



DAHRĪ

DAHRĪ (< Ar.-Pers. *dahr* “time, eternity”), a theological term referring either to an atheist or to an adherent of the doctrine that the universe had no beginning in time.

i. In Middle Persian literature.

ii. In the Islamic period.

i. In Middle Persian Literature

Dahrī, in the sense of “atheist” or “materialist,” one who derives the universe from Infinite Time (in the abstract), occurs in a few Middle Persian texts of the 9th century. The term appears, together with those for other skeptics, in *Dēnkard* 3.225 (ed. Madan, p. 250; de Menasce, 1973, p. 237): “He who does not believe (*agrawišn*, a hybrid form) in the existence of the creator Ohrmazd, [denies] the Religion and the Prophet and supports the doctrine of the devils, is in religious terminology called “adorer of the devil” (*dēw-ēsn*), heretic (*ahlomōy*), and anti-Iranian (*anēr*; in the present author’s opinion, this term refers to those who in Islamic times opposed Mazdean mores, ethics, and belief and does not mean simply “ignoble,” as it is generally interpreted) and in the popular (secular) parlance (*pad ēwāz ī šahr*) sophist, as well as *daharīg* (*dh’lyk*.” In this loosely phrased sentence the *dahrī/daharīg* evidently refers to the one who denies god and religious doctrine.



At the close of the 9th century Mardān-Farrox son of Hormizddād, a proficient polemicist and rational Zoroastrian, described the belief and teachings of the *dahrīs* in his refutation of atheism and materialism, *Škand-gumānīg wizār* (Doubt-dispelling exposition), in complete accord with the accounts of the Islamic heresiographers and theologians of the time. He wrote (chap. 6.1-8; *Škand-Gumānīg*, tr., pp. 78-79; Zaehner, p. 23; Shaki, p. 62; West, pp. 41-42): “Another deception is that of the atheists (*nēst-yazad-gōwān*, lit., “who say god is not”), who are called *daharī* [in Pazand], and consider themselves to be delivered from religious discipline and the toil of performing meritorious deeds. They foolishly utter much nonsense. Notice this: This world with all its manifold transformations and organizations of its constituents and organs, its oppositions and combinations, is considered to have for its principle (*buništ*, Pazand *bunyaštaa*) the Infinite Time (*akanārag-zamān*, Pazand *akanaraa-jamān*), and that there is no reward for merits and no retribution for sins, no paradise or hell, no agent to direct good or evil deeds, and that all things are material and the spiritual world does not exist.” The same theme is treated in chapter 5, where Mardān-Farrox referred to the atheists as *nēst-yazad-gōwān*, who deny god and his rival (*hambūdīg*; *Škand-Gumānīg*, tr., p. 64).

In the Sasanian period Infinite Time, representing Zurwān (= Akanārag Zamān), the creator par excellence and the father of Ohrmazd and Ahreman (see [ahura mazdā](#); [ahriman](#)), the Iranian materialists and atheists dissociated themselves from the naturalistic Infinite Time, the temporal *dahr*, as the primal principle of the cosmos and simply denied god, the creation, and religion (*pad yazdān ud dēn *nakkīrā būd hēnd*; *Ardā Wīrāz-nāmag*, chap. 56.3; ed. Gignoux, pp. 102-03). They are described more thoroughly as those sinners “who in the world did not believe in the spiritual world (*mēnōg*) and were ungrateful to the religion of Ohrmazd the creator, [and] doubted the blessings of paradise, the evils of hell, the existence of the Resurrection, the Final Body (*tan ī pasēn*)” (*Ardā Wīrāz-nāmag*, chap. 61.3; tr. Gignoux, pp. 194-95). In the Sasanian law book *Mādayān ī hazār dādestān* (pt. 2, p. 34) atheism (*anast-gōwišnīh*, lit., “saying he is not” and blasphemy/sacrilege (*yazdān-dušmenīh*)) are mentioned among other mortal crimes that were, by the order of the high priest (*mowbedān mowbed*) Weh-Šāpūr/Šābuhr, to be submitted to judgment and recorded in memoranda.

The Sasanian authors also reported intense sectarian conflicts and divergent philosophical outlooks, ranging from what was regarded as orthodox to extreme heterodox views.



Lamenting the prevalence of ideological confusion and moral perversion among the Sasanians, Burzōē/**Borzūya**, the renowned physician of Ҷosrow I Anōšīravān (r. 531-79) and translator of the *Pañcatantra* into Pahlavi, mentioned, inter alia, the existence of various skeptical views verging on atheism. In his introduction to *Kalīla wa Demna* Borzūya acknowledged the existence of agnostics among the medley of Sasanian disputants (pp. 47-48).

A similar, though more specific account was given by the Christian philosopher Paulus Persa, a contemporary of Borzūya and Ҷosrow I who bore witness to the existence of various schools of philosophy, especially that of materialism in Sasanian society. According to him, “some believe that the world and everything contained therein have been created; others think that the world has been made ex nihilo; according to others it has been drawn out from *hūlē* (matter)” (Casartelli, tr. p. 1).

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ii. In the Islamic Period

The frequent translation of *dahrī* as “materialist” is generally inadequate, particularly when the word is used in the sense of an adherent of the doctrine that the universe had no beginning in time (*qedam al-‘ālamdahrī* (Gimaret, 1985, p. 264), can hardly be classified as a materialist. Although the connection was not formally acknowledged in any of the great classical Koran commentaries, the term *dahrī* was probably derived from Koran 45:24, in which God refers to the words of the miscreants “What is there but our life in this world? We die and we live. Only time (*al-dahr*) can cause our death.” Denial of the reality of another life, and implicitly of the existence of God, by identification of time as the sole cause of death, is in fact characteristic of the *dahrīya* in the first sense. In another connection, as *dahr* had the connotation of a very long period of time, it accorded with the beliefs about the eternity of the universe associated with the second meaning of *dahrī*.

The adjective *dahrī* was already in use at an early date. Abū Bakr Aṣamm (d. 200/816) was reputed to have written a refutation of the *dahrīya*, and other such refutations were attributed to Naẓẓām and Abū Hoḍayl (Ebn al-Nadīm, ed. Tajaddod, pp. 206, 214; Baḡdādī, *Farq*, ed. ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd, p. 124). The expression *ahl al-dahr* was also used (Kāyyāṭ, chap. 20; Ebn Fūrak, p. 254; Bāqellānī, pp. 25, 66, 76, 113). *Molḥed*, a synonym for *dahrī* common among theologians in the early Islamic period, was used most commonly in the second sense (Mānkdīm, pp. 113, 117; Fūrakī, fol. 246; Jovaynī, 1950, pp. 23, 25; idem, 1969, pp. 219, 223, 229). The numerous refutations of the *molḥedīn* that Ebn al-Nadīm attributed to Abu’l-Hoḍayl, Bešr b. Mo’tamer, Žerār, Najjār, and others were thus probably also directed at the *dahrīyamolḥed* came to designate the Isma‘ilis.

In the first sense *dahrī* thus referred to those who denied the existence of God,



of a Creator (cf. Bazdawī, p. 237; Mortazā, II, p. 329), and was contrasted with *mowahhed* (Jāḥeẓ, I, pp. 217; Baḡdādī, *Farq*, ed. ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd, p. 124; Baḡdādī, 1928, p. 319). In denying God the *dahrīya* at the same time denied that there is an afterlife in which rewards and punishments will be meted out; they thus also denied the possibility of prophecy and the existence of demons, jinns, and angels. Similarly, they denied the possibility of miracles. All these denials resulted from the principle of accepting only what can be seen or is familiar (Jāḥeẓ, II, p. 139, IV, pp. 85, 90, VI, p. 269, VII, p. 12; Kayyāṭ, p. 58; Ebn Fūrak, 1987, pp. 84, 142; Ebn Qotayba, p. 133, 229; Bazdawī, p. 6). Authors like Jāḥeẓ and Ebn Qotayba appear to have taken only this first sense of *dahrī* into account. Jāḥeẓ painted an even darker picture, presenting the *dahrīya* as devoid not only of all religion but also of all morality: As they recognized no law and were thus ignorant of the distinction between licit and illicit, they had no standard of conduct other than their own interests and lived like beasts (VII, pp. 12-13).

Dahrī in the second sense referred to believers in the eternity of the universe (or of “matter” or “time”; K̄vārazmī, pp. 35, 39; Ebn Ḥazm, I, p. 9; Ebn Fūrak, pp. 220, 221, 254; ‘Abd al-Jabbār, V, p. 233). Šahrestānī, in the first chapter of his *Nehāyat al-aqdām*, where he demonstrated that the universe had a beginning (*ḥodūt*), named the *dahrīya* as adversaries (p. 29; cf. p. 126). For the *dahrīya* in this sense the present universe represents only the continuation of a repetitive process that had no beginning. Baḡdādī called them *al-azalīya men al-dahrīya* (“the eternalists among the *dahrīya*”; 1346/1928, pp. 55, 59; cf. Fūrakī, fol. 24b), and Nasafī identified them as *lam yazalīya* (p. 56). For them the universe has existed for all eternity in the same form in which it is visible today, “with its earth, its air, its sky, its stars” (Baḡdādī, 1346/1928, p. 319); no Creator (*šāne’*, *moḥdet*) had brought it into existence. Nothing can come to be that has not been preceded by its equivalent or its opposite to infinity (Anṣārī, fol. 56b; Aš‘arī, par. 13; Fūrakī, fol. 24b). More generally, nothing exists unless preceded by another thing; every man is born from sperm, and every sperm comes from a man (Baḡdādī, 1346/1928, pp. 40, 319; Bāqellānī, pp. 76, 112; Jovaynī, 1950, p. 25; idem, 1969, p. 224; Mānkdim, p. 117). In the view of these *dahrīya* the universe is a continuous chain of discrete events, of which none was the first: *ḥawādet lā awwal lahā* (Bāqellānī, pp. 25, 66), a view that the theologians, in their attempts to demonstrate the existence of God, never failed to attack (Gimaret, 1990, pp. 225-26). Within this group of *dahrīya* there were also variations in doctrine. Some accepted the possibility of accidents (movements, colors, etc.) that appear in bodies that are themselves eternal. For



others, adherents of the notion of *al-komūn wa'l-zohūr*, even the accidents are eternal and eternally present in the bodies, but sometimes they are hidden there and sometimes apparent. Still others denied the existence of accidents altogether (Baġdādī, *Farq*, ed. 'Abd al-Ḥamīd, p. 329; idem, 1926, pp. 7, 36, 52; Jovaynī, 1969, p. 168; idem, 1950, p. 18; Mānkdim, p. 96). These supposed “schools” within the *dahrīya* are almost impossible to distinguish, however.

There were also scholars who believed in the eternity of the world but held different views of its character from those of the *dahrīya* in the strict sense of the term. Some argued that the world, though eternal, has not always been as it is now; others recognized the existence of a Creator, with whom the world is “co-eternal.” On this point the theologians cited a number of doctrines (Baġdādī, 1926, p. 59; Fūrakī, fol. 24b; Jovaynī, 1950, p. 226; Mātorīdī, pp. 30, 121, 141-52; Bazdawī, p. 14; Nasafī, p. 57). According to the first group, what is eternal is not the universe itself in its present form but the principle or principles from which it was formed. This group encompassed adherents of the Aristotelian thesis of primary matter (*hāyūlā*), the *aṣḥāb al-ṭabā'e'*, who argued that the world is the result of the union and interaction of four “natures,” heat, cold, humidity, and dryness; and adherents of the dualist view, in which the world was represented as having issued from the mixing of two principles, light and darkness. In these various doctrines the universe is “eternal in its material but new in its form” (*qadīm al-ṭīna ḥadīṭ al-ṣaṇ'a*), a formulation of Mātorīdī (p. 30) that was also repeated by Nasafī (p. 57). On the other hand, there were the neoplatonic doctrines according to which the universe issued from a primordial being and thus is itself eternal, on the principle that an effect cannot be dissociated from its cause (*al-ma'lūl lā yofāreq al-'ella wa-lā yata'aḳkar 'anhā*

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