



# MAMMALS III. THE CLASSIFICATION OF MAMMALS AND THE OTHER ANIMAL CLASSES ACCORDING TO ZOROASTRIAN TRADITION

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## MAMMALS

### iii. The Classification of Mammals and the Other Animal Classes according to Zoroastrian Tradition

The first written information about certain animals in Iran comes from the Zoroastrian literature, according to which the entire animal kingdom is divided into two classes: “beneficent animals” (Av. *gao.spənta-*; MP. *gōspand*), such as cattle, dogs, and other domestic animals, which all play important roles in promoting human welfare, and, in the opposing camp, “evil animals” (Av. *xrafstra-*, MP. *xrafstar*), creatures potentially harmful to human beings and their agricultural crops or else hideous and obnoxious in aspect. Beneficent animals can be tamed and eaten or sacrificed to the deities. Evil animals are regarded as inedible, unacceptable as sacrificial offerings; they



should be killed. The bipartition of animals into beneficent and harmful represents without doubt one of the most original aspects of the Iranian religious worldview as described in the available Zoroastrian literature.

### BENEFICENT ANIMALS

A systematic animal classification in ancient Iranian is found in the *Avesta* and with more details in Middle Persian texts. In the *Avesta* there is a distributive description of the whole physical world, with the exception of humans, in *Yasna* 71.9. It consists of *yazamaide* (“we worship”) formulae, which only mentions the names of various entities worshipped, without saying much about them:

We worship all the waters (which are) in springs and flowing in rivers,  
We worship all the plants in their shoots and roots,  
We worship the whole earth, We worship the whole sky, We worship all  
the stars, the moon, and the sun,  
We worship all the endless lights,  
We worship all the animals, those living in the water and those living  
underground, the flying ones, those roaming in freedom (or: wilderness),  
and those worthy of (or: attached to) the pasture  
(Darmesteter, I, pp. 431-32; Humbach, 1991, I, p. 148)

*Yašt* 13.74 provides a list of animals divided into domestic (*pasuka-*) and wild (*daitika-*); this opposition also occurs in *Yasna* 39.1-2 (Darmesteter, I, p. 269; Humbach, 1991, I, p. 148). In *Yašt* 8.48 the creatures are first divided into those living underground and those above the earth, followed by the first four members of the standard list: those living in the water, those living underground, the flying ones, and those roaming in freedom. Here the last member, that is, those worthy of the pasture, is missing. The reason could be either that the quintuple list is an expansion of an older quadruple list preserved only here or that the last member was left out for some unknown reason (Schmidt, 1980, p. 215).

In the *Visperad* (1.1 and 2.1), the chiefs or prototypes (*ratavō*) of the animals are invoked and revered. The categories of animals are the same as in *Yasna* 71.9. In the *Avesta* the chiefs are never identified, but the Middle Persian translation of the *Visperad* gives the following, although the zoological identification of some of these animals is not certain:



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Middle Persian texts other than the translations of the Avesta offer more



details on animals (Table 1). A remarkable classification, based on taming degree, foot forms, habitat, color, and morphological differences, is found in the *Bundahišn*; it demonstrates the method and rigor of the categories and reveals details with which the redactors depict certain animals that were in the process of disappearance. Several chapters of this book are dedicated to animals: chapter 13 on the nature of the five kinds of animals (TD1, fol. 38r; TD2, fol. 48v; DH, fol. 184v; tr. Anklesaria, pp. 117-26); chapter 22 on the nature of the evil animals (TD1, fol. 59r; TD2, fol. 73r; DH, fol. 200r; tr. Anklesaria, pp. 182-88); chapter 23 on the nature of the wolf species (TD1, fol. 61r; TD2, fol. 75v; DH, fol. 201r; tr. Anklesaria, pp. 188-91); and chapter 24 on fabulous creatures (TD1, fol. 61v; TD2, fol. 76v; DH, fol. 201v; tr. Anklesaria, pp. 190-205). Chapter 13 of the *Bundahišn* has a close parallel in another Zoroastrian text, the *Selections of Zādspram* (chap. 3.50-65).

According to the lost Avestan *Dāmdād Nask* “the creating of the creation” (DKM, 3, p. 681, 11-20), of which summaries are given in the *Bundahišn* (chap. 13.9) and *Zādspram* (chap. 3.51), the beneficent animals were grouped into five classes, comprising *domestic animals* and wild animals as well as birds, fishes, and burrowing animals; and they were again subdivided into genera and species.

A slightly different classification of beneficent animals is given in *The Pahlavi Rivāyat Accompanying the Dādestān ī Dēnīg* ([PRDD], chap. 46. 22). This classification is described first in the creation myth according to which the beneficent animals are all descendants of the sole-created cow/bull (*gāw ī ēwdād*), the first animal to live on earth, which was killed by the Evil Spirit; all species of beneficent animals were brought forth from his purified seed. The animal world is first divided into a tripartite classification, then into the traditional quintuple one, and a more modern one, which is also quintuple. The latter is then further subdivided twice, into a list of eleven or twelve, and finally into individual species.

The *Bundahišn*, for the threefold division, uses the term *kardag*, which is absent in *Zādspram*. For the modern quintuple division, generally the term *ēwēnag*, genus, is used. For the 11 or 12 subdivisions, the *Bundahišn* has no term; *Zādspram* uses *bahr*, group; for the individual species both have *sardag*. Both sources use the same Avestan list. *Zādspram* follows the order known from the Avesta (see above; in *Yasna* 71.9, *Visperad* 2.1). In *Bundahišn* 13.9, however, the sequence is in part inverted:



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The second quintuple classification is basically the same in both sources, but with different terminology:



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This is the basis for the further subdivisions into genera and species; the latter are stated to total 282. Although *Zādspram* and *Bundahišn* agree in most respects, there are major differences. One is that the *Bundahišn* numbers the species from 1 to 12; *Zādspram* does not give any number, but names select ones: “(Ohrmazd) divided [animals] into genera: as the round-hoofed ones are



one single (genus), they are all called horse; the double-hoofed are many, such as the camel, the bovine, the sheep, the goat, and other double-hoofed (animals); the five-clawed are the dog, hare, rat, sable, (and) others; and birds, and then fishes” (chap. 3.54; Gignoux and Tafazzoli, eds., 1993, pp. 50-51). The genera named are eleven; but since it is explicitly stated that there are others in the classes of the double-hoofed and the five-clawed, it is possible that *Zādspram* did not know the fixed number 12, as the *Bundahišn* has it.

There is also a discrepancy between the number of species enumerated (178) and the stated total of 282 in the *Bundahišn*; species are divided within species to make a total of 282. According to *Zādspram* (chap. 3.55), there are animals, not listed, “of revealed names and unrevealed names” (*paydāg-nāmān a-paydāg-nāmān*), altogether 282 species, with species within species numbering 10,000 kinds. From this statement it is evident that the names of many species in the older tradition were not known to the later authors, even if “10,000” is regarded as a symbolic number rather than an actual total. The *Bundahišn* implies that the 95 species missing (that is, the difference between the total of 282 species and the 178 named species) must be made up by a subdivision of species with species, presupposing that the system of 12 or 11 genera is closed.

It should be noted that in the *Bundahišn* twelve large species are mentioned, while *Zādspram* lists only eight large species (numbers 2, 3, 4, and 11 of the *Bundahišn* are absent in *Zādspram*). However, both texts agree on the number of 282 species, which means that their common source did not name more either and that this number was a well-established tradition. According to Hanns-Peter Schmidt (1980, p. 225):

the number 282 can be of different provenience than the classificatory list and may be a symbolic number: The purification and dedication recitals for the collection of the *Bahrām*-Fire number 1128, and this is four times 282. 282 is also very close to the number of days of human pregnancy, that is, 280 or ten lunar months. 282 may be composed of 280 days of gestation and the days of conception and birth. What is still more striking is that *Bundahišn* XV, 12 states that humans, horse species, and bovines are born in ten months. The numbers 282 and 1128 would then have a specific meaning in the process of creation.

The differences between the two versions suggest that there was a more elaborate system behind it. In the [Sasanian](#) period almost all branches of science were influenced by non-Iranian traditions, and the case of zoology is



not an exception. The classification found in Middle Persian texts owes much to the ancient Greek tradition. The attempt by redactors of these texts to construct a coherent animal classification may indicate that prior to their work this had not been done. The comparison of the Bible classification of animals with Middle Persian texts yields numerous passages closely parallel, both in form and content. It has been suggested that such correspondence was under the influence of the Academy of Athens, which had moved to Iran in 529 CE after the emperor Justinian closed it. Its philosophers were welcomed in the Persian court by Kosrow I (r. 531-579), who, according to the historian Agathias, was a great admirer of the works of Plato and Aristotle (Christensen, 1944, p. 422).

#### EVIL ANIMALS

The evil animals (*xrafstars*; Table 2) are created by Ahriman, the Evil Spirit. He created his creatures from material darkness, in the form of a frog—black, ashen, worthy of darkness, and evil, like the most sinful-natured *xrafstar*. (Bund., TD1, fol. 5r.; TD2, fol. 74r; tr. Anklesaria, p. 44).

The word *xrafstar* (Av. *xrafstra-*, MP. *xrafstar*), evil animal, has been variously interpreted, and its exact meaning is much disputed. According to the traditional interpretation Zarathushtra used it in the *Gāthās* (Y. 28.5; 34.5) pejoratively for “the enemies of the religion” (Bartholomae, *AirWb.* col. 538). Some scholars see in it a reference to evil animals whom Zarathushtra chose to exclude from the sacred place of worship and hence symbolically from the whole good creation (Humbach, 1991, pt. I, pp. 118, 140; pt. II, pp. 24, 107). H. W. Bailey suggested that the term is a derivation of an Indo-European verbal base \* $\square$ (s)ker, (s)kerp-, (s)krep- “to bite, sting, cut,” which looks promising (Bailey, 1970, pp. 25-28). But, the *krt* suffix *-tra-* is never formed on an *s*-extension. There is a great likelihood that there were two different terms in Iranian *daevic* vocabulary, as we have \**prystr* in MMPers., and *plstl* is attested in the *Bundahišn* (TD 2, fol. 73v.9). Therefore, the term can be derived from *fra-pt-tar*, “things that fly-creep” (Gershevitch, 1954, 62, 246; Moazami, 2005, p. 302). Jean Kellens proposed that the term approximately means “affreux, sauvage” (Kellens and Pirart, 1990, II, p. 231).

In the Young Avesta and Middle Persian texts, the term *xrafstar* is used specifically for reptiles and amphibians such as frogs, scorpions, lizards, and snakes, and insects such as ants, beetles, and locusts. In general, any animal that crept, crawled, pricked, bit, or stung, and seemed hideous and repulsive to



human beings, was *xrafstar*. Predators such as felines and wolves were also creatures of Evil Spirit, but in Middle Persian texts they are referred to as *dadān*, “wild animals, beasts.”

The *Bundahišn* states that the physical existence of the evil animals, the shining of their eyes, and their psychic wind are of the Beneficent Spirit, but their spirit of sinfulness and malevolence are of the Evil Spirit, which is of great advantage, since when humans see them they can either kill or avoid them (*Bund.*, TD1, fols. 58v., 59r.; TD2, fols. 73r., 73v., tr. Anklesaria, p. 183).

Evil animals did not receive the same systematic attention as did beneficent animals, but a classification of them is found in the Avesta (*Vidēvdād*, chap. 14.5–6; Moazami, 2014, pp. 348-49) and later Zoroastrian literatures. This classification starts with snakes, followed by reptiles and amphibians, then insects and worms, and ends with flying insects:

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The *Bundahišn* assigns separate chapters for *xrafstrān* “evil animals” and *gurgān*, “wolves.” It divides evil animals according to whether they live in water, on the earth, or in the air. The worst of each type are the frog (in water), the many-headed dragon (on the earth), and the winged snake (in the air) (*Bund.*, TD1, fol. 59r.; TD2, 73r., tr. Anklesaria, pp. 182-83).

The *Pahlavi Rivāyat Accompanying the Dādestān ī Dēnīg* ([PRDD], ed. Williams, 1990, chap. 21a.3-46) lists the animals in a different sequence from that given by the *Vidēvdād* and *Bundahišn* (TD1, fols. 59r., 59v.; TD2, fol.73 r.; DH, 200r.; tr. Anklesaria, p. 185) and includes species that may be later additions:

According to the Zoroastrian worldview, evil animals are not always harmful, and their existence is not completely useless. The Beneficent Spirit in his omniscience diverts some of these evil animals to the benefit of his creatures



(*Bund.*, TD1, fol. 60v; TD2, fol. 75v; tr. Anklesaria, p. 189). For instance, their bodies are used in the composition of remedies with a mixture of drugs, because they are from the four beneficial elements: water, earth, wind, and fire. (*Bund.*, TD1, fol. 59r; TD2, fol. 73v; Anklesaria, p. 183; Gignoux, 2001, p. 53).

Among wild animals created by the Evil Spirit, the wolf appears to have a close relation with the Evil Spirit and demons (see [DĒW](#)). Its creation is directly attributed to the Evil Spirit, which desired to create the species in secret, in the form of fever, disease, and other evils, so that humans would not see them when they come upon them. (DkM, p. 92; de Menasce, chap. 95, p. 101.) The Evil Spirit produced the wolf in fifteen species (*Bund.*, TD1, fols. 60v, 61r; TD2, 75v, 76r; DH, fol. 201r, tr. Anklesaria, p.189.): *gurg*, wolf; *gurg ī syā*, black wolf; *babr*, tiger; *šagr*, lion; *palang*, panther; *yōz*, cheetah; *xaftar*, hyena; *tōrag*, jackal; *gār-kan*, cave digger; *karzang*, crab; *gurbag*, cat; *būg*, owl; *gurg ī ābīg*, aquatic wolf; *kōsag*, shark; and *gurg ī čarnak/čahār wāg*, wolf (?).

The *Bundahišn* states that some of the evil wolf species are avoided out of fear, but others can be tamed, such as the elephant and the lion; the lion was created by the Evil Spirit, but according to a model established by the Beneficent Spirit (TD1, fol. 61v.; TD2, fol. 76v.; tr. Anklesaria, p. 191; *The Persian Rivayats of Hormazyar Framarz and Others*, p. 270).

The lion had a venerable place in Iran as a symbol of kingship; undoubtedly in part for the simple reason that the lion was observable as a powerful and beautiful wild animal (see Root, 2002, pp. 169-209). The [elephant](#), which was imported to Iran from India, was probably counted among the evil animals because of its unfamiliar appearance, and classifying it with the lion must have been influenced by the association of both animals with royalty, for only kings kept and used them for hunting and warfare.

The creation of the bear, monkey, and some other evil creatures are attributed to the union of Jam ([JAMŠID](#)), the mythical king of Iran and his twin sister Jamīy with demons (*Bund.* TD1, fol. 44r, 44v.; tr. Anklesaria, chap.14B, pp. 136-37; [PRDD] 8e9, p. 13).



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