



## ZURVAN

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**ZURVAN** (Av. *zruuan-*, Pahl. *zrlw'n*), ancient Zoroastrian deity of Time. Although the etymology of the Avestan word *zruuan-* causes difficulty, there is consensus over its basic meaning, that is, “period (of time),” rather than (abstract) “time” itself (Lubonsky, p. 73). It occurs thus in a limited number of fixed expressions, all indicating a (determined, allotted) period of time (Kellens; Rezania). Of particular interest in this connection is the distinction, made in a number of passages, between the finite period of lifetime allotted to mortals and the immortal period of time that is characteristic of the gods (*Yašt* 8.11 with parallels).

In a few more recent passages from the Avesta (*Vd.* 19.13; 19.16; *Ny.* 1.8) and, remarkably, in the final words of the *Yasna* ceremony (*Y.* 72.10, followed only by a few formulas), an abstract being with the name *zruuan-* is worshipped. The passages themselves align this being with a range of other, often better known, spiritual beings as recipients of praise. Although the number of passages is not very large, this deity Zurvan is always accompanied by a few other divinities (*yazata*) who represent, together, the basic structure and outline of the cosmos: the god *Θwāša* (firmament), who is widely seen as representing (abstract) space, and the god *Vayu*, who is associated with the void between the realms of light and darkness. Zurvan has two epithets: *akarana-* (infinite) and *darəyō.xvaδāta-* (for a long time subject to its own laws). In some Zoroastrian traditions, these two epithets gave rise to two divine beings, one governing or representing “time eternal,” the other a fixed period of historical time, but this remains an exception. Finally, in a unique



passage describing the fate of the soul after death (*Vd.* 19.29), the paths leading up to the Činwad Bridge (Činwad Puhl, q.v.) are said to be *zruuō.dāta-* (established by [or in] time).

It is clear that the few Avestan passages that mention the concept and the deity do not allow much interpretation. Little notice would have been taken of Zurvan, as one among many abstract deities mentioned in the Avesta (Gray, pp. 124-29), had it not been for a spectacular later development in Zoroastrian traditions (see ZURVANISM). This development is known exclusively from non-Iranian sources, in Syriac (e.g., Theodore Abu Qorra), Armenian (e.g., Elišē, q.v.), Arabic (e.g., Šahrastāni), and Greek (Eudemus of Rhodes). These all begin to flow from the late fourth century C.E. onwards and present an alternative cosmogony, according to which Ahura Mazdā/Ohrmazd and Ahriman (qq.v.) are the offspring of the only pre-existent god, Zurvan (Zaehner, pp. 54 ff., 419 ff.). It is in one of these sources, the *Dubitaciones et solutiones* of the Neoplatonic philosopher Damascius (late 5th/early 6th cent. CE), that a reference is made to a much earlier authority, Eudemus of Rhodes (4th cent. BCE), but it is impossible to make out which part of Damascius's remarks (mentioning "Time" or "Place" as pre-existent entities, in whom the two spirits originated) reproduces Eudemus's words. Even the most generous assumption in this respect, however, cannot cloak the fact that Damascius (or Eudemus) does not mention the name of Zurvan or anything resembling the myth of Zurvan as it is found in the later sources (de Jong, pp. 336-37). Support for an Achaemenid popularity of Zurvan was further sought in the presence of a divine name Turma in the Elamite tablets from Persepolis (Hallock, PF 1956.1, 1957.1), which some scholars interpret as an Old Persian form of the god's name (Gershevitch, p. 183). This has been shown to be impossible on linguistic grounds (Henkelman, pp. 534-36). With this, all evidence for an early importance of Zurvan in western Iran has dissipated (for the Sasanian evidence for the god and the Zurvanite movement, see ZURVANISM).

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