

Spring 2025 Arts of Asia Lecture Series
Visualizing the Divine
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Zoroastrian Art:
Ancient, Medieval, and Modern Perspectives

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Timeline:

- 1500–500 BCE: The *Avesta*, a collection of ritual texts which constitute the Zoroastrian scripture, is composed and transmitted orally in Central Asia and Eastern Iran.
- 550–330 BCE: The Achaemenid dynasty rules over the first Persian empire.
- 330 BCE: Alexander the Great conquers the Persians, ushering a period in which Hellenistic and Near Eastern traditions intermingle.
- 224–651 CE: The Sasanian dynasty establishes a Zoroastrian Persian empire which rules over Iran and much of the Near East.
- 651 CE: Arab armies defeat the Sasanians, ushering in the Islamic period of Iranian history.
- 9th century CE: Many 'classical' Zoroastrian sources reach their final shape in the Middle Persian language; oldest surviving Zoroastrian manuscript fragments from Central Asia.
- 13th century CE: Oldest surviving Zoroastrian manuscripts from India were copied (the oldest surviving Zoroastrian manuscripts from Iran date to the 15th and 16th centuries; surprisingly, the oldest Zoroastrian manuscripts).
- 15th-18th cent. CE: Period of exchange between Iranian and Indian Zoroastrians (Parsis), associated with the rise of Indian Zoroastrian merchant capital.
- 19th century CE: Parsis move in increasing numbers to Bombay and play an important role in British rule throughout Asia. Iranian Zoroastrians experience gradual relief from poverty and begin to move to Tehran.
- 20th–21st cent. CE: Global Zoroastrian diaspora.

Textual and Visual Sources:

I. King Darius the Great at Bisotun (520 BCE) (translated by Skjærvø 2011)

The following is a translation of an excerpt of a trilingual inscription carved in stone on Mt. Bisotun in western Iran, together with a photograph of the inscription and the monumental rock relief which accompanies it. The inscription was carved at the behest of Darius, king of the Persian Empire, shortly after he initiated a coup d'état against a man named Gaumata whom he claimed had usurped the Persian throne after the death of the king Cambyses. The events of the coup, and the rebellions which followed, are narrated at great length in Darius's inscription. Here, he details how his right to rule relates to the favor of the Zoroastrian deity Ahuramazdā. As you read the excerpt, can you think of similar historical instances in which religious language has been used to legitimate political authority?

I am Darius, the great king, king of kings, king in Persia, king over the lands, the son of Hystaspes, the grandson of Arsames, a descendent of Achaemenes.

King Darius announces: These are the lands that came to me by Ahuramazdā's greatness. They were my bondsmen. They brought me tribute. Whatever was announced to them from me, that they would do.

King Darius announces: In these lands, any man who was outstanding, him I treated well. Whoever sided with the Evil One, him I punished well. By Ahuramazdā's greatness, these lands behaved according to my law. As was announced to them from me, thus they would do.

King Darius announces: Ahuramazdā conferred the royal command upon me. Ahuramazdā brought me support until I held this royal command together. By Ahuramazdā's greatness, I hold this royal command.

King Darius announces: For this reason Ahuramazdā bore me aid, as well as the other gods who are, so that I should not side with the Evil One. I was not a liar and did nothing crooked, neither I nor my family. I wandered in rectitude. I did wrong to neither the poor nor the mighty. The man who exerted himself in my homeland, him I treated well. Whoever did evil, him I punished well.

King Darius announces: You who shall be king hereafter shall not favor the man who is a liar or does crooked deeds, but shall punish him well!



Figure 1: The Relief at Mt. Bisotun. Photo by Hamidreza Soruri, 2015.

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II. From *The Book of Advice of Zarathustra* (translated by Skjærvø 2011)

The next excerpt is from a 9th-century Middle Persian-language Zoroastrian catechism, describing all the things about the Zoroastrian religion that a Zoroastrian should learn as a child. As you read the excerpt, note the use of dualistic language in the responses to the questions the text poses. How does this compare to other religious traditions with which you are familiar?

The teachers of old, who have the foremost knowledge of the Tradition, have said that, at the age of fifteen, one should know the following:

(Question) Who am I, and to whom do I belong? Where did I come from, and to where will I go back? And of what lineage and family am I? And what are my duties in the world of the living, and what is my reward in the world of thought?

[...]

(Answer) One should have no doubt about the following:

I have come from heaven, I have not always been on earth. I am something created, not something that has always been. I belong to Ohrmazd, not to Ahrimen, to the *yazads*, not to the demons, to the good, not to the bad. I am a human, not a demon, the creature of Ohrmazd, not of Ahrimen. [...] On earth, firstly, I have to ally myself by my praise to the Tradition, perform and sacrifice according to it, and not turn away from it, but believe in my mind in the Good Tradition of the Mazdayasnians. I have to distinguish what is good for me from what is bad, evil-doing from well-doing, goodness from badness, and light from darkness, and one who sacrifices to Ohrmazd from one who sacrifices to the demons.

III. The judgment of the dead from the *Book of Arda Wiraz* (translation by Vahman 1986)

The Book of Arda Wiraz, the story of a Zoroastrian priest who travels to heaven and hell to witness the reward of the righteous and the punishment of the wicked, was for centuries one of the most popular books among Zoroastrians in Iran and India. Originally composed in Middle Persian, the text was translated into Sanskrit, Persian, and Gujarati on numerous occasions. By the medieval period, these translations were commonly accompanied by narrative illustrations. As you read the translated excerpt below, observe how the narrative is depicted in the two miniature paintings. The first painting was executed in Iran, while the second originates from Western India. What similarities and differences can you observe?

Then the width of that Chinwad bridge became nine lances long. I passed with the assistance of Srosh, the pious, and the god Adur over the Chinwad bridge blissfully, prosperously, bravely and victoriously, well protected by the god Mihr, the just Rashn and the good Way and the powerful god Wahram and the god Astad the world accomplisher, and the splendour of the good religion of the Mazdeans. And the immortal souls of the righteous and the other heavenly residents first bowed before me, Arda Wiraz. Then I, Arda Wiraz, saw the just Rashn, who had in his hand a yellow golden balance, weighing the deeds of the righteous and the sinful. Then Srosh, the pious, and the god Adur took hold of my hand and said:

'Come, let us show you Paradise and Hell and the brightness and the bliss and the ease and the joy and the goodness and the peace and the delight and the fragrance of Paradise, the reward of the righteous. Let us show you the darkness and the narrowness, the discomfort and badness and distress and evil and pain and sickness and terror and fearfulness and hurtfulness and stench of Hell, and the different forms of punishment which the demons and sorcerers and sinners receive. And to you we shall show the abode of the righteous and that of the liars, and we shall show you the reward for the firm believers in Ohrmazd and the Archangels. And the goodness of Heaven, and the evil of Hell. And the existence of God and the Archangels and the non-existence of Ahreman and the demons. And the existence of the Final Body and the next world. And we shall show you the reward of the righteous in Heaven, from Ohrmazd and the Archangels, and we shall show you the misery and the various punishments of the sinful in Hell inflicted by the sinful Ahreman and demons and evil-doers.'



Figure 2:

Arda Wiraz sees the Chinwad Bridge and the scales of Rashn.

(Top): Persian *Ardāvīrāfnāma*, copied in 1628 CE, KR Cama Oriental Institute, Bombay.

(Bottom): Gujarati *Ardāvīrāfnāmū*, copied in 1802 CE, collection of Zar Amroliya (London)



IV. From the *Book of King George* by the Bombay Zoroastrian Priest Mulla Firuz (translated by Sheffield forthcoming)

Throughout the medieval and early modern periods, learned Zoroastrians were engaged participants in cosmopolitan intellectual networks that cut across religious and ethnic boundaries. In India, Zoroastrians studied with Muslim and Hindu scholars and were familiar with Persian and Sanskrit literary forms. When Europeans began to establish trading outposts in India, they often employed Parsis as agents and translators. As a result, Zoroastrians were among the first to adopt European forms of knowledge to the Indian environment. What follows is a brief excerpt from a lengthy account of the history of the British in India composed in more than 100,000 Persian couplets by the priest Mulla Firuz between the years 1812–1830. In what ways does the text seem to blend traditional Persian forms of knowledge with modern colonial history?

I have seen many a book of history in Turkish, Arabic, and Farsi.
In every era and century throughout time there have been many learned men
With toil and with trouble they have burned their lives. They have learned all sorts of knowledge.
They have assembled many stories of previous eras and ancient times,
Of feasts and fights, of happiness and sorry, they have clothed them in prose and in verse.
There are countless books in Persian about all peoples in the world as memorial,
Yet of the appearance of the Franks in India, of their knowledge, insight, and beauty,
The conquests of these famous people have not appeared in courtly (*darī*) speech.
[...]
In India, Iran, Turk, and Rūm, Persian is the most luminous and famed of the forms of knowledge.
In this clime, no one even knows the name or sign of the English language.
Though Frankish wine is unadulterated, Persian wine increases delight.
Though Frankish wine goes down easy, Persian wine dissolves the rust in the heart.



Figure 3: An early photograph of the Taj Mahal Hotel in Bombay, built for the Parsi industrialist Jamshetji Tata, opened in 1903. Photo before 1925. Asian Art Museum (San Francisco) 2005.64.448.

V. From *Mankind, Whither Bound?* by Dastur Manekji Nusserwanji Dhalla, Karachi (1950)

The final excerpt provided here is from a progressive Zoroastrian priest writing shortly after the states of India and Pakistan gained independence from Great Britain in 1948. Striking in particular is the way the text hearkens back to the ancient notion of a golden age in imagining a better future. As you read the text, view the image of a modern Zoroastrian silver bowl in the collection of the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco. Note that the design of the bowl is drawn from the 6th-century relief at Mt. Bisotun (figure 1 in this handout). Ancient motifs are common among Zoroastrians today, employed in household ritual objects such as this, community buildings such as fire temples, and even in personal jewelry and clothing as markers of identity. In what other ways can you think of in how ancient motifs have become symbols of identity in the modern world?

Zarathushtra or Zoroaster preaches that the world is imperfect, and it is the mission of man to fight and rout the forces of imperfection in all its phases, The prayer of the pious unto Ormazd is that they may be the perfectors of the world. As greed and jealousy and envy and hatred make life upon earth miserable, despairing and disconsolate masses look over their shoulders for the time that has gone and is no more. Life was cheap, easy and leisurely in former times. Naturally, people sing of 'good old days,' the glories of the past. They picture the past as happier and better than their times, or as the Golden Age of the world, Vishnu Purana of the Hindus and the post-Zoroastrian works speak of the four ages: the Golden, Silver, Bronze and Iron, The last being sinful and worst, will bring the destruction of the world by fire and water. But the Golden Age is not dead and gone. It is yet to be born in the fullness of time through the accumulated ameliorative work of mankind of all ages for the perfection of the world. It is true that the Golden Age still seems to have remained but a dream. Yet it can be shown that it is slowly and steadily being approached. Despite many setbacks and interruptions, the world is progressing towards perfection.

Mankind marches towards the Golden Age. The progress is not smooth and straight. It runs in a zigzag line. When the progress of mankind will reach physical and mental, social and moral uniformity, the goal will be reached.



Figure 4: A silver ceremonial bowl with Zoroastrian themes derived from Achaemenid and Sasanian art. Likely created in India, late 19th-century. Asian Art Museum (San Francisco)

2009.25

Further reading:

Online:

Encyclopaedia Iranica: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/>

Achemenet, The Achaemenid Persian Empire from the Bosphorus to the Indus river, from 550 to 330 B.C: <http://www.achemenet.com/en/>

Muya, the Multimedia Yasna: <https://muya.soas.ac.uk/>

Persia: Ancient Iran and the Classical World (Getty Institute): <https://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/persia/explore.html>

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Skjærvø, Prods Oktor. *The Spirit of Zoroastrianism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.

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Vahman, Fereydun. *Ardā Wirāz Nāmag: The Iranian 'Divina Commedia.'* London: Curzon Press, 1986.