

# AVESTAN MANUSCRIPTS

## VENDIDAD – SADEH & PAHLAVI

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### 1. Vendidad Introduction

#### A. Vendidad, a Book of the *Avesta*, the Zoroastrian Scriptures

Before the Arab invasion of Iran and the subsequent destruction of the bulk of the *Avesta*, the *Avesta* consisted of 21 books (nasks). The *Vendidad* is one the surviving Avestan books.

#### B. Place Amongst the *Avesta*'s 21 Books

In Sasanid Iran (c.220-650 CE), the entire *Avesta*'s 21 books corresponded to the 21 words in the Ahunavar prayer.

According to the *Denkard*'s Book 8, the *Vendidad* formed the 19<sup>th</sup> book of the *Avesta*'s 21 books (nasks) corresponding with the 19<sup>th</sup> word, 'drigubyo', in the Ahunavar prayer. However, J. J. Modi notes that some *Rivayats* (religious information sent by the priests of Yazd to India) place the *Vendidad* as the *Avesta*'s 20th book corresponding with the prayer's 20<sup>th</sup> word 'dadat'.<sup>1</sup>

#### C. Meaning of Vendidad

'Vendidad' is the modern name derived from the Avestan 'Vi-Daeva-Data', the 'Law against the Devas' or in other words, 'Law against Demons' or 'Law against Evil'.

#### D. Term for a *Vendidad* Chapter

While a chapter in the Avestan book of *Yashts* is called a 'karda' and a *Yasna* chapter is called a 'ha', a *Vendidad* chapter is called a 'fargard' (section).

### 2. *Sadeh & Pahlavi Vendidad* Manuscripts

There are two manuscript traditions that include the *Vendidad*: the *Vendidad Sadeh* and the *Pahlavi Vendidad*.

#### A. *Vendidad Sadeh*

The *Vendidad Sadeh* (also spelt Sade or Sada) is an Avestan text consisting of interpolated *Yasna*, *Visperad* and *Vendidad* verses in the order of their recitation during the *Vendidad* ceremony (see below). The *Vendidad Sadeh* can be called the *Yasna*, *Visperad* and *Vendidad* interpolated for the *Vendidad* ceremony.

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<sup>1</sup>J. J. Modi in *The Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the Parsees* (Bombay, 1922) p. 350.

### (i) Sadeh Meaning & Use in the Name

‘Sadeh’ (ساده) means plain, simple, bare or unadorned.

One explanation for the inclusion of ‘sadeh’ with the name ‘Vendidad’ is that it describes the plain nature of the text in Avestan without commentary. *Vendidad Sadeh* manuscripts usually did not have a Pahlavi translation or comments.

Another explanation is that the Vendidad portions are read without accompanying rituals. As J. J. Modi notes, “As far as the ceremony or the recital itself goes, most of it (the ritual) is performed during the recital of the Yasna and the Visperad chapters.”<sup>2</sup>



*Vendidad Sadeh* Manuscript from Yazd Iran, copied in 1647 CE. Credit: British Library.

### B. Iranian & Indian *Vendidad Sadeh*

As a subset of the *Vendidad* manuscript tradition, there are two *Vendidad Sadeh* traditions:<sup>3</sup>

1. The Iranian *Vendidad Sadeh*, which is faithful to the Avestan text of the *Pahlavi Vendidad*, and
2. The Indian *Vendidad Sadeh*, which at times diverges from the Avestan text of the *Pahlavi Vendidad*.

### C. *Pahlavi Vendidad*

The *Pahlavi Vendidad* is the Avestan *Vendidad* text with a Pahlavi translation and commentary.

## 3. Early *Pahlavi Vendidad* Manuscripts

Extant Avestan manuscripts have colophons that enable us to determine the names and locations of earlier scribes.

### A. Mihraban Kay Khusro’s 1323 CE *Pahlavi Vendidad* Manuscript

Among the earliest surviving Avestan manuscripts is the *Pahlavi Vendidad* copied by Mihraban Kay Khusro in 1323 CE at Navsari, Gujarat, India. In this manuscript, each sentence is first written in Avestan and then in Middle

<sup>2</sup> J. J. Modi in *The Religious Ceremonies* etc. (see above) p. 351.

<sup>3</sup> W. W. Malandra in ‘Vendidad’ at Ency. Iranica (online, 2006).



1323 CE Mihraban Kay Khusro *Pahlavi Vendidad* in Avestan and Pahlavi  
 British Library MS Avestan 4, folios 265v-266r: Chapter 19, verses 6-9

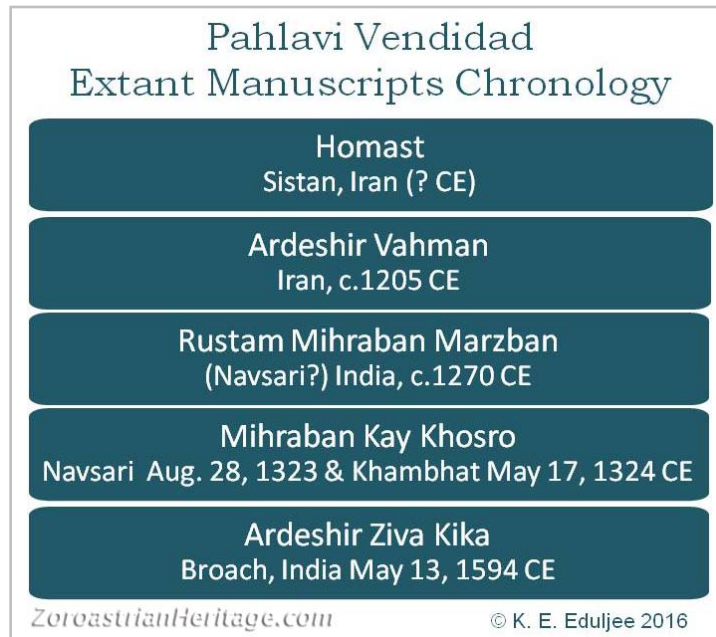
Persian Pahlavi, the language of Sassanian Iran (c. 224 - 651 CE). Mihraban Kay Khusro had travelled to India from Iran and made copies of Avestan manuscripts for the Parsees.

A year later Mihraban made an additional copy of the *Pahlavi Vendidad* at Khambhat (Cambay) some 150 km to the north of Navsari (and also in Gujarat). The Khambhat manuscript's date of completion corresponds to May 17, 1324 of the Gregorian calendar.

Mihraban Kay Khusro's 1323 CE Navsari manuscript is now housed in the British Library. They state that the manuscript had previously belonged "to Samuel Guise, Surgeon in the Bombay Army from 1775 to 1796. Guise's collection was made at Surat between 1788 and 1795, at great personal expense, while he was Head Surgeon to the General Hospital. His rarest manuscripts (according to his catalogue published in 1800) were purchased from the widow of Dastur Darab who between 1758 and 1760 had taught Avestan to Anquetil du Perron, the first translator of the Avesta into a European language.

"Unfortunately the first part of the manuscript was in such bad condition that Guise had folios 1-34 and 59-154 re-copied and presumably the original was thrown away. The manuscript also lacks the final leaf containing the colophon, but luckily, this has been preserved in a later copy made from the same manuscript. Samuel Guise died in 1811 and his collection was sold at auction by Leigh and Sotheby in July 1812."

## B. Pahlavi Vendidad Manuscript Chronology



Mihraban copied his Vendidad manuscripts from a manuscript previously copied by his father Rustam Mihraban Marzban shortly after the latter's arrival in India in 1269 CE. The father Rustam had copied his manuscript from one written by Ardeshir Vahman in Iran around 1205. Vahman had in turn copied an undated Vendidad manuscript written by a Homast in Sistan, Iran.

Both of Mihraban Kay Khusro's manuscripts are now incomplete and in damaged condition. Thankfully, however, Ardeshir Ziva of Broach made a copy of Mihraban's Khambhat manuscript and Ziva's manuscript (completed on May 13, 1594) survives as the only complete and direct copy of Mihraban's Khambhat Vendidad manuscript.

## 4. The Vendidad Ceremony

### A. Vendidad Ceremony & Ushahin Gah

The Vendidad ceremony – sometimes called simply “Vendidad” – is performed by Zoroastrian priests during the Ushahin Gah, i.e., from midnight to dawn (until the stars become imperceptible). The ceremony, which can last for up to six hours, takes up the better part of the gah and one can imagine a priest reading the *Vendidad Sadeh* from a manuscript in the dead of night by the light of a flame.

As the day's darkest hours are believed to be the time when evil seeks to raise its ugly head, the Vendidad ceremony can be seen as the laying down

the law against evil, thereby providing a spiritual defence against the power of evil.

Ervad Soli P. Dastur chronicles the conducting of “the first ever Vendidad prayers” (in North America) at the Zoroastrian Center of North Texas’ (ZCNT’s) Dar-e-Meher in Dallas, Texas, USA on April 28, 2007. He states, “The first ever Vendidad prayers were performed by Mobed Poras Balsara, Mobed Yazdi Dastur, grandson of late Vada Dasturji Ferozeji Dastoor of Udwarda, both from Dallas and me. We started the prayers around 12:20 AM with the participation of about 35 local ZANT (Zoroastrian Center of North Texas) members and were very happy and relieved to complete all the 22 Fargards of Vendidad by 6:10 AM! About 25 ZANT members were still there to see the completion.”<sup>4</sup>

## **B. Vendidad Ceremony & Becoming a Maratab Priest**

As part of the training of Zoroastrian priests, graduation from the Navar to Maratab level requires proficiency in the performance of the Vendidad ceremony.

## **C. When the Vendidad Ceremony is Performed**

According to Ervad Behramshah Bharda, the Vendidad ceremony is performed:<sup>5</sup>

- At the conclusion the Nirang-din ceremony during which Taro/Gomez, the urine of a white bull (the varasya), is consecrated, and after which the Taro is known as Nirang;

- During the consecration of an Atash Behram or Atash Adaran;

- At the behest of the laity in memory of someone who has passed away. [While the ceremony can be performed anytime after the Paidast (Paydast/Geh-sarnu; Phl. gahan-srayishn)<sup>6</sup>, it is of particular significance if performed in the Ushahin Gah before the dawn of the fourth day after a person has passed away.]

- At the behest of the laity seeking spiritual purification or removal of / protection from evil.

## **D. Where the Vendidad Ceremony is Performed**

The ceremony is fairly accessible to the laity. It can be performed in any space including an area of a house – provided the space has been ritually cleansed preferably with Taro. There is every indication that in the not too

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<sup>4</sup> At parsikhabar.net.

<sup>5</sup> B. H. Bharda in ‘Importance of Vendidad in the Zarathushti Religion’ (online at tenets.zoroastrianism.com, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> The Paidast/Geh-sarnu is the ceremony when traditionally the body is taken from the bungli to the Tower of Silence.

distant past, the laity regularly called upon the services of priests to perform the “Vendidad”, so much so, that the *Vendidad* manuscripts are among the most numerous and well preserved books of the *Avesta*.



**This article is at:**

<http://www.heritageinstitute.com/zoroastrianism/reference/Vendidad-Eduljee.pdf>

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