



KARŠIFT

KARŠIFT (Av. *Karšiptar*), the mythical bird, appears once in the *Avesta* (*Vd.* 2.42). In the *Vidēvdād*, Ahura Mazdā describes to Yima how to build an “enclosure” (Av. *vara-*, MPers. *war*; on this word, see Cantera, pp. 55-62) as a refuge to keep samples of all his creatures (*Vd.* 2.27-28 and 35-36) alive during the great winter (*Vd.* 2.22 *staxrō mrūrō ziiā*) that was to ravage the world. It was *Karšift* that brought the Zoroastrian religion into the *vara*. The same information is told by Middle Persian texts (*Bundahišn* 17.10; 24g25). Furthermore, according to *Bundahišn* (24g25), *karšift* possesses the gift of speech, and according to *Zādspram* (23.2) and the *Pahlavi Visperad* (1.1) is the chief (MPers. *rad*) of birds.

As regards to the meaning of Avestan *karšiptar*, a literal translation would be “the black-winged” from *karši-* “black” (the expected Avestan compound form of **kršna*; cf. Sk. *kṛṣṇa*) and *-ptar* “wing” (Gershevitch, p. 88; the second term has been already recognized by Pagliaro in 1954). To complete the evidence on *Karšift*, three other Middle Persian terms may be added: 1. *caxrawāk*, which appears in a gloss for *karšift*: *caxrawāk ī pad axw ī mēnišn abāz šawēd*, “*caxrawāk* who will return to the spiritual world” (PV 2.42); 2. *carg*, a gloss from *Bundahišn* 17.19 attested in mss. K20 and M51: *karšift rad kē carg xwānēnd* “*Karšift* is the chief that they call *carg*”; 3. *cixrāz* (the only possible reading, despite the regular transcription *cihrāb* [Redard, p.198]), which, according to *Dādestān ī Mēnōy ī Xrad* 60.9, is the chief of birds (here without mention of *karšift*). The three terms mentioned here may be etymologically related: *cakrawāk* < **cakra-vāka-* “the one who says *cakra*”, with a historical



spelling; *cixrāz*, which is a different suffix, yet semantically identical < **cakra-vāca*-; and *carg*, which would be a form without a suffix and displaying a metathesis. The word has survived until the present time, as pointed out by Daryaei and Malekzadeh, who add a cognate in the Persian language: the bird *čakāvak* “lark” associated with heavenly singing; they also point to a poem by Manučeḥri Dāmḡāni (11th cent.), where *čakāvak* occurs “in relation to a treasure *Ganj-e Gāv*, which is said to have been one of Yima’s treasures in his *Vara*” (p. 112). Despite all these materials, the identification of *Karšift* remains difficult, but Gershevitch’s (1975, p. 88) proposal to identify it as a raven certainly has merit. He based his hypothesis on a mythological parallel in Armenian, where a raven guides the hero, Mehr, to the rock (see Boyle, for the complete story). Note, incidentally, the regular role of the raven fulfilling the role of messenger in Indo-European legends (cf. Redard, 2012). Though there is another word for raven in Middle Persian, *warāy* (cf. Av. *vārāyna*- “falcon”), this must not be taken as a problem. An inherited name (*warāy*) and a metonymic one (*karšift*) could easily have coexisted, a current phenomenon for the names of animals. Even if there is no decisive argument to support it, the hypothesis of the raven is tempting because it combines the etymological signification with the role of messenger between the two worlds that are attributed to him.

See also [JAMŠID i. MYTH OF JAMŠID](#)

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