



YASNA

YASNA, the name for the central ritual in Zoroastrianism and for the long liturgical text recited during the daily performance of the ritual. In this article, Yasna (abbrev. *Y.*) will designate the text, *yasna* the ritual itself. As described elsewhere (see [SACRIFICE. IN ZOROASTRIANISM](#)), the *yasna*-ritual is rooted in ancient Indo-Iranian cultic practices. More specifically, it derives from common rituals concerned with the daily preparation of the sacred drink (Av. *haoma*, Ved. *sóma*) and from animal sacrifice (nowadays preserved only in the clarified butter, *gōšudāg*, which is consumed with the bread offering, *drōn*). The ultimate goal of the *yasna* is the maintenance of the cosmic integrity of the good creation of Ahura Mazdā.

The text of the Yasna. The Yasna is composed of 72 sections (Av. *hāiti*-, Phl. *hād*, Pāz. *hā*) of widely differing compositional form, character, and language. That is, the Yasna is a composite text representing the editorial work of scholar-priests whose goal it was to produce an extended liturgy to accompany the ritual. Its full recitation is of approximately two and a half hours duration.

Summary of the content. *Y.* 1-8 forms an introduction to the *yasna* in which the deities (*yazata*) are invoked and invited to attend the *yasna* and the essential elements of the ritual are presented. *Y.* 1 serves as a model, with some deviations for *Y.* 1-4, 6, while *Y.* 5, 8 follow independent structures. Each *hāiti* has its own characteristic invocation formula:

Y. 1 *niwaēdayemi hankārayemi* “I consecrate, I accomplish (this *yasna*)” followed by the name of the deity or deified entity, now in the genitive, now in



the dative; *Y. 2 āyese yešti* “I take in worship” preceded by the name of the deity or deified entity in the accusative; *Y. 3 āyese yešti* initially as in *Y. 2*, but 3.5-19 = *Y. 1.3-17* with the substitution of *āyese yašti* for *niwaēdayemi hankārayēni* without any attempt to change the case endings; *Y. 4 āaṭdiš āwaēdayamahi* “Thus, we dedicate these” followed by the name of the recipient in the same case as in *Y. 1*; *Y. 6 yazamaide* “we worship” preceded by the name in the accusative; *Y. 7 ašaya daḍqmi* “I properly give” followed by the name in the accusative. *Y. 5 = Y. 37* of the *Yasna Haptaṅhāiti* in its entirety. *Y. 8* concludes the section with the presentation of and calling to the sacrificial meal (*x^warəθəm myazdəm*), that is, the *drōn*, followed by blessings and curses.

Y. 9-11.11 Hōm Yašt. *Y. 11* concludes with blessings and curse and other prayers.

Y. 12-13. Although the *Frawarānē* (Confession of Faith) is recited already at *Y. 1.23* and *3.24*, here there is an extended confession which was composed in Standard Avestan, but in imitation of the Gāthic dialect, apparently in an attempt to add an air of greater authority.

Y. 14-18 contain various invocations, in many instances repeating material already contained in *Y. 1-8*, and serve as introductory sections of the *Staota Yesnya* “(words) of praise and worship,” which extends through *Y. 58*.

At the center of the *Staota Yesnya* are the seven sections of the *Yasna Haptaṅhāiti* (*Y. 35-41*) plus a later interpolation (*Y. 42*). The *Yasna Haptaṅhāiti* is flanked at both ends by the five *Gāθās* (see [GATHAS](#)) of *Zaraθuštra*, namely, at the beginning *Ahunawaitī* (*Y. 28-34*) and at the end *Uštawaitī* (*Y. 43-46*), *Spəntō.maiṇyū* (*Y. 47-50*), *Wohuxšaθrā* (*Y. 51*), then a non-Gāthic interpolation (*Y. 52*), and *Wahištōišṭī* (*Y. 53*).

Moving out toward the periphery, the *Gāθās* are enclosed protectively at their beginning by *Y. 19-27*. These sections contain Avestan commentaries on the three sacred prayers taken from the lost *Bag Nask* (*Y. 19 yaθā ahū wairyō* or *ahuna wairya*, *Y. 20 ašəm wohū*, *Y. 21 yeṅ’hē hātqm*), followed by a series of invocations of the ritual objects and offerings and of various deities, with much material borrowed from *Y. 1-8* (*Y. 22-27.12*, concluding with the *Frawarānē*), and finally the three sacred prayers themselves, which immediately precede the recitation of the *Gāθās*.

The conclusion of the Gāthic recitation is immediately followed by the sacred

prayer, the *ā airya'mā išyō* (Y. 54) and then by a praise of the Gāθās and the Staota Yesnya (Y. 55). Y. 56 is a short invocation of Sraoša, while Y. 57 is the long Srōš Yašt. The Staota Yesnya concludes with Y. 58 called *fšūšō.mqθra*, a prayer for protection against evil powers and praise of Ahura Mazdā, the Aməša Spəntas, Fire and the Staota Yesnya.

Y. 59 is mostly a repetition of Y. 17 and 26. Particularly interesting is a prayer for the priest's stipend. Y. 60 is devoted to benediction for the house of the righteous (*dahmā āfritiš*). Y. 61 returns to a glorification of the three sacred prayers plus the Dahmā Āfritiš. Y. 62 is a collection of stanzas, containing some metrical verses, praising Ātar "Fire" (*ātaxš nyāyišn*).

Y. 63-69 are sections dealing with the ritual "offerings to the Waters" (*āb-zōhr*). Y. 63 is a short section announcing the worship of the Waters, followed by Y. 64 composed of quotations from Gāθic stanzas. Y. 65 is dedicated to the Waters generally and in particular to Arədwī Sūrā Anāhitā, where secs. 1-5 are quotations of *Yt.* 5.1-5. Y. 66-67 announce the giving of the libation (*zaoθrā*) to various deities, but especially the Frawašis and Ahurānī, who is the subject of Y. 68. In this section *ahurānī ahurahe*, lit., "Wife of Ahura of Ahura" is invoked beside the Ahurānīs "Wives of Ahura" who are equated with the Waters. Y. 69 is a brief repetition of some Gāθic passages forming the conclusion of the *āb-zōhr*.

Y. 70-72 are concluding invocations and prayers.

Date of composition. Obviously, the text could not have been composed until some time after the death of Zaratuštra, as the majority of its composition is in the Standard (or Younger) Avestan dialect, in contradistinction to the Gāθic (or Old) Avestan dialect of the prophet's Gāθās, of the Yasna Haptañhāiti and of the sacred prayers. But, when was the Yasna composed? This is a very difficult question to answer. To begin to frame an answer one must distinguish elements of the composition from the editorial work that produced the extended text. Further, one can imagine that the text was the product of a uniform editorial project drawing on inherited liturgical elements, completed at a particular time in history; or one can imagine some sort of agglutinative process whereby over a long period of time the text was gradually expanded; or, too, one can image a uniform editorial composition, but then subject to later accretions.

The first observation to be made is that the editors did not control the Avestan



language. They often drew upon inherited Avestan compositions which had been received in good grammatical form. However, when they attempted to create new compositions based on inherited constructions they ran into trouble. This is immediately apparent, for example, in the formulaic invocations of the initial portion of the Yasna (1-8). In a number of places the received text of the Yasna includes citations from an otherwise lost tradition of commentary in Avestan on the sacred prayers (Y. 19-21) and the Gāθās (Y. 61.5, 70.5). It is curious to find such scholastic commentaries embedded in a liturgical text. Their presence suggests that the editors borrowed this material from the scholastic tradition. This may not be so surprising when one considers that the Avesta generally, including the Gāθās, is actually a “school” text (see Malandra). The very literary form of the exegetical sections dealing with the three sacred prayers makes plain that these sections are taken from other sources. Y. 19 begins with the formula that is familiar in didactic texts like the Vendīdād, namely, “Zaraθuštra asked Ahura Mazdā ... Then Ahura Mazdā said ...” The actual exegesis proceeds in such a way that a phrase is quoted, then explained with the technical term *para.cinasti* “it signifies.” What is explained, though, is not the grammar and syntax (as one might expect on the analogy of Sanskrit commentaries), but rather what the significance of the words might be. Often the grammar is so tortured that it is difficult to discern what a comment means. The impression this gives is that (1) the exegetical texts being quoted were scarcely understood, and (2) that those texts themselves were probably composed by men who struggled with the language. All of this points to a period of time long after Standard Avestan was a living language.

If it is true that the conceptual organization of the Yasna is such that the most sacred elements of the tradition are enclosed by the protective shield of the sacred prayers, one wonders why, outside of this framework, Gāθic passages are quoted freely. For example, Y. 5 in its entirety is a quotation of Y. 37. That is, the Yasna itself seems to freely violate this principle of its structure. One might surmise that we have to do here with accretions that have built up over time. Y. 11.18 presents an interesting case of a Gāθic passage that must have been someone’s gloss to a word in the particular liturgical piece, a gloss that then became mechanically a part of the liturgy. As demonstrated under HOM YAŠT, Y. 11.9 presupposes a written text of the Gāθās using the Avestan alphabet. This means that this passage, which appears as an appendix to the Hōm Yašt, cannot have been composed prior to the invention of the script. At the earliest this would be 4th century C.E., though it could well be much later.

Just as the liturgy accompanying the *yasna* has evolved over time, so too the ritual itself. *Y.* 22.2 contains an important hint at the evolution of the ritual. In a formulaic series of “I take in worship” (*āyese yešti*), after the enumeration of the elements of the libation (*haoma*, water, milk, pomegranate) we find “And I take in worship the two stone presses (*asmana-ca hāwana*); and I take in worship the two metal presses (*ayanhaēna-ca hāwana*.” What this suggests is that at that time the ancient mode of pressing the *haoma* with stones (cf. Ved. *grāvaṇā*) was being superseded by the brass mortar and pestle used to this day. Another evolution of the ritual concerns the *barəsmān* (see [BARSOM](#)). The Avestan text clearly describes sticks which are strewn (*fra□star-*) and held in the left hand (*Vd.* 19.17-19), and this was still the practice in late Sasanian times (Modi, p. 281); yet in modern practice they are bundled, thin metal rods placed in the two *māhrūy* holders. The *drōn*, now bread consumed by the *zōd*, is a replacement for the flesh offering. The eight priests of the ancient *yasna* were reduced in number to two (*zōd* and *rāspīg*). The names of the eight priests are preserved in Avestan (*zaotar*, *hāwanān*, *āsnātar*, *ātrəwaxš*, *sraošāwarəz*, *ābərət*, *raēθβiškara*, *frabərətar*, qqv.) and mentioned with their duties in the *Nērangistān*, while the *rāspīg* (< **rāθβīka*; cf. OInd. *rtvij*) is also mentioned in the Pahlavi of that text, but without Avestan equivalent. It may well be that, while the norm for the high ritual called for a full staff of eight priests, in popular practice two priests who assumed the functions of the others were tacitly allowed without being mentioned in Avestan texts. Since the *Nērangistān*, a mixed work of Avestan quotations bearing on ritual and long commentaries in Pahlavi, appears to date from the close of the Sasanian period, its recognition (Chap. 28) of the essential components of the *Yasna* as it is known today, would place the basic configuration of the *Yasna* within the same time frame (see Kotwal and Kreyenbroek, pp. 17 f.), although Islamic period accretions cannot be ruled out.

The manuscript tradition. The fundamental description of the manuscripts and the tracing of their various lineages was undertaken by Geldner (1896) in his “Prolegomena.” While his treatment of the Pahlavi (and Sanskrit) *Yasna* tradition is fairly clearly laid out, his discussions of the other *Yasna* traditions are difficult to find and to follow. To clarify these obscurities, Hoffmann (1984) published a concise delineation of all the *Yasna* traditions, with particular emphasis on the *Gāθās*, on the basis of Geldner’s “Prolegomena.” Although all MSS traditions ultimately stem from Iran, one must distinguish Iranian from Indian, as the two communities’ traditions developed independently of each other. The MSS may be grouped under three general classes:



I. The Pahlavi Yasna. These MSS consist of the Avestan text accompanied by a Pahlavi gloss/commentary. Through colophons the entire family can be traced back to the MS of Farnbag, ca. 1100, itself derived from two MSS of ca. 1020. They are the most important MSS. For a full genealogical tree, see Geldner (p. xxxiv; reproduced by Humbach, 1991, Pt. I, p. 66). This class consists of

a. the Iranian Pahlavi Yasna, whose authoritative MSS are Pt 4 (1780), Mf 4 (no date), Mf 1 (1741, lacking the Pahl.), all of which ultimately derive from the ca. 1200 MS of Māhpānāh;

b. the Indian Pahlavi Yasna, whose authoritative MSS are K 5 (1323), J 2 (1323), both of which ultimately derive from the ca. 1200 MS of Māhpānāh;

c. the Sanskrit Yasna: ca. 1200 Neryosangh wrote a translation of the Pahlavi in Sanskrit. This became the basis of the Indian Sanskrit Yasna, whose authoritative MSS are S1 (perhaps 14th/15 cent.), J 3 (no date). These MSS ultimately derive from the ca. 1100 Ms of Farnbag, the same MS copied by Māhpānāh.

II. The Vendīdād Sāde. These MSS are actually of the Yasna, into which have been inserted the Vendīdād and Vispered, and were used for liturgical purposes outside of the regular Yasna proper. The term *sāde* “pure” indicates that these text are not accompanied by the Pahlavi gloss. This class consists of

a. the Iranian Vendīdād Sāde, whose authoritative MSS are Mf 2 (1618), Jp1 (1638), K 4 (1732), all of which can be traced back to a hypothetical MS of ca. 1510.

b. the Indian Vendīdād Sāde. As a whole these MSS are of slight value for textual criticism, in that they have been thoroughly influenced by popular pronunciation employed in the oral performance. Nevertheless, they all derive ultimately from a MS written in India prior to 1300, a MS that itself seems to have been defective, yet which preserved readings occasionally better than those of I a, b.

III. The Indian Yasna Sāde. Like those of II b, these MSS are of slight text-critical value.

The yasna ritual. The *yasna* is the central ritual of Zoroastrianism, which has as its focus the consumption and preparation of the sacred drink of

immortality *haoma*. It must be performed daily, in the morning watch, by qualified priests only. While each performance has a lay patron, the laity is barred from entry into the sacred space (*pāvī*) where the ritual is performed. In modern practice the *yasna* is always performed in a designated space within a fire-temple (*dar-e mihr*). The following summary of the ritual is based on observations of modern, mostly Parsi, practices (see Darmesteter, 1892) whose running commentary on the translation of the Yasna includes notes on performance (Modi, 1922, and Kotwal and Boyd, 1994, especially). The ritual actions and the choreography of the priestly gestures can be given only in the barest outline here.

There are two separate rituals involving *hōm* (Av. *haoma*), one of which is not part of the *yasna* proper. This is the *paraṅnā*, a ritual carried out by the *rāspīg* prior to the *yasna*. In it, the *rāspīg* prepares the *parāhōm* (Av. *para.haoma*), that is, the *hōm* which will be consumed by the *zōd* at the conclusion of the recitation of the Hōm Yašt section of the Yasna. Also, in preparation for the *yasna* the sacred bread or *drōn* must be baked, and water necessary for both libations and cleansing must be brought from the well located within the precincts of the temple. The chamber within the temple where the *yasna* is to be performed must be maintained in a state of utmost purity, the sacred space being bordered by furrows. The *pāvī* is oriented on a north/south axis. There is a raised stone seat for the *zōd* at the north end facing south, in front of which is the main stone table, on which are mortar and pestle for the pounding of the *hōm* plant, two holders for the *barsman* (tied with a datepalm leaf cord), a knife, filter, and various cups for holding water (*āb*) and libations (*zōhr*); also present are the *haoma* twigs, a pomegranate, and (goat's) milk. To the south is the fire-stand with small tables to the west for kindling wood and incense, near which the *rāspīg* takes his stand. To the west of the main table is another table for other water vessels. Both priests must be in a state of complete physical and spiritual purity.

The opening invocations of Y. 1.1-2 serve to bring the divine beings with their powers within the sacrificial precinct. First to be invoked is Ahura Mazdā, followed by the Aməša Spəntas, with the addition of Gə'uš Tašan, Gə'uš Urwan, and Ātar. Within the rubric of secs. 3-7 various deities are invoked according to their time of worship during the five watches of the day (the *asnyas*). The periods of time are expanded to the three phases of the Moon (the *māhyas*) in sec. 8, the divisions of the year (the *yāryas*) including the five *gāhāmbārs*, the intercalary days (*hamaspaθmaēdaya*), and the years (*sarədas*, i.e., New Year) in



sec. 9. Secs. 10-23 contain further invocations of deities with some repetitions of those in secs. 1-9.

Y. 3-8 are traditionally known as *Srōš Drōn*, because during their recitation the *zōd* consumes the bread (*drōn*) with butter (*gōšudāg*). At the conclusion of the *Hōm Yašt* (Y. 9-11.11), the *zōd* takes three draughts of the *parāhōm*. Following the extended confession (*Frāwarānē*) and the commentaries on the sacred prayers, Y. 22 through the *Ahunawaitī Gāθā* (collectively called *Hōmāst*) accompany the second preparation of the *haoma*. For the most part, the remainder of the *yasna* is recitation without significant ritual action. After the conclusion of the *yasna*, the *zōd* takes some of the *hōm* already prepared during the *Hōmāst* and, leaving the *pāvī*, pours the *hōm* into the well. Remaining portions of the *drōn* may be given to the lay patron.

Meaning of the yasna. Since the latter part of the 20th century, increasing importance has been placed on the performance aspect of ritual, in recognition that meaning in ritual often cannot be fully explained in terms of a verbal narrative (for Zoroastrianism, see Williams and Boyd). The attempt of some scholars (esp. Molé) to read the Yasna text as a narrative of cosmic creation and eschatological conclusion fails for a variety of reasons, though basically because the text is significant for its maθric power, not for its cognitive function (see Darrow, 1988). This is not to say that the text is meaningless, rather that it cannot be read as a descriptive guide to the ritual. Nevertheless, there is a theological framework within which the ritual derives its meaning. Basic is the idea that Ahura Mazda has fashioned his spiritual and material creations in response to the assault of Anra Mainyu and his evil creations; and that within his good creation there is a constant dialogic relationship between the spiritual world (Pahl. *mēnōg*) and the material (Pahl. *gētīg*; see [GĒTĪG AND MĒNŌG](#)). The maintenance of cosmic stability depends on the integrity of this relationship. While an immediate purpose of the *yasna* is the blessings of the divine beings on the patron and his wider community, including the departed, the underlying goal of the ritual is the daily maintenance of cosmic integrity. The pure and undefiled actors and requisites for the drama are the material counterparts of the spiritual entities. Far from being a symbolic act, the proper performance of the *yasna* is what prevents the cosmos from falling into chaos.

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For further references see under SACRIFICE. IN ZOROASTRIANISM and other cross-referenced articles in *EIr*.