites then still maintained in the highly conservative Yazdī village of Šarīfābād, and Šarīfābādī usages provided the basis for a detailed account of Irani practices in the 1970s by a layman from that village, Ardašīr Kōdādādīān. He drew both on his own knowledge and on statements supplied to him by other Irani Zoroastrians, both priests and laymen. In 1978 the usages then current in Bombay were described by a Parsi scholar, Homi Dhalla. The rites of the two communities are essentially the same, those of the Iranis being a little more elaborate. For Iran Kermānī usages are less well known than those of Yazd, whereas for India the fullest records come from Navsari (see [BHAGARIAS](#)).

In the Vidēvdād. The slightly conflicting injunctions of the *Vidēvdād* may well belong to different centuries and localities. Perhaps the oldest are those contained in 6.44-46: “Where, O Ahura Mazdā, shall we carry the body of a dead man, where lay it down?” Then said Ahura Mazdā: “On the highest places, Spitāma Zaratuštra, so that most readily (lit., “often”) corpse-eating dogs (*sunō kərəfš.xvarō*) or corpse-eating birds shall perceive it. There these Mazdā-worshippers shall fasten it down, this corpse, by its feet and hair, [with pegs] of metal or stone or horn. If they do not, corpse-eating dogs and corpse-eating birds will come to drag these bones on to water and plants.” The corrupting flesh is thus to be got rid of with as little harm as possible to the good creations. Presumably only water and plants are mentioned here because on a bare hilltop there was little danger to fire, fertile earth, or beneficent animals. Dogs and birds themselves belong to the good animal creation (on birds, see *Anklesaria*, 7.2; Schmidt, pp. 209-11). Reference to these two as excarnators is standard, occurring in other passages from the *Vidēvdād* and Pahlavi texts, and their activity as such is well attested in historical times (see below).

If a person died in bad weather, the relatives were to dig a trench in the earthen floor of a secluded place within the house, lay ashes or dung in the bottom, and put the corpse there, covering it with dust from bricks, stones, or dry kinds of soil. Then, when the weather relented, they were to make a breach in the wall of the house and carry the corpse out to a place where “corpse-eating dogs and corpse-eating birds shall most readily perceive it.” There they were to lay it down on a bed of chalk and fasten it with bricks or stones (*Vd.* 8.4ff.). There is no mention in this passage of a high place, and the chalk layer suggests that this rite may have been used where there was flat



fertile ground. Different instructions are given for bad weather in *Vidēvdād* 5.10ff.: “In every house, in every village, they shall erect three rooms (?*kata*-) for this corpse.” Each was to be high enough for those carrying the corpse not to have to stoop and wide enough for them to be able to lay it out there. There it was to be kept until the weather allowed them to bear it out to lie until birds had devoured its flesh and sunshine and rain had cleansed both the bones and the *daḱma*. The word *daḱma* here seems to mean an open structure, possibly enclosed by a wall, as nothing is said about fastening down the corpse; it was perhaps quite high, as, exceptionally, only birds are mentioned as corpse-devourers.

The corpse was to be exposed naked (*Vd.* 8.23-25), and, according to one passage, the two men who carried it were also to be “naked, unclothed” (*mayna anaiwi.vastra-*, *Vd.* 8.10), presumably to simplify their *cleansing* afterward. It was forbidden (*Vd.* 3.14) to carry a corpse alone (which would involve full contact with it), and after the bearers returned their chief (*ratu-*) was to demand: “Let urines be brought, so that these corpse-bearers may wash hair and body.” The urine, a substance widely used in the past as a disinfectant, might “be of small or of large cattle” (*Vd.* 8.11-13). The term translated as “corpse-bearer” is *nasu-kaša-*. It occurs only here but appears to have a dialect variant, *nasu-karət-*, in *Vidēvdād* 7.26, 27. There it is a question of wicked *nasu.karət-* who bring a corpse into contact with water or fire. The word has been explained (Humbach, pp. 103-05) as meaning literally “corpse-cutter,” from the root **kart* “cut,” and has been assumed to have originated at a time when those who carried the corpse to the place of exposure dismembered or slashed it to speed the work of the carrion-eaters.

Once the bones were sun-bleached and rain-washed, there was a choice as to their disposal (*Vd.* 6.49-51): To the question “Where shall we carry the bones of dead men, where lay (them) down?” the answer was “An ossuary (*uzdāna*-) shall be made, out of reach of dogs and foxes and wolves, not to be rained on from above by rainwater. If they shall be able, these Mazdā-worshipers, [let it be] among stones or chalk If they are not able, let it (i.e., the skeleton) be laid down, being its own couch, being its own cushion, upon the earth, exposed to the light, seen by the sun.” This seems to mean that, at need, the bones might simply be left at the place of exposure.

The only mention in the *Vidēvdād* of a religious rite in connection with the corpse is in 10.1-17, where it is asked “How shall I fight against the demon, which from the dead flies upon the living? How shall I fight against Nasu,



which from the dead enters into the living?” The answer is to recite all five Gathas, together with *Yasna haptanhāiti* (Darmesteter, II, pp. 73ff.), interspersed with short Young Avestan imprecations against Anra Mainyu (see [AHRIMAN](#)), Nasu, and various *daēvas* (see [daiva](#)). This recitation of holy words was intended solely to protect the living, as the concern of these chapters of the *Vidēvdād* is with maintaining physical purity, not with cherishing the departed soul (for which there are quite different rites).

From Achaemenid to Sasanian and early Islamic times. There is no trace of the rite of exposure among western Iranians before the coming of Zoroastrianism (Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* II, p. 26), and it appears to have been only slowly adopted by them as that religion spread. It was apparently known to Heraclitus of Ephesus around 500 B.C.E. (Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* II, p. 160) and was mentioned by Herodotus (1.140): “There are . . . matters concerning the dead which are secretly and obscurely told—how the dead bodies of Persians are not buried before they have been mangled by bird or dog. That this is the way of the magi I know for a certainty, for they do not conceal the practice.” Plutarch (*Artoxerxes* 18) similarly recorded that, when in 401 the Persian generals of the rebellious [Cyrus](#) were put to death, their bodies “were torn by dogs and birds.” The rite of exposure is attested from the 5th and 4th centuries B.C.E. among both the eastern and western Iranians through the existence of ossuaries (see [ASTŌDĀN](#); [BURIAL iii](#); Boyce and Grenet, *Zoroastrianism* III, index, s.v. ossuary; Huff).

A statement by Cicero (*Tusculan Disputations* 1.45.108) about the Iranian way of disposing of the dead was attributed by him to the Stoic Chrysippus (3rd century B.C.E.), whose own source is thought likely to have been the 4th-century Eudemus of Rhodes: “In Hyrcania the masses breed communal dogs, while the aristocracy have dogs that they keep at their own homes; we happen to know that their breed of dog is decidedly superior. However, everyone according to his individual means acquires dogs that will tear him to shreds, because they reckon this to be the best of burials.” Such customs appear to lie behind Onesicritus’ tale (quoted by Strabo, 11.11.3; cf. Boyce and Grenet, *Zoroastrianism* III, pp. 6-7, 190 n. 159) that in Bactria those suffering from old age or sickness were thrown alive to dogs kept for that purpose, which they called “undertakers.” The use of such a term accords well with Chrysippus’ account, which is, moreover, corroborated by the Chinese traveler Wei-jie, who wrote of Samarkand soon after 605 C.E.: “Outside the city walls there is a separate community of over two thousand households who specialize in



funerary matters. There is also a separate building in which dogs are kept. Whenever a person dies [members of this community] will go and collect the corpse and place it inside this building and order the dogs to devour it. When the flesh has been entirely devoured they will bury all the bones but no coffin is used for the burial” (*Tong-dian* 193.1039b; tr. in Lieu, p. 183). Keeping dogs as excarnators is thus attested for Bactria, Sogdia, and Hyrcania from Achaemenid to late Sasanian times but is not recorded among western Iranians. Agathias described at second hand the disposal of the body of the Persian general Mihr-Mihrōē, who died in 555: “Then the attendants of Mihr-Mihrōē took up his body and removed it to a place outside the city and laid it there as it was, alone and uncovered according to their traditional custom, as refuse for dogs and horrible carrion birds” (2.22; tr. in Cameron, p. 79). Agathias also commented (2.23): “For this is the Persian funeral practice: the flesh is removed in this way and the exposed bones rot, scattered at random all over the plain. They consider it irreligious to place the dead in a tomb or container, or even to bury them in the ground.” Surviving ossuaries show, however, that at least some of the wealthier Zoroastrians gathered up the dried bones. Agathias continued: “And if the birds do not fly down upon a body quickly, or if the dogs do not come up at once and tear it to pieces, they hold that this man was profane in his ways and that his soul is wicked and doomed.” This report reflects a genuine popular belief recorded in variant forms by foreign observers and Zoroastrians themselves (e.g., Gabriel de Chinon, 17th century, cited by Firby, p. 49). In the *Persian Rivayats* (ed. Unvala, I, p. 145.7-8; tr. Dhabhar, p. 165) it is simply said that the swift disposal of the corpse pleases the departed soul. In late Sasanian times a new zeal in purification practices (see [CLEANSING i](#)) also affected funerary customs, which seem to have been elaborated then and thereafter, in an ever more strenuous endeavor to control and segregate Nasā until the corpse was safely deposited in the *daḵma*.

From medieval to modern times. The injunction to make three *kata*– in which to place a corpse in bad weather (*Vd.* 5.10-11) was taken as authority for building in every Zoroastrian community a small mortuary, usually of three rooms, to which every corpse was taken as soon as breath left the body, to remain there until carded to the *daḵma*. The Iranis called this building *zād-o-marg-kāna* (? and death house), or simply *zādmarg*. Apparently the Parsis did not have such mortuaries in the 15th century (see *Persian Rivayats*, ed. Unvala, I, p. 139.15-19; tr. Dhabhar, pp. 155-56); but if so, exhortations by Persian priests to build them were heeded, for thereafter *nasā-kānas*, “corpse-houses,” were a



regular feature of Parsi towns and villages and continued to be used in this way down to the 19th century (Unvala, p. 317; Modi, 1937, p. 55). Thereafter in both communities the custom reestablished itself of leaving the corpse at the house of death until the funeral, and the *zādmarg/nasā-kāna* became mainly a headquarters for the undertakers and a place to keep the biers and other apparatus.

Accordingly, within living memory, when a death was known to be approaching, preparations were made in the house. A place apart, on the ground floor, was swept and cleaned, and a slab of stone about 7 feet long was fetched from the mortuary (or three smaller slabs to make up that length). In old houses with earthen floors gravel or sand might instead be strewn over a space sunk a little into the ground (Modi, 1937, p. 54, who considered this practice to be based on *Vd.* 8.8, with its injunctions about placing the corpse in a trench in the house during severe weather). If the floor were plastered, the corpse might be laid directly on it (cf. the bed of chalk in *Vd.* 8.10). The purpose in each instance was to protect the good earth from contamination. The place was always prepared so that the corpse's head would not be toward the north, the demons' quarter.

As soon as possible after the last breath was drawn a dog was brought up to the body, preferably by the priest, to check with its gaze the power of Nasrušt. There is no Avestan authority for this rite other than what appears to be an interpolation in the *VidēvdādSade* (between 7.2 and 7.3; Darmesteter, II, p. 97). In the genuine Avestan text it is said (v. 2) that Nasu rushes on a corpse as soon as the soul leaves it, unless (vv. 3-4) the person met a violent death (dying, that is, in health and vigor); in such an instance Nasu does not settle on the corpse until the next watch of the day. In the Pahlavi commentary on verse 2 it is stated that when a person dies a dog should be tied at his feet (*-š andar pāy bast estēd*); when the dog sees the demon, it will smite it (*ka wēnēd, a-š zanēd*). Verse 4 is glossed by the statement that during the watch in which a person has died a violent death the corpse, not being yet polluting, "will be like a corpse that has been seen by a dog" (*ēdon bawēd čiyōn nasā ī sag dīd*). Such statements evidently yielded the rite's name, *sagdīd*. It was held essential that the dog should go right up to the body, and it was induced to do so by placing three pieces of freshly baked bread beside the corpse or on its breast for it to eat (Jackson, p. 389; Boyce, *Stronghold*, p. 149; Khodadadian, p. 37). After the first *sagdīd* the dog was kept near the corpse to watch over it; in some places it was actually tied to the corpse's feet, this being one way of understanding



Pahlavi Vidēvdād 7.2. Should the dead person be a woman with child, two dogs were needed (*Saddar naṭr* 70.5; ed. Dhabhar, p. 50; tr. West, p. 335). The observance was evidently established before the end of the Sasanian period, for in *Šāyest nē-šāyest* 2.65 (Tavadia, ed., p. 53) it is said: “If a corpse not looked at by a dog is taken among 1000 men, then truly all [are] polluted in body.” In Iran either before or after the first *sagdīd* the priest, using a metal bowl and spoon, put three small spoonfuls of *nērang* (consecrated bull’s urine) between the corpse’s lips in order to ward off Nasrušt inwardly. As he did so he repeated the *Ahunwar* and *ašəm vohu* (Khodadadian, pp. 42-43).

Through these acts, it was believed, Nasrušt was prevented from instantly settling on a corpse even after a natural death, and so a little time was won during which it could be safely handled (although all that is conceded in the *Persian Rivayats*, ed. Unvala, I, p. 140.3-13; tr. Dhabhar, p. 156, is that “when *sagdīd* is performed, it [the corpse] causes less pollution”). In Gujarat it was thus customary for elderly relatives to wash and lay out the body—men for a man, women for a woman. In Iran professional *pākšūs* (those who “wash clean”) were more often employed (Boyce, *Stronghold*, pp. 23, 149), though for men *nasā-sālārs* (see below) might undertake the task. The *pākšū* was also called *morda-šūr* or *-šūy* “washer of the dead” (Jackson, p. 388; Khodayar, p. 36). Those touching a corpse worked in pairs, with *peyvand*, that is, a bond created by a piece of cloth or an old *kostī* (sacred cord), between them. At need *peyvand* might be made with the dog. Before coming to the house the *pākšūs* bathed, put on special clothes, and said the *kostī* prayers and the first part of the protective *Srōš bāj* (see *bāj*). Then, before entering the death chamber, they made *peyvand* by tying the ends of the cloth or cord to their right forearms. In Persia the one who did the washing wore a fleecy woolen glove on the right hand, the task of the other being to pour *gōmēz* (cow’s urine) from a metal bowl with a metal spoon. They washed the corpse on the stone slab from head to foot three times with the *gōmēz*, which they allowed to dry on it. In India they washed it once with *gōmēz* and then once with water. Newly washed but old clothes, regularly of white cotton, were then put on the body. The use even of old clothes was a concession, doubtfully allowed in *Saddar naṭr* 12.1-4 (ed. Dhabhar, pp. 11-12; tr. West, p. 272), for in the *Vidēvdād* (5.60-61) it is declared a sin to waste the smallest shred of clothing on the dead. The hands were crossed on the breast, and in Iran the legs were bent at the knees and crossed tailor fashion, *pāy gerd kardan*, lit., to “curve” the legs (*Persian Rivayats*, ed. Unvala, I, p. 141.8; tr. Dhabhar, p. 158 n. 11; cf. Khodayar, p. 306; Boyce, *Stronghold*, p. 150). In India the legs were kept straight. This difference in



practice led to sharp controversy among the Parsis when in the 18th century the Kadmis adopted Irani usage. A reason given for it was that in life a man walks with straight legs but at death his legs should be bent as if he were seated, in order to show that his mortal journey is over (*Persian Rivayats*, tr. Dhabhar, p. 158 n. 4). This, the Irani priests claimed, was a divine injunction. The Parsis, unpersuaded, suggested other reasons: that through this contraction of the corpse the area of pollution was lessened (*Persian Rivayats*, tr. Dhabhar, p. 158 n. 4); or that the Iranis, harried by Muslims, had sometimes to convey a corpse secretly to the place of exposure, which could be done less conspicuously if the corpse were laid out in this way and carried at one side of a beast of burden (Unvala, p. 317). Evidently in bad times Muslim ruffians did attack funeral processions, to the point of forcing the Zoroastrians to break two prohibitions, those against carrying a corpse on an animal and at night (*Pahl. Vd.* 8.11: *pad stōr nē barišn, pad šab nē barišn*). Moreover, with few *daḳmas* and long distances to traverse (e.g., to the Yazdī *daḳma*, 9 miles from the city), both corpse and mourners were sometimes transported part of the way by animals, though priests regularly walked the whole distance. In India the corpse was sometimes carried on a light bullock cart, which was broken up and buried near the *daḳma* (Seervai and Patel, p. 239). In Iran the body was laid out with bent legs until the middle of this century in rural areas, and this usage was still enjoined in the 1970s by at least one conservative Irani priest (Mobed Yazešny; cited by Khodadadian, p. 195). The ultimate abandonment of the practice followed the introduction by reformers of coffins and graves, the current usage being to cross the extended legs at the ankles.

Once the body had been clothed, one of the *pākšūs* tied a *kostī* around its waist while saying the *kostī* prayers on behalf of the departed spirit. The body was then wrapped in a white shroud, which in Iran would have been washed in running water by the family priest, as would the thread (spun by a young girl) to sew it up with; the needle would have been cleansed by the priest with *gōmēz* (Boyce, *Stronghold*, p. 150; Khodadadian, p. 59). The shroud was stitched up, leaving only the face exposed for subsequent *sagdīds* (*Persian Rivayats*, ed. Unvala, I, p. 111.7; tr. Dhabhar, p. 113). In Iran it was usual to tie on a *padān* (the ritual white cotton face mask), which could be raised when required. Laying out and shrouding the body, with accompanying rites, is called by the Parsis *sačkār*, a word of uncertain origin. In Iran an open pair of scissors, washed by the priest with *gōmēz*, was laid on the corpse's breast above the crossed hands, the handles beneath the chin, the points lightly penetrating the shroud. These scissors were for slitting the shroud at the *daḳma*, but were



probably also thought of as apotropaic. Then one of the *pākšūs*, while reciting Avesta, drew three lines (*kaš*) around the shrouded corpse with a nail or metal bar, in order to pen in the Nasuš. Both *pākšūs* then withdrew, still with *peyvand*, and, returning home, left the *Srōš bāj*, rubbed themselves with *gōmēz*, bathed, and put on fresh clothing.

At some moment after the first *sagdīd*, fire was brought into the room, to be kept burning at least three paces from the corpse. Incense was put on it (*Vd.* 8.80), in the Yazdī region the dried root of a plant called by the Zoroastrians *bū'-e nākōš* (Boyce, *Stronghold*, p. 149 and n. 23). In some places a lamp was preferred because of the injunction (*Vd.* 5.41-2) that at a death fire was to be removed from the house and not reestablished until nine days later in winter, thirty days in summer. In Iran the known custom was to let the house fire grow cold (embers from it being taken to the fire temple) and not to rekindle it until the fourth day (Khodadadian, p. 49). The family either left the house after the laying out of the corpse and took shelter with neighbors or withdrew as far as possible from the death chamber. In Navsari no cooking was done on the hearth fire until the fourth day; neighbors again provided for the bereaved family.

When the fire was brought into the death chamber the priest sat by it, tending it and reciting Avesta steadily until the corpse was taken away, which had to be done within twenty-four hours. If death had occurred in one of the first two watches (*gāh*), the funeral took place the same day, if in the third watch or at night, then it took place during the first watch of the next day. If the body had to remain for some time in the house, any pious person in a state of purity might take over the duties of tending the fire and chanting Avesta. During the hours of darkness recitation of the *Yašt-e Srōš-e sar-e šab* (*Y.* 57) was held to be essential. In both Iran and Gujarat the *sagdīd* was repeated during each *gāh*.

About an hour before the time appointed for removing the body the *nasā-sālārs* brought the bier (*gā/āhā/ān*), which was of iron (hence its name, from **gāh-āhan* “iron throne”), as metal was held not to conduct impurity (*Persian Rivayats*, ed. Unvala, I, pp. 242.4-7, 389.10-12, 389.14; tr. Dhabhar, pp. 246-47, 606). The standard type had a rail along the sides; four short legs, so that its under-surface never rested on the earth; and four carrying bars, projecting sideways far enough for the bearers not to have contact with the corpse. A smaller version was kept for those under fifteen years old (for illustrations of biers, taken from one of the *Persian Rivayats*, see Menant, 1910, pp. 182, 183). The *nasā-sālārs* were professional handlers of the dead, and bore this title



both in Iran and in India. They had charge of the disposal of the corpse, and only they might enter the *daḡma*. It has been suggested (Darmesteter, II, pp. 121 n. 20, 148) that their office corresponded with that of the Avestan *ratu-*, or chief over the *nasu-kaša-* (Vd. 8.11). The Pahlavi translation there of *ratu-* is *sardār ī murda-kašān*, “chief of the bearers of the dead,” which makes it very probable that *nasā-sālār* is a contraction of Pahlavi **nasā-kašān-sālār*. (In current Irani usage the title is still further contracted to *sālār*.) For a corpse-bearer the Parsis use the term *khāndia*, “one who shoulders (the bier),” from the Gujarati word for “shoulder,” whereas the Iranis have had a number of expressions. *Mardōmān-e nasākaš* is recorded in the *Persian Rivayats* (ed. Unvala, I, p. 118.4), which closely renders Avestan *nasu.kaša-* and may never have been in colloquial use. Other expressions were *mardhā kē dar zīr-e gāhān ravand*, more simply *mardom-e šīw-gāhān*, or just *šīw-gāhānān* (ed. Unvala, I, pp. 144.3, 118.13, 253.9), “those under the bier.” Less readily comprehensible is the now standard *pīš-gāhānān* “those in front of the bier” (Jackson, p. 389; Khodayar, p. 306; Khodadadian, p. 139).

The bearers, having no direct contact with the corpse, were not considered to undergo serious contamination. The work was regarded as meritorious and was usually undertaken by volunteers, though no close relatives of the dead person would be among them. It was arduous, the bier itself being heavy, so there were usually relief bearers, who followed the bier. According to the *Pahlavi Vidēvdād* (8.10), women might be corpse-bearers (a woman with a man or two women), and this is repeated in *Šāyest ne-šāyest* 2.8 (p. 34 and nn.) and the *Persian Rivayats* (ed. Unvala, I, p. 115.13-15; tr. Dhabhar, p. 119), but within living memory only men have done this work (except for the bodies of small children, for which there were locally special usages; Boyce, *Stronghold*, p. 159; see below).

The *nasā-sālārs* were usually two in number. Before the funeral they and the bearers bathed, put on white clothes, and performed the *kostī* rite. The bearers followed the *nasā-sālārs* to the house of death, where the mourners had been gathering. Two priests, who had also performed the *kostī* rite at home, were present. The *nasā-sālārs* laid the bier down by the corpse and took the *bāj* of Srōš. In India (Modi, 1937, p. 61) they also said in suppressed tones the Middle Persian *dastūrī*, or authorization for disposing of the corpse. In Iran they said this only at the *daḡma*. They then seated themselves at either end of the bier.

The priests, having *peyvand* between them and wearing the *padān*, stood looking at the bier and began reciting what the Iranis call the *Yašt-e Gāhān*



“Service of the Gathas,” the Parsis *Geh-sārnā* “Gatha recitation.” After short preliminary Avestan formulas (Anquetil du Perron, II, p. 533) they recited about half the first Gatha (*Ahunavaitī*) up to the end of *Yasna* 31.4. Then they turned their backs on the bier, and all present looked away while the *nasā-sālārs* lifted the body on to it and tied it there with strips of white cloth or, in Iran, a thick *kostī*. The second obligatory *sagdīd* was then performed as prescribed in *Saddar naṭr* (70.2; ed. Dhabhar, p. 50; tr. West, p. 335), and the male mourners then paid their last respects to the dead person, bowing to the soul whose presence was apprehended there. This act is called by the Parsis *sejdo* (from Arabic *sajda* “reverence, prostration”).

As mentioned earlier, in *Vidēvdād* 10 recitation of all five Gathas is prescribed to repel Nasu, but in recorded usage only the first is said. The one known divergence is over when the recitation should be completed. The Irani usage was as follows: “At the place *tat mōi vīcidyāi* (the opening words of Y. 31.5) they (the priests) are to be silent until the *nasā-sālārs* tie the corpse to the bier and lift it up. Then the *mōbads* may follow the corpse and recite the *Yašt-e Gāhān* as they go” (*mōbadān dar donbāl-e morda be-ravand wa yašt-e gā/āhān be-jā be-kvānand*; *Ithoother Rivāyat*, ans. 33, cited by Modi, 1914, pp. 418-19; cf. Anquetil du Perron, II, p. 584 n. 1). The only attested Parsi usage (pace Modi, 1914, pp. 416-17, whose evidence to the contrary does not seem convincing) was that the priests finished saying Gatha *Ahunavaitī* within the house, before the bier was carried out. Latterly in Bombay the practice of the priest’s repeating the whole of *Ahunavaitī* on the way to the *daḵma* was generally adopted (Modi, 1914, pp. 419-20).

In both communities a number of the mourners (in Iran including women) attended the bier for a little distance, in Iran as far as the *zādmarg*, which was regularly built on the edge of the town or village nearest the *daḵma*. At one time music makers went ahead, with hautboy (*sornā*) and drums. One man followed with a lighted lamp and another with a metal vessel containing glowing embers on which he put incense, while a woman, closely related to the dead person, waved before her face some articles of clothing that the deceased had worn and uttered words of lamentation (Khodayar, p. 307). A priest came next, leading on a leash the dog that had been watching over the corpse and with which he thus had *peyvand*. The bier followed at ninety paces’ distance, with the mourners as far again behind it. At the *zādmarg* the *nasā-sālārs* carried the bier into the building by the near door. They set it down, another *sagdīd* was performed, some brief Avestan prayers were said, and



then they carried it out by the far door, on the side toward the *daḵma*, toward which the corpse's head was turned. The funeral procession proper then formed. Only men took part, and to do so was held to be highly meritorious: "As many as are able to walk behind the corpse's bier, let them do so, for at each step a merit of 300 *stīrs* accrues" (*Saddar natr*, 12.8-9; ed. Dhabhar, p. 12; tr. West, p. 273). In Iran the procession was called *pādaš*, in India *pāydašt*, explained as "foot-hand," because the mourners go on foot in pairs, holding in their hands a handkerchief or cord to make *peyvand* between them. In India two priests with *peyvand* led the procession (Modi, 1937, p. 65), in Iran the priest with the dog (Khodadadian, p. 65). The relief bearers escorted the bier, and the mourners, led by other priests, followed ninety (in India thirty) paces to the rear, all having taken the *Srōš bāj*. The procession moved at a steady pace, and no one was supposed to look back, nor (if possible) was the bier to be set down. When the bearers changed places they continued to face in the direction in which they were going, each pair transferring to those relieving them the *peyvand* that passed under the bier.

The following account is of the rituals at the *daḵma* as performed in Iran (Khodadadian, pp. 68-75; for the slightly briefer Parsi rituals, see Modi, 1937, pp. 65-67). The priest leading the procession went up to a stone slab a short distance from the tower, followed by the bier; the rest of the mourners halted ninety paces away. The bearers set down the bier on the slab and withdrew. The *nasā-sālārs*, who had gone on ahead, had stationed themselves between the slab and the tower, and they now "renewed the *kostī*" while the priest recited the confession on behalf of the dead, the *Patēt-e Vedardegān*, known to the Parsis as *Patēt-e Gudaštagān* or *Ravānī* (Antia, pp. 125-34). Upon finishing, he signed to the *nasā-sālārs* to move the corpse from the bier to another stone slab close by, where the dog made the final *sagdīd*. The bearers, who had also renewed the *kostī*, approached again, took up the empty bier, and withdrew backward for some steps, out of respect for the attendant soul, and then set off, still with *peyvand* and *bāj*, along with the relief bearers, to the *zādmarg*. There they left the *Srōš bāj* and cleansed themselves.

At the *daḵma* the priest again renewed the *kostī*, and he and the *nasā-sālārs* murmured the *dastūrī* for committing the body to the tower (in India the *nasā-sālārs* recited the *dastūrī* for a second time, alone, after they had entered the tower). The priest then said some brief Avestan prayers, ending with three *Ahunwars*, during which one of the *nasā-sālārs*, using the closed points of the scissors from the shroud, drew three lines (*kaš*) round the corpse on the slab,



beginning the first at the left ear and continuing round the feet to the right ear, then making the second in the opposite direction, and not completing any of the lines behind the head (Khodadadian, p. 186). Ritually the only path thus left open for the corpse demon was toward the *daḵma*. The priest and all those present then recited the *Kəmnā Mazdā* while the *nasā-sālārs*, having placed the corpse on a smaller, lighter bier kept in the *daḵma*, carried it up into the tower. As they descended to its stone-paved surface, they recited the last words of the *Kəmnā Mazdā*, followed by other short Avestan prayers, and then consigned the spirit to Ahura Mazdā with the words *zurvanahe akaranahe* “for boundless time.” The corpse was laid on its back, its head toward the west, and with the scissors one of the *nasā-sālārs* slit the shroud over its breast, with a long cut up toward the chin. (In India the shroud and corpse clothes were ripped off and destroyed outside the tower, in accordance with the requirement in the *Vidēvdād* that the corpse should be abandoned naked, but women’s bodies were left partly covered; Dhalla, p. 20.) Finally, the *nasā-sālārs* addressed words in Persian to Srōš and the soul (Khodayar, p. 174; tr. in Jackson, p. 393).

The mourners then left the *Srōš bāj*, abandoned *peyvand*, and, after applying *gōmēz* and water to the exposed parts of their persons, performed their *kostī* prayers again. In India they would then disperse, but in Iran it was customary to hold a feast near the *daḵma*, in order to give comfort and pleasure to the departed soul; a number of relatives and friends would ride out bringing wine and food (but no meat, as Zoroastrians abstain from meat for three days after a death). It was customary usage to break the earthenware pitchers on the spot afterward.

At the house of death others would join the younger women of the family in eating freshly baked bread and drinking an infusion of poppy juice (Khodadadian, pp. 76, 188). The house was cleansed by sprinkling *gōmēz* on the place where the corpse had lain, along the way by which it had been carried out, and around the door. The stone slab was removed and cleansed, or the sand or plaster dug out and taken away for cleansing. Parsi usage was essentially the same (Modi, 1937, p. 64; Karaka, I, p. 196), detailed injunctions being given about these matters in the older literature (*Šāyest ne šāyest* 2.14ff., pp. 37ff.). The place where the slab had been was to be avoided for nine days in winter or thirty days in summer, and in some devout families was not trodden on for a year.

In Iran the corpses of children under seven years old were carried to the



daḵma on a light-colored cloth, held by cords at the four corners (Khodadadian, p. 154). The bodies of stillborn infants were exposed at some other high place. Religious rites were nevertheless performed for them, as for other children. Among the Parsis the rites of *sačkār* and *Geh-sarnā* were performed even for a stillborn child, the body being carried to the *daḵma* on a small iron sheet, held in both hands by a *nasā-sālār* who had *peyvand* with a companion. Two priests followed at a distance (information from Dastur Firoze Kotwal).

Carrying the dead when it is raining is forbidden in the *Pahlavi Vidēvdād* (8.7), clearly because contaminated raindrops might fall on the earth. But it is said in the *Persian Rivayats* that, if rain came after a funeral procession had started, it could not turn back. If there was any place where the bier could be placed in shelter, that should be done. If rain threatened when the procession was setting out, the bearers should take with them a large cloth or carpet, which, after setting down the bier, they could hold above it if rain fell (ed. Unvala, I, p. 114.3-7; tr. Dhabhar, p. 120).

Modern developments and changes. In the 19th century modern city life began to create problems for Parsis in Bombay. More and more people died in hospital instead of at home, and it was not always possible to gain possession of their bodies quickly enough for the rites to be performed within the proper time. Some orthopractic families were accused of causing needless suffering to the dying by removing them from hospital, but sometimes this might have been at their own wish, for cases are known of devout old people dying at home who asked to be laid on the stone slab while still breathing, in order to avoid the least danger of their bodies contaminating the earth. Walking funerals, *pāydist*, continued well into the 20th century, from house door to the *daḵmas* on Doongervadi Hill, which, when the first tower was built therein 1670, had been a lonely place away from habitations. Increased traffic and press of people ended this custom, and from 1928 *bunglis* (one-story buildings) were erected at Doongervadi, to which the corpse was brought at death by motorized hearse (Desai, pp. 46-47). The mourners gather there for the traditional rites within twenty-four hours of the death, and then those men who wish to do so follow the bier in a short *pāydist* to the hilltop *daḵma*, where the last *sagdīd* and final rites are performed.

From the mid-19th century Parsi reformers pressed for changes, notably for the abandonment of *sagdīd* and the use of *gōmēz*, and some for burial instead of exposure, but they were in general more successful away from Bombay.



Even earlier small scattered Zoroastrian communities had of necessity buried their dead, doing the best they could to protect the earth, for example, by lining the grave with stones (Jackson, p. 337). In Iran reformist influences were first strongly felt in the 1930s. The Tehran *daḵma* was replaced in 1937 by a cemetery, called *ārāmgāh* “place of rest.” It too has a building equivalent to the old *zādmarg-kāna*, where the corpse is laid out, shrouded, and usually placed in an iron coffin. After the recitation of the *Yašt-i Gāhān* the *nasā-sālārs*, followed by the mourners, carry the coffin to a cement-lined grave, which is later cemented over (Ādargošasp, pp. 20-23; Khodadadian, pp. 70-71). Relatives put flowers on the grave, and the cemetery itself is planted with trees and flowers. (Doongervadi Hill also has tree-planted grounds; Desai, p. 49.) Cemeteries were established in Kermān and Yazd in 1939 and 1960, although there the *daḵmas* remained in alternative use until the 1970s. The *daḵma* at Šarīfābād was abandoned a decade later. Cement is used in the graves, but there is not usually a coffin.

Zoroastrians living in other lands have to make use of general undertakers and public crematoriums; the religious rites are usually performed at the home or the community’s place of worship. The relatively long-established London community has its own chapel for this purpose at the Brookwood cemetery. In Bombay, however, orthopractic priests will not perform funerary rites if the body is cremated.

See also [burial ii](#), [iii](#).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

A. Ādargošasp, *Ā’in-e kafn wa dafn-e Zartoštīān*, Tehran, 1348 Š./1969.

B. T. Anklesaria, ed., *Pahlavi Vendidad*, Bombay, 1949.

A. H. Anquetil du Perron, *Zend-Avesta*, 2 vols. (bound in 3 parts), Paris, 1771.

E. K. Antia, *Pāzend Texts*, Bombay, 1909. A. Cameron, *Agathias on the Sasanians*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 23-24, Washington, D.C., 1969-70.



- J. Darmesteter, *Le Zend-Avesta*, 3 vols., Paris, 1892-93; repr. II, Paris, 1960, pp. 146-151.
- S. F. Desai, *History of the Bombay Parsi Punchayet 1860-1960*, Bombay, 1977.
- B. N. Dhabhar, ed., *Saddar Naṣr and Saddar Bundelesh*, Bombay, 1912.
- H. Dhalla, "Funeral Customs and Ceremonies of the Parsis in India," *University of Shiraz, Bulletin of the Department of Linguistics (Asia Institute)* 2-4, 1978, pp. 1-47.
- N. K. Firby, *Europeans Travellers and their Perceptions of Zoroastrians in the 17th and 18th Centuries*, AMI Ergänzungsband 14, Berlin, 1988.
- D. Huff, "'Feueraltäre" und Astodāne," paper read at the Second European Conference of Iranian Studies, Bamberg, 1991.
- H. Humbach, "Bestattungsformen in Vidēvdāt," *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung* 72, 1958, pp. 99-105.
- K. A. Inostrantsev, "On the Ancient Iranian Burial Customs and Buildings," *Journal of the K. R. Cama Oriental Institute* 3, 1923, pp. 1-28.
- A. V. W. Jackson, *Persia Past and Present*, New York, 1909; repr. New York, 1975, pp. 387-94.
- D. F. Karaka, *History of the Parsis*, 2 vols., London, 1884, I, pp. 192-213.
- A. Khodadadian, *Die Bestattungssitten und Bestattungsriten bei den heutigen Parsen*, Ph.D. diss., Freie Universität, Berlin, 1974.
- Khodayar Dastur Sheriyar, "The Funeral Ceremonies of the Zoroastrians in Persia," *Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy Madressa Jubilee Volume*, ed. J. J. Modi, Bombay, 1914, pp. 306-18.
- S. N. C. Lieu, *Manichaeism*, Manchester, 1985.
- D. Menant, *Les Parsis*, Paris, 1898; repr. Osnabrück, 1975, pp. 175-94.
- Idem, "Une sacerdoce zoroastrien à Naosari," *Conferences du Musée Guimet* 35, 1910.
- J. J. Modi, "The Geh Sārnā Recital, as Enjoined and as Recited about 150 Years



Ago,” in *Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy Madressa Jubilee Volume*, ed. J. J. Modi, Bombay, 1914a, pp. 415-20.

Idem, “The Tibetan Mode of the Disposal of the Dead. Some Side-Light Thrown by It on . . . the Iranian Mode, as Described in the Vendidad,” in *Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy Madressa Jubilee Volume*, ed. Modi, Bombay, 1914b, pp. 319-72.

Idem, *The Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the Parsees*, Bombay, 1922; repr. Bombay, 1979, pp. 49-67; 2nd ed., Bombay, 1937.

H. P. Schmidt, “Ancient Iranian Animal Classifications,” *Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik* 5/6, 1980, pp. 209-44.

K. N. Seervai and B. B. Patel, *Gujarāt Pārsis. Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency* IX/2, 1899, pp. 239-41.

N. Söderblom, “Death and the Disposal of the Dead (Parsi),” *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics* IV, Edinburgh, 1911, pp. 502-05.

F. Spiegel, *Avesta . . . übersetzt*, 3 vols., Leipzig, 1852.

I. M. Unvala, “Some Old Zoroastrian Customs,” *Acta Orientalia* 4, 1926, pp. 311-19.

E. W. West, tr., *Pahlavi Texts* III, SBE 24, pp. 255-361 (*Saddar natr*).