



DAIVA

***DAIVA**, Old Iranian noun (Av. *daēuua-*, OPers. *daiva-*) corresponding to the title *devá-* of the Indian gods and thus reflecting the Indo-European heritage (**deiuó-*), though the category of divinities to which it referred seems to have dropped completely out of the Iranian religious tradition and even to have become demonized. It is extremely difficult to determine just when this change took place and to understand its significance within the framework of Mazdean theology. The impression garnered from various sources is that the process was a gradual one.

In Avestan. In the Gathas the *daēuuas* had not yet, in fact, become demons. As [Émile Benveniste](#) (1967) clearly established, they constituted a distinct category of quite genuine gods, who had, however, been rejected. They were still venerated by the leaders of the larger Iranian nation (*daξiiu-*; Y. 32.3, 46.1) and had formerly been worshiped even by the people who accepted the religion of the Gathas (Y. 32.8); they thus formed part of the Mazdean social and religious system. That they were national gods is confirmed by the fact that they were invoked by means of the Iranian versions of expressions common in Vedic rhetoric, for example, *daēuua-/mašīia-*: *devá-/mártya-*, *vīspa-daēuua-*: *vísva- devá-*, and *daēuuo.zušta-*: *devájušta-*. The poet of the Gathas reproached the *daēuuas* for being, through blindness, incapable of proper divine discernment (*ərəš vī + ci*) and of having as a result accepted the bad religion, characterized by *aēnah-* (approximately equivalent to “error”), along with the good, characterized by *auuah-* (approximately equivalent to “favor”). It appears from the Gathas that the process of rejection, negation, or



demonization of these gods was only just beginning, but, as the evidence is full of gaps and ambiguities, this impression may be erroneous. For example, although polemics against the *daēuuas* and their followers are a major theme of the Gathas, in the other section of the Older *Avesta*, Yasna Haptañhāiti (Y. 35-41; Kellens and Pirart, pp. 30-32, 133-40), they are not mentioned at all. This divergence is extremely puzzling, especially as the doctrines expressed in the two sections are otherwise quite similar. Even in the Gathas no proper names are mentioned, so that it is not even clear precisely who the *daēuuas* were. Nor does the Younger Avesta (Vd. 10.9, 19.43) appear to shed any light on this specific problem.

Furthermore, in the Gathas the scope of the word *aēnah-*, and thus of the error to which it refers, is not precisely understood, and criticism of the *daēuuas* seems to differ slightly in different contexts. In the passage in which their relation to fundamentally negative abstractions (*druj-*, *aka-manah-*, *pairimaiti-*) is defined (Y. 32.3), a syntactical construction otherwise unknown in Old Indo-Iranian has been adopted: masculine plural subject plus verb “to be” plus attributive adjective in the form of a singular neuter noun in the accusative plus ablative. The meanings are thus fundamentally incomprehensible. The pejorative terms applied to the *daēuuas* are *duždāh-* “miserly” and *xrafstra-*, referring to noxious creatures, depicted as harmful in the Younger Avesta, though the significance of the term in the Older Avesta is not certain. On the other hand, the *daēuuas* were never identified as *drəguuañt-* “people of the lie,” which would be very significant if it could be demonstrated that it is not a chance of survival.

In the Younger Avesta the *daēuuas* were represented as small, wicked genies who disturbed the order of the world, human health, and the regularity of religious life, in contrast to the *daēuuaiiasna-*, literally, “those who sacrifice to the *daēuuas*,” adherents of other religions. There are, however, exceptions in several passages. For example, the *daēuuaiiasnas* who offered nocturnal libations to Anāhitā (see [anāhid](#); Yt. 5.94) seem from the evidence to have been Mazdeans who were thus designated because of their deviation from accepted ritual; this passage suggests that in the period of the Younger Avesta the objects of all religious disapproval, whatever petty event may have inspired it, were identified as *daēuuas*. In the *Vidēvdād* (10.9,19.43) Indra (Ved. Índra), Sauruua (Ved. Śarvá), and Nāñhaiθiia (Ved. Nā́satya) are mentioned at the head of a list of *daēuuas*, immediately after reference to Anra Mainiiu (see [ahriman](#)); in the Pahlavi books the same three were recognized as the enemies



of *Aša*, *Xšaθra*, and *Armaiti* respectively. There are three possible explanations of why these Iranian equivalents to Vedic gods should be mentioned in the *Vidēvdād*. First, it is conceivable that they were still worshiped in some Iranian circles, though at the period when the *Vidēvdād* was compiled that seems very unlikely; furthermore, this explanation does not take into account the probability that there was no word **daiva*- “god” in Iranian (see below). If, on the other hand, these gods represented an ancient memory, they would provide clues to the identification of several of the *daēuuas* in the Older Avesta, but this suggestion raises other difficulties, aside from the apparently miraculous survival of this memory. In particular, it is difficult to explain why only these three gods would have been “demonized,” or perhaps not “undemonized,” while Mithra, *Vāiiu*, and others were not. Finally, it might be suggested that the three gods were simply avatars of the Indian gods, but it would be surprising to find in the *Vidēvdād* such close links with the Vedic religion coupled with complete adaptation of the names to Iranian phonology.

In Old Persian. The word *daiva*- appears three times in the plural in an inscription of Xerxes I (r. 486-65 b.c.e.) at Persepolis (XPh, ll. 36, 38, 39; Kent, *Old Persian*, pp. 150-52), and *daivadāna*- occurs once, in the accusative singular, in the same inscription (l. 37), referring to one of the *daivas*’ sanctuaries: “And in addition (*utā*) among these countries there was [a place] where previously the *daivas* were worshiped (*yad*). Therefore, at the command of Ahura Mazdā, I destroyed this sanctuary of the *daivas*, and I proclaimed, “The *daivas* are no longer to be worshiped!” In this place where previously the *daivas* had been worshiped, there I worshiped Ahura Mazdā with a *brazman* according to Harmony (*artācā brazmaniy*).” The possible Avestan parallel to the usage of the word *daivas* in this text remains entirely unclear. Mary Boyce (*Zoroastrianism* II, p. 175) has argued that Xerxes, “as a Zoroastrian, was recording the destruction of an Iranian sanctuary devoted to the worship of those warlike beings condemned by the prophet . . . ” Muhammad Dandamayev, on the other hand, has suggested that the *daivas* mentioned by Xerxes were Mithra, *Anāhitā*, and the other gods condemned by Zoroaster (p. 226). Ugo Bianchi cited the use of the word *daiva*- “with an absolutely negative sense (that is to say, not depending upon an adjective or on the context)” as evidence that the Achaemenids were in fact Zoroastrians (1977, p. 1). In the view of all three of these scholars, Xerxes thus understood the word in the sense “rejected god,” which is identical with the Gathic meaning.



Other scholars have taken into account the broader context in which the inscription was composed, including what is known of the political history of the reign of Xerxes. Somewhat earlier in the inscription (ll. 13-28) Xerxes listed the countries that were part of the Achaemenid empire and reported (ll. 28-35) that, at the time of his accession to the throne, one of them was in revolt; he put down the rebels and restored the country to its former condition. If the country “in revolt” could be equated with the country where false *daivas* had been worshiped, it would follow that Xerxes understood *daiva-* in the Younger Avestan sense “god of another religion.” Hans Hartmann, Henryk S. Nyberg (pp. 364-66), and apparently Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin (1962, p. 156) all identified the country in revolt as Babylon, but Gherardo Gnoli (p. 79) has expressed reserve about this identification, particularly in view of what is known of the Achaemenids’ religious policy. The question of Xerxes’ specific policy toward the Babylonian temples was reviewed by Amélie Kuhrt and Susan Sherwin-White, who concluded that the *daivas* mentioned in the inscription cannot be identified with the gods of Babylon.

On the other hand, Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg insists that inscription XPh does not reflect specific historical events but is merely a proclamation of royal religious ideology, announcing in effect “All rebellion will be punished, and the sanctuaries of the gods of the rebels will be destroyed.” If she is correct, the sense of *daiva-* in the inscription would be similar to that in the Avestan passage in which the *daivas* are said to have offered nocturnal libations to Anāhitā (*Yt.* 5.94). It should be added that Xerxes replaced the rebels’ cult with the official Achaemenid cult, represented by his sacrifice to [Ahura Mazdā](#) according to a precise ritual (*artācā brazmaniy*). From this perspective the *daivas* appear to have been gods, of whatever origin, who might side with rebels, even hypothetical ones, and thus imperil the political and religious order of the empire, which was rooted in the imperial cult. Considering that the Achaemenids did not prevent subject populations from practicing their own religions, as specified in the treaties of political submission and tribute, it must be concluded that the gods whom Xerxes called *daivas* could be worshiped but that such worship could not be expressed with the verb *ya-* “to worship.” In Xerxes’ text *yad* can mean only “to perform the official worship, the worship of the founder.” Although Xerxes’ mention of the *daivas* is most logically explained in this way, the available documentation does not permit further clarification of the actual historical usage of *yad*.

Problems of interpretation. It is difficult to reconcile the fragmentary and



chronologically discontinuous information on the *daivas* provided in the sources. There is an essential contradiction between the testimony of the Gathas, which suggests that the rejection of the *daēuuas* constituted a major crisis in Iranian religious thought, and the fact that no known Iranian dialect attests clearly and certainly the survival of a positive sense for **daiva-*. Only four possibilities have been identified. First, if a curious amalgam of signs in the last lines of the inscription from Surkh Khotal could be interpreted as *δειιο*, then Mithra could be said to have borne the title **daiva-* (Humbach), but this reading has not been accepted. Second, proper names in which *dēv* is the first element are known from Sogdiana (Nöldeke, 1923; Henning), but, as Marijan Molé has pointed out, they are attested only from an area where the population had been converted to Buddhism. Third, that the white *dīv* of Māzandarān, the subject of an episode in the *Šāh-nāma*, may have been an authentic ancient local divinity (Nöldeke, 1915) is purely conjectural. Fourth, Georges Dumézil's interpretation of Ossetic *ævdīv* as equivalent to **apa-daiva* "godless" (1960) was received with skepticism by Benveniste (1959).

If the pejorative sense of **daiva-* was common to all Iranian languages, it could not have resulted from an innovation; it would have had to be an original constituent of the Iranian language and religion, but it is impossible to make this fundamental fact of Iranian linguistics accord with the information in the Gathas. Attempts to explain the pejorative connotation of **daiva-* thus involve either accepting the linguistic evidence while denying that of the Gathas (the constituent hypothesis), accepting the evidence of the Gathas and denying that of the language (the reform hypothesis), or attempting to reconcile the two (the progressive hypothesis).

According to the constituent hypothesis, the **daivas* had never been Iranian gods. Martin Haug claimed that a schism had occurred at the time of the Indo-Iranian migrations, a notion that is now out of date. Thomas Burrow, on the other hand, argued that the **daivas* were gods of the Indian tribes who lived in the same territory as the Iranians. The *daēuuas* named in the *Vidēvdād* (10.9, 19.43) would thus have represented either a memory of the national past or the specific gods of the ancient enemy. Both of these interpretations are contradicted by the Gathic evidence, which cannot simply be passed over in silence.

In the reform hypothesis the rejection of the **daivas* is considered to have been the work of Zoroaster (Lommel, pp. 88-92; cf. Gershevitch; Bianchi, 1978, pp. 19-22; Gnoli, pp. 73-83). This interpretation is intimately connected with



explanation of Mazdaism by means of the dialectical schema: thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. The rejection of the *daēuuas* would thus have been the core of the antithesis and the fundamental act of Mazdean monotheism. There are several insurmountable flaws in this hypothesis, however. First, it does not account for the fact that a personal doctrine, which was disseminated gradually by missionaries, ended by predominating in exactly the geographical area where the Iranian languages were spoken. Second, it depends heavily on the meager evidence suggesting that **daiva-* was originally equivalent to “god.” Finally, it does not account for the fact that one man was able to impose his condemnation of the traditional gods upon his entire people. Herman Lommel (p. 91) and Ilya Gershevitch (pp. 79-80), though aware of the force of this last objection, argued that the total rejection of these gods is evidence of the genius of Zoroaster.

According to the progressive hypothesis, the rejection of the **daivas* was a gradual phenomenon, rooted in the Indo-Iranian past but evolving during the course of Iranian history, a result in which Zoroaster played a role of greater or lesser importance. This hypothesis has three variants. In that proposed by James Darmesteter and Molé the “rejection” consisted of nothing more than a striking lexical accident to the Iranian word **daiva-*. This interpretation, like the constituent hypothesis, is contradicted by the Gathic evidence and also by the onomastic data of the *Vidēvdād* (10.9, 19.43), which Darmesteter sought unsuccessfully to explain away. This variant is the most extreme and the farthest from the dialectical hypothesis, for it postulates that there was no religious divergence between India and Iran at all. According to the variant proposed by Boyce (*Zoroastrianism* I, pp. 85, 197), which Duchesne-Guillemin came close to adopting in 1962, the Iranians’ distrust of the **daivas* was general, but Zoroaster was the actual artisan of their demonization. To the extent that it accords to the prophet the primordial role, this interpretation has the same weaknesses as the reform hypothesis. The third variant was implied in a paragraph by Antoine Meillet (p. 62) and in Benveniste’s explanation of the formation of the cult of Mazdā (1929, pp. 35-42), but it was fully developed by Nyberg (p. 96) and Duchesne-Guillemin (1953, pp. 27-28). It reflects an attempt to reconcile all the known evidence in acceptable fashion. According to this argument, there were two categories of divinity in Indo-Iranian religion, the **asuras* and the **daivas*. The Indians demonized the first and the Iranians the second; Zoroaster’s role was at most simply to accelerate the latter process. This hypothesis raises new difficulties, however. First, the use of *ásura-* in the Rigveda is so unsystematic and inconsistent that it can



hardly be said to confirm the existence of a category of gods opposed to the *devás*. Burrow has clearly shown, furthermore, that the demonization of the *ásuras* took place so late that the associated terms cannot be considered a feature of Indo-Iranian religious dialectology. To propose a prehistoric opposition **ásura/daivá* therefore would involve interminable and entirely conjectural discussions of the status of Mithra, *Apam Napāt*, and **Ahura* (Boyce, 1969; Bianchi, 1978). There is also the question of interpreting the Gathic passages if reference to the rejection of the *daēuuas* was not what was intended. Dumézil foresaw the difficulty when he defined Zoroastrianism as a reform of a reform (1945, pp. 63-64). If it is assumed that the debasement of the *daēuuas* and the elevation of Mazdā constituted the primary reform, then it is not clear in what the secondary reform consisted. Johanna Narten (*passim*) has demonstrated that it could not have been the formulation of the system of beings, as Dumézil believed; on the contrary it appears that the rejection of the *daēuuas* was the focus of attention in the Gathas. Another obstacle to acceptance of this hypothesis is the reappearance of the banished gods in the Younger Avesta. The dialectical schema does not account for the diversity of the evidence. It is not clear, for example, where Mithra belonged or why the Mazdeans rehabilitated Vāiiu but not Rudrá, the Nā́satyas, or even Indra. The evidence does not support any closely reasoned argument. For example, in contrast to Duchesne-Guillemin, who believed that Mithra was “the god of cruel offerings and drunken ecstasies” (1953, p. 40), Boyce declared that “Mithra’s general character as god of justice and good faith accords admirably with Zoroaster’s tenets” (1969, p. 17).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

E. Benveniste, *The Persian Religion According to the Chief Greek Texts*, Paris, 1929.

Idem, *Études sur la langue ossète*, Paris, 1959.

Idem, “Hommes et dieux dans l’Avesta,” *Festschrift für Wilhelm Eilers*, Wiesbaden, 1967, pp. 144-47.



U. Bianchi, "L'inscription "des daivas" et le Zoroastrisme des Achéménides," *RHR*, 1977, pp. 3-30.

Idem, *Mithra and the Question of Iranian Monotheism. Études mithraïques*, Acta Iranica 17, Tehran and Liège, 1978.

M. Boyce, "On Mithra's Part in Zoroastrianism," *BSOAS* 32, 1969, pp. 10-34.

T. Burrow, "The Proto-Indoaryans," *JRAS*, 1973, pp. 123-40.

M. Dandamayev, *Persien unter den ersten Achämeniden*, Wiesbaden, 1976.

J. Darmesteter, *Ormazd et Ahriman*, Paris, 1877.

J. Duchesne-Guillemin, *Ormazd et Ahriman*, Paris, 1953.

Idem, *La religion de l'Iran ancien*, Paris, 1962.

G. Dumézil, *Naissance d'archanges*, Paris, 1945.

Idem, "À propos de quelques représentations folkloriques des Ossètes," *Festgabe für Herman Lommel*, Wiesbaden, 1960, pp. 39-40.

I. Gershevitch, "Die Sonne das Beste," *Mithraic Studies* 1, 1975, pp. 79-81.

G. Gnoli, *Zoroaster's Time and Homeland*, Naples, 1980.

H. Hartmann, "Zur neuen Inschrift des Xerxes von Persepolis," *OLZ* 40, 1937, pp. 158-60.

M. Haug, *Essays on the Sacred Language, Writings and Religion of the Parsees*, Bombay, 1862.

W. B. Henning, "A Sogdian God," *BSOAS* 28, 1965, pp. 253-54.

C. Herrenschmidt, "Notes de vieux-perse III (artācā brazmaniy)," *IJ* 36, 1993, pp. 45-50.

H. Humbach, "Der iranische Mithra als Daiva," *Festgabe für Herman Lommel*, Wiesbaden, 1960, pp. 75-79.

J. Kellens, "Trois réflexions sur la religion des Achéménides," *Studien für Indologie und Iranistik* 2, 1976, pp. 121-26.



Idem and E. Pirart, *Les textes vieil-avestiques I*, Wiesbaden, 1988.

A. Kuhrt and S. M. Sherwin-White, "Xerxes' Destruction of Babylonian Temples," in H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg and A. Kuhrt, eds., *Achaemenid History II. The Greek Sources*, Leiden, 1987, pp. 69-78.

H. Lommel, *Die Religion Zarathustras*, Tübingen, 1930.

A. Meillet, *Trois conférences sur les Gâtha de l'Avesta*, Paris, 1925.

M. Molé, *Culte, mythe et cosmologie dans l'Iran ancien*, Paris, 1963, pp. 5-7.

J. Narten, *Die Aməša Spəntas im Avesta*, Wiesbaden, 1982. T. Nöldeke, "Dīv," *ARW* 18, 1915, pp. 597-600.

Idem, "Deva," *ZII* 2, 1923, p. 318.

H. S. Nyberg, *Die Religionen des alten Irans*, Leipzig, 1938.

H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg, *Yaunā en Persai. Grieken en Perzen in een ander perspectief*, Ph.D. diss., Groningen, 1980.