



DERAḲṬ

DERAḲṬ (Mid. Pers. *draxt*), tree, shrub. Two other words for “tree” occur in Pahlavi literature: *wan* (Av. *vanā-*, Pashto *wana*, Pers. *bon*) and *dār*, also meaning “wood” (Av. *dārav-/drav-* “tree stem, wood,” Caspian dialects, Kurd., etc., *dār* “tree”; *AirWb.*, cols. 738-39, 1353; *Morgenstierne*, p. 87 no. 260); both *bon* and *dār* are obsolete in modern Persian usage, except in compounds like *sarv-bon* “cypress tree,” probably *nār-van* “elm tree,” *dār-bast* “trellis, scaffolding,” and Šīrāzī *bon(-e)gāh* “grove,” and *dār* in the sense of “gibbet” and “wooden frame.” In the *Bundahišn* a distinction is made between *dār* and *draxt*: Perennial plants that yield no food, like the [cypress](#), plane, and box trees and the tamarisk are called *dārodraxt*, but *draxt* is also said to designate any perennial plant, whether it produces food or not. Curiously, perennial fruit trees like the [date palm](#), the myrtle, the lote, and the grapevine are called simply *mēwag* “fruit” (NPers. *mīva*; tr. *Anklesaria*, 16.8-10; tr. *Bahār*, p. 87).

The *Bundahišn* (tr. *Anklesaria*, 4.12-18), along with other legendary or historical sources, reveals the basically animistic Mazdean conception of the vegetable kingdom, which is reflected in tree symbolism (cf. the animistic, representative, and symbolic stages distinguished in the general development of tree worship; *Barns*, pp. 448-51). In the Mazdean tradition plants, like other natural phenomena, were believed to have souls (Pahl. *mēnōg*; see, e.g., *Bundahišn* 4.12, 4.14, 4.16, 4.18); all “Ahura Mazdā-given, clean plants,” instinct with divine spirit, were venerable (*Yasna* 16.89, 17.12, 17.16; tr., pp. 194-95, 198, 199; for the few, despicable plants created by Ahriman, see [GĪĀH](#)), and this principle underlay all Mazdean plant lore, as well as what may have been



a kind of tree cult. Mazdeans believed that **Ahura Mazdā** (*Bundahišn*, tr. Anklesaria, 6D.1-4, 6E.1, 16.3) created fifty-five kinds (*sardag*) of grains and twelve of medicinal plants, which grew from the semen of the “uniquely created bull” at its death, as well as 130,000 *sardags* (species? 100,000 in *Indian Bundahišn* 9.2-4, 27.2, tr. West, p. 110; cf. *Zādspram* 3.38, tr., p. 12) derived from 10,000 *sardags* (genera? 1,000 in *Zādspram* 23, tr. pp. 57, 110; cf. 3.38, tr., p. 12) in turn derived from a single *mādagwarsardag* (archetype?). From the combined seeds of all these plants a cosmic or archetypal tree, *wan-ī was-tōhmag* (multiseeded tree) or *wan-ī harwisp-tōhmag* (all-seed tree; *Zādspram* 3.39, tr., p. 12), grew in the middle of the mythical sea Frāxwkard (Av. *vouru-kaša-*; *Bundahišn*, tr. Anklesaria, 6D.3, 16.3-4; *Zādspram* 3.38-39; tr., p. 12). This fabulous tree was also known as *frārōn/tuxšāgbizešk* “righteous/diligent physician,” *hamāg-bizešk* “all-healer” (*Bunda-hišn*, tr. Anklesaria, 24C.8; Av. *vīspō-biš*, lit., “all-remedy [tree]”; *AirWb.*, cols. 1468-69), and *wan-ī ĵud-bēš* “antipain tree” (*Mēnōg ī xrad*, ed. Anklesaria, 61.37-39; tr., p. 82). These allusions to the healing virtues of this fantastic tree probably reflect the belief that it embodied the twelve kinds of medicinal plants mentioned above, as well as the belief that the 10,000 *sardags* were intended by Ohrmazd to counter the 10,000 diseases devised by **Ahriman** (*Bundahišn*, tr. Anklesaria, 6D.3).

A number of features of the multiseeded tree are described in the *Bundahišn*. For example, within (under?) its trunk (*ēwan*) there are nine mountains with holes (*sūrāgōmand*) from which spring 9,999 streams. The mythical bird Sīmorǵ (Mid. Pers. Sēn murw) is said to perch on it every year to mix its seeds with water, which Tištar (Sirius) then rains down on all the regions of the world, thus propagating all kinds of plants. The immaculate sacred plant, the “white Hōm” (Av. *haoma*), also called *gōkirin* (Av. *gaokərənə-*) *draxt*, was planted by Ohrmazd near the multiseeded tree, in order to keep away decrepitude (*zarmān*) by imparting immortality to anyone who partakes of it (tr. Anklesaria, 14C.9, 16.4-5, 6D.6; Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* I, pp. 88-89, 137-38). Although the multiseeded tree seems to have been invulnerable, the *gōkirin* was not; Ahriman produced a huge frog (*wazay*), his largest animal, to spoil or destroy the *gōkirin*. Ohrmazd, in order to restrain the frog, created his largest animals, two *kar* fish, which constantly circled the *gōkirin* (*Bundahišn*, tr. Anklesaria, 24A.1-4). Whereas on a spiritual level the “white Hōm” was the *rad* (chief, lord, patron) of plants (16.5), among actual trees the **date palm** “is worth all the plants in the sky and on the earth” (16.1; cf. 17A.2).



Most forms of tree worship include belief in tree oracles (Barns, p. 455); in the *Šāh-nāma* (Moscow, VII, pp. 88-91) [Alexander the Great](#), after crossing a desert, came to an inhabited and woody country (probably western India), where he learned of a wonderful tree with one male and one female trunk; the foliage of the former provided oracles in the daytime, that of the other at night. The male prophesied that Alexander's reign would last only fourteen years, the female that he would die soon, in a foreign land.

According to a Zoroastrian tradition recorded by Daqīqī, the Kayanid king Goštāsp commemorated his conversion to Zoroastrianism by planting at Balk a wonderful cypress sapling, later known as Sarv-e Kāšmar, which in a few years attained a height of 40 cubits and a comparable diameter (*Šāh-nāma*, Moscow, VI, pp. 68-71). Belief in a sacred, divine, or “cosmic” tree may lead to reverence for, even worship of, individual trees believed to harbor the divine spirit or to embody the souls of personages who might serve as intercessors with the deity. Trees with particular remarkable features lend themselves to such beliefs: Evergreens and very old trees may symbolize immortality; size may suggest the greatness of the associated holy person; and an isolated position may underscore the uniqueness of God or the holy person. Although supposedly “fruitless” cypresses and plane trees have been particularly favored in Persia for these purposes, any other noticeable species may become foci of devotion: date palms in central and southern regions, oaks in western Persia, Siberian elms (*deraḳt-e āzād*, *Zelkova crenata* Desf.) in the Caspian provinces, pistachio trees in Khorasan, various fruit trees in Lorestān and Īlām (Asadiān et al., pp. 234-35).

Aside from the much later identification of the cypress of Kāšmar (or Bost) as the sacred tree of the Persians, the only “historical” reference to such an act of devotion and votive offering by a Persian notable is that of Herodotus (7.31), who reported that at Callatebus in Asia Minor the Achaemenid Xerxes (486-65 B.C.E.) found a plane tree so beautiful that he decorated it with golden ornaments and put it under the care of one of his Immortals. The animistic attitude toward venerable trees has continued in Persia to the present day, but with the transfer of devotion to Muslim saints, particularly Twelver Shi'ites. Distinguished trees have often generated belief in their sacred origin and association with saints, who work miracles or grant wishes through the intermediary of “their” trees. Hence the multitude of holy trees (*deraḳt-e fāzel* “eminent tree”; Ouseley, I, p. 313; Moḥammad-Pādšāh, III, s.v.; *deraḳt-e faẓl* “tree of distinction/grace”; Yule in Polo, pp. 134-35), now usually designated



deraḳt-e naẓar-karda (blessed tree; *āqā-dār* in Gīlān and Māzandarān). There can be little doubt that the two historically attested magnificent cypresses at Kāšmar and Faryūmad inspired the legends that they were planted by Zoroaster or Goštāsp, and many an *emāmzāda* owes its existence to the proximity of an outstanding tree. Manučehr Sotūda (pp. vi-vii) noted that ten remarkable trees recorded in 1906-12 by H. L. Rabino di Borgomale, then British consul at Rašt, “are now each flanked by a building named Emāmzāda Ḥasan, Emāmzāda Ebrāhīm, and the like.” The sanctity of a given tree is usually revealed by a Shiʿite saint in a dream to a person who then usually lays claim to the potentially lucrative custodianship (*tawliat*) of the tree and the shrine eventually constructed there. Dūst-ʿAlī Moʿayyer-al-Mamālek (pp. 16, 28, and photograph p. 173), an intimate and son-in-law of the Qajar Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah (1264-1313 Š./1848-96), reported such a story, deliberately circulated, which led to construction of an *emāmzāda* beside a plane tree in the private quarters of the shah’s palace. Sometimes two or more prominent trees of the same species together constitute a sacred spot; the once prosperous Haft Tan (seven persons) in a suburb of Sārī included seven majestic Siberian elms, of which only a few have been spared by the ravages of time. In Māzandarān such a spot is called a *godargāh* (passage, implying that a saint has passed by), according to Jawād Nūšīn, who reports eighteen *emāmzādas* and several *godargāhs* in Kalārostāq (pp. 79-81). In Lorestān and Īlām lote trees, considered “paradisiacal,” grow on plains or mountain passes trodden by holy persons (Asadiān et al., pp. 234-35).

Many remarkable “sacred” trees have been described by European travelers in Persia and by some native authors (see Massé, *Croyances et coutumes* I, pp. 221-23). To those trees may be added the controversial solitary plane tree described confusingly by Marco Polo (I, p. 127) as “the Arbre Sol . . . in Tonocain/Timocain” (i.e., the districts of Tūn and Qāyen in Khorasan); Guy Le Strange’s guess (*Lands*, p. **) that it was the fabled “cypress of Zoroaster” is certainly wrong. Other additions to the list include the majestic old cypress in the courtyard of Emāmzāda Sayyed Ḥamza in Kāšmar; the still verdant wild pistachio tree, about 6.5 m tall and 860 years old, shading the tomb of Shaikh Aḥmad Jāmī (q.v.; d. 536/141) in Torbat-e Jām; and another wild pistachio tree, 400-500 years old, at the tomb of Zayn-al-Dīn Abū Bakr Tāybādī (d. 791/1389) in Tāybād (Abrišamī, p. 39). Shaikh Abū Saʿīd b. Abī’l-Ḳayr (d. 440/1048-49), forty years before his death, designated the site of his tomb at the foot of a large mulberry tree at Meyhana (Moḥammad b. Monawwar, pp. 37, 304, 371). The tombs of many Sufis and other saintly men buried in Herat province are



shaded by old wild pistachio trees (Saljūqī, notes, pp. 52, 75, 103, 106, 120, 121, 130). Even dead “sacred” trees usually retain their status (see, e.g., *Nozhat al-qolūb*, ed. Le Strange, pp. 279-80; Saljūqī, p. 55 and notes, p. 24).

There are many legendary or semihistorical allusions to the symbolism of trees in pre-Islamic Persia, sometimes with apocalyptic import. Herodotus (1.107-08) reported the legend of *Astyages*, king of Media, who saw in a dream a vine growing from the private parts of his pregnant daughter Mandane, who was married to *Cambyses I*; he also reported (7.27) that the wealthy Lydian Pythius had offered a miniature golden plane tree and vine to Darius I when the latter passed through en route to Greece. These gifts may have been meant as charms, fetishes, or symbols of potential victory. Xenophon described, on the authority of Antiochus of Arcadia, a golden plane tree that was revered at the Achaemenid court; it was adorned with jewels from all over the empire, and royal audiences were held beneath it. The Macedonians who looted Persepolis had seen both that tree and a golden vine that were sometimes kept in the royal bedchamber (*Hellenica* 7.1.38). This golden tree was last mentioned when the Seleucid Antigonus Monophthalmos seized it at Susa in 316 B.C.E. (cf. Eddy, p. **; cf. Rawlinson, IV, p. 170).

Herodotus also reported (7.19) that Xerxes, contemplating an invasion of Greece, saw himself in a dream crowned with an olive branch from which other branches spread over the earth, a vision that the Magi interpreted as portending not only victory over Greece but also conquest of the world. Another prophetic dream of a tree is related in the *Bahman Yašt* (ed. and tr. Rāšed Moḥaṣṣel, 1.3, 1.6-11, pp. 49-50, cf. 3.19-28, pp. 53-54; tr. West, 1.1-5, pp. 192-93, cf. 2.14-22, pp. 198-201), where Zoroaster is reported to have dreamed of a tree with four branches, of gold, silver, steel, and “mixed-up” iron, which Ohrmazd interpreted as symbolizing four future periods in Iranian history after Zoroaster’s own millennium: the reigns of Goštāsb, Kay Ardašīr, Ḳosrow I, and finally a calamitous age of invasion by demons. In the *Šāh-nāma* (Moscow, V, pp. 54-55 vv. 787-92) there is an account of a jeweled artificial tree shading the throne of Kay Ḳosrow. Reminiscent of this tree is the one that the ‘Abbasid caliph al-Moqtader (296-320/908-32) had in Baghdad (Ḳaṭīb, p. 103; Qazvīnī, pp. 210-11).

Sacralization of trees presupposes legal sanctions against profaning or destroying them, or at least an ethical attitude condemning such acts; but the only protection for trees in Persia seems to have been the awe inspired by them, expressed in this hemistich by the poet Neẓāmī Ganjavī (d. 605/1209):



“Anybody felling a tree will be short-lived” (p. 427 v. 5). A dramatic instance is the early belief that the caliph al-Motawakkel (232-47/847-61), who ordered the sacred cypress of Kāšmar felled despite warnings of his entourage and the supplication of local Mazdeans, was murdered before the pieces of the tree reached Baghdad. In general, however, Persia has suffered from continuous deforestation over the centuries. In addition to the traditional indiscriminate and wasteful felling of trees for fuel and other uses, during the last few decades much wooded land has been cleared for cultivation, particularly in the Caspian provinces. Reżā Shah (1304-20 Š./1925-41) established an annual tree-planting day (15 Esfand/6 March), which was nominally observed during the reign of Moḥammad-Reżā Shah (1320-57 Š./1941-79), but it had little impact. In the charter of Moḥammad-Reżā Shah’s “White Revolution” (promulgated on 6 Bahman 1341 Š./26 January 1963) many forests and pastures were nationalized, which provided some measure of protection, as destructive exploitation of these resources was forbidden. In addition, a long-term program of reforestation and preservation resulted in establishment of such agencies as Sāzmān-e jangalbānī o marāte‘-e kešvar (Organization of conservation of forests and rangelands), Sāzmān-e ḥefāzat-e moḥiṭ-e zīst (Department of environmental protection), and Anjoman-e mellī-e ḥefāzat-e manābe‘-e ṭabī‘ī o moḥiṭ-e ensānī (National society for the conservation of natural resources and the human environment), the last under royal patronage. A seminar on the natural vegetation of Persia was convened in Tehran 8-11 Tīr 1354 Š./29 June-2 July 1975 (Dānešgāh). The application of protective measures was greatly facilitated by adequate provision of kerosene fuel to villagers and the expansion of the electric-power network. Since the Revolution of 1357 Š./1979 acute shortages of kerosene and electricity, as well as indifference to the natural environment, have resulted in the increased use of firewood and charcoal by villagers and city dwellers (see [FORESTS](#)).

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