



MAGIC I. MAGICAL ELEMENTS IN THE AVESTA AND NĒRANG LITERATURE

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The presence of magical elements in the strict sense (i.e., doctrine or formulas supposed to produce a radical modification or a strong impact on physical objects) in Avestan literature has been considered rare. This is in keeping with the basic idea that we cannot include in magic the entire corpus of ideas lying behind the esoteric conception of the ritual of the *yasna* and its influence on the sacrificer(s) or on the persons who ordered the sacrifice. Nor can we include the speculations concerning the ritual as an extra-temporal dimension in which the priests were able to open a way towards Ahura Mazdā and the other (Later Avestan) divinities (the so-called “status” of *maga-*; see Gnoli, 1964; but cf. Kellens, 1994; Schmidt, 1991). We also cannot consider as a patent expression of ancient magic the complex conception of the force stemming from the Avestan ritual and its prayers. A certain prudence is also appropriate in regard to the large block of doctrines and rituals concerning the laws of purifications, which are very significant in the Zoroastrian context (Choksy, 1989), and the related prescriptions against the pollution emerging from corpses, or connected with the presence or influence of demonic beings



(Christensen, 1941), in particular with respect to the *Druj* Nasu (Gray, 1929, p. 211). All these doctrines can be connected with magic only in a few particular cases, which in part presumably belong to Indo-Iranian folklore (Carnoy, 1916, pp. 177-78; see also Henry, 1903).

Although these basic limitations have to be carefully considered, we have to examine the fresh and more detailed approach to the entire problem of Avestan magic that has been investigated by S. K. Pekala (2000). In fact, following the approach of the anthropologists Bronislaw Malinowski and Stanley Tambiah, this scholar documents the frequent use of spells and curses, which are attested to a much greater extent than has been customarily recognized, and concludes that magic in general should be considered as a significant part of the Avestan culture. The various Avestan spells, curses, and exorcisms clearly show the high complexity and strong development of magical practices, with the result that they became central to much of the Mazdean perspective. In particular, Pekala not only gives some evidence for the fact that the belief in witchcraft and sorcery, and other means of defense against the devilish forces, was undoubtedly widespread throughout Avestan literature, but he also maintains that all these protective formulas and performances against the *daēvas* (see *DAIVA*) should be considered as strictly belonging to the realm of magic.

In the Avesta, besides the strength generally attributed to the *mąθra*-“formula,” which can destroy or repel *Anra Mainyu* and the *daēvas*, it also possesses a healing power according to early Mazdean medicine (*mąθrō.baēšaza*- “healing with the *mąθra*, *Vd.* 7.44; see Benveniste, 1945, pp. 7-8) and protects human bodies (see *Vd.* 20.5-10) from diseases and death. In particular, *Yt.* 4 (Panaino, 2003) is unusual in that it contains a sequence of *mąθras* (with some allusions to the connected ritual prescriptions); these are directed against the *Druj* Nasu and other demons. According to *Yt.* 4.2-3, by one’s invoking *Haurvatāt* (see *HORDĀD*) and the *Aməša Spəntas* the *daēvas* can be smashed; the priest must in fact pronounce a formula which apparently is not transmitted in the text (being probably secret and known by heart), and then he must draw a furrow in the ground (*karšāim kārāiieiti*). Thanks to these acts he would be able to hide his own body (*haom tanūm guzaēta*) and (*Yt.* 4.5) bind (*θβąmca drujəmca baṇdāmi*) and strike down (*θβąmca drujəmca niyne*) the demon (or demoness) which was reputed to be present and the *Lie* (*Druj*) who accompanied him (or her). The reference to the idea of binding a hostile and demonic power is very common in magic (see



also below with regard to the *Nērang* literature) and is attested also in *Yt.* 8.55, where Tištrya binds with a great number of bindings the *Pairikā Dužyāiryā*.

After this ritual for invisibility, the priest (*Yt.* 4.6), in a similar ritual, must trace an increasing series of furrows (three, six, and finally nine) on the ground, and at the same time invoke the name of the person to be protected. It is to be noted that this kind of triadic repetition is similar in its structure to the procedure for the construction of Yima's *vara* (*Vd.* 2.30, 38) as well as for the laying out of the *baršnumgah* (*Vd.* 9.1-57, in particular 9.9-11; see Panaino, 1997). According to *Yt.* 4.7 the *maθra-* can be used against "the names of these Lies, those who cut up corpses;" and it works in order to strike down at will the Karapans (*nām'əni aēšqm drujinqm, nasūm.kərəta paiti janaiti, jata karapanō ...*) and the devilish creatures of hell. This formula of purification goes on in *Yt.* 4.8 with the mention of a special ritual, performed after sunset (*pasca hū frāšmō.dāitīm*), against the northern direction, i.e., the dangerous side of the demons. This side has in fact to be stricken (*apāxəδra.naēməm janaiti*); then, before the new dawn the Nasu will be smitten. In *Yt.* 4.9 we find a direct reference to the line of transmission of this *maθra-* (resulting to be a sort of paralyzing weapon against demons); it must be taught from the father to (his) son, from the brother to (his) uterine brother, from the priest to (his) disciple (*θrāiiavan-*, masc., lit. "student attending a **θrāya-*, i.e., a triple course of studies during three years," Gershevitch, 1967, pp. 209-10; cf. already Darmesteter, 1892, II, p. 361, n. 30).

This *maθra-* is referred to also in *Yt.* 14.46, after the revelation of another, apparently magical, ritual. This should be enacted (*Yt.* 14.44) by arranging "four feathers" (if *catanrō pərətō* means this, but see Humbach, 1976, who gives a different interpretation of the passage: "four full hands [of libations]") on the way in order to secure victory over the enemies through a sacrifice; that should be immediately offered to *Vərəθrayna*, before the performance of the *yasna* which might be offered by the opposing army. However, the interpretation of this passage remains open to question.

In *Yt.* 10.19-21, which is not properly a magical text, a kind of malediction against the *miθrō.druj-* ("one who is false to the contract") is attested, whose horses cannot stir from their places and are not able to draw the chariot, and whose spears are carried off by the wind. In fact, the evil spells of the Antimiθra (*auui.miθra-*) produce such a bad result (Gershevitch, 1967, pp. 82-85).



The kinds of restrictions noted above in the transmission of the *mąθra*- and in the performance of the ritual were probably obligatory because, according to *Vd.* 9.47-48, if an unqualified person would try to perform the purification, Nasu would be strengthened. According to *Yt.* 14.46, this very spell can even save a person whose head is forfeit and repel the arm ready to strike a blow. In *Yt.* 14.35, Ahura Mazdā explains how the possession of the feather of a falcon (the bird *vārənjina*- [Bartholomae, 1904, col. 1411, s.v. *vārən-gan*-], elsewhere *vārə-gan*- [ibid., col. 1412]) allows the pious Mazdean to counter-curse his opponents, while according to *Yt.* 14.36, whoever carries a bone or a feather of this bird cannot be harmed or driven away (Lommel, 1927, pp. 139-40; Malandra, 1983, pp. 85, 86). Such a feather in fact brings him respect and strength, and can be considered a sort of amulet.

The magical force of the act of binding (Eliade, 1947-48), attested also in *Yt.* 8.55, where Tištrya binds the Pairikā Dužyairyā (see Panaino, *Tištrya* I, p. 78, and s.v. Dužyairyā), has been adapted into the later doctrine of the binding of the planetary demons by the stars (Panaino, 1997) in the context of the astral battle between Ahuric stars and Planets (also called *parīgān*). This struggle represents a Sasanian modernization of the Avestan fight between stars and falling stars (*stārō kərəmā*, lit. “starred worms,” or *Pairikās*; see Panaino, *Tištrya* II, pp. 68, 75-78). *Pairikās* (Pahl. *parīg*) “witches” and *Yātus* (Pahl. *jadūg*) “wizards” (cf. Ved. *yātu*- and *yātudhāna*-; see Henry, 1903, pp. 158-59) are frequently mentioned in Avestan literature, and they can probably be considered as experts of demonic and Ahrimanic magic. The strong Avestan polemics against the Kavis and Karapans probably involve a complete refusal of their ritual considered as demonic.

It is to be noted that the names of the divinities, in particular that of Ahura Mazdā are given a special strength that, like a *mąθra*-, can destroy the demons and any kind of demonic beings, as shown in *Yt.* 1, and in particular in the list of names of Ohrmazd (*Yt.* 1.7-8, 12-15; see Panaino, 2002, pp. 15-27 and passim). These names are in fact considered a support and a fortification against the Druj and Anra Mainiiu (*Yt.* 1.19; see [AHRIMAN](#)).

Vd. 21 preserves a special incantation against death and was probably recited in order to counter any danger connected with childbirth (Darmesteter, 1892, pp. 281-87; for the ancient Indian traditions, see Henry, 1903, pp. 138-44).

The seminal idea that the *mąθra*- had an inner, anti-demonic power had a strong impact on the development of a special class of texts, called in Pahlavi



nērang “incantations, charms,” which are mostly attested in Pahlavi, Pāzand, and New Persian (see Dhalla, 1938, p. 383; Modi, 1911b, 1911c, 1924; Carnoy, 1916, pp. 182-84), in some cases also on amulets (Modi, 1901, 1911b). These texts frequently develop Avestan traditions, in particular when they are recited against the Druj̄s, the *xrafstras* (Hampel, 1974, pp. 20-21; Mirza, 1992, pp. 79), the Parīgan, and the Kavis and Karapans. Frēdōn (or Farīdūn in Pāzand texts), the first physician (Av, Θraētaona) is frequently mentioned because of his healing power (Carnoy, 1916, pp. 184-185; Skjaervø, 1995, pp. 189, 208-12) in order “to tie” (*bastan*) fever or other diseases (see e.g., Kanga, 1900, pp. 142-43). His name is invoked also in a Manichean Middle Persian magical text (M 781) edited by Henning (1947, pp. 39-40 = 1977, pp. 273-74). Sometimes the names of some divine astral beings are mentioned (Tištar, Sadwēs, Wanand, Haftōring), but it is peculiar that the planets, which are usually demons, can also be invoked (see *EIr.* II/8, 1987, p. 867). These spells are also used against evil mouths and evil eye that can be tied (Kanga, 1900, pp. 144-45), as an exorcism against demonic possession, in order to remove barrenness in women, to repel witchcraft but also robbers.

Although not strictly linked to the *nērang* literature, it is worthwhile to mention the existence of some *omina* texts (in New Persian) based on (1) the sighting of snakes in the different days of the month, such as the *Mār-nāma*, which refers to a kind of “ophiomancy” known also by al-Biruni in the *Chronology of the Ancient Nations* (see Sachau, 1879, p. 218), and (2) the observation of the various phases of the moon in the twelve zodiacal signs, such as the *Borj-nāma*. Both texts were embedded in the Persian *Rivāyats* of Dastur Dārāb Hormazdyār (Unvala, 1922, II, pp. 164-92, 194; Dhabhar, 1932, p. 579), but are surely older. These *omina* are ultimately of Mesopotamian origin (Gray, 1909-10, 1918; cf. Modi, 1911a; Panaino, 2004, 2005), because they follow the same patterns of the Babylonian hemerologies, a genre which is attested, in a very simple form, also in Pahlavi texts such as the appendix to the *Handarz ī anōšag-ruwān Adurbād ī Māraspandān* (Jamasp-Asana, 1913, pp. 69-71; Zaehner, 1972, pp. 107-9).



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(Antonio Panaino)

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