

The Zoroastrian Concept of *Xrafstra*

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Zoroastrianism is based on the dualism of Good and Evil, which divides everything into two opposing groups. One peculiar characteristic of Zoroastrian religious life has attracted many observers' attention throughout history. This is their hostile attitude towards some kinds of creatures called *xrafstras*, such as serpents, scorpions, beasts of prey, insects and worms. Most people do not like these creatures, but the Zoroastrians not only detested, and killed these creatures, but also considered the killing of them to be a meritorious act, even though death itself was regarded as belonging to the realm of the Evil Spirit.

The main purpose of this article is to examine why this should be so, despite the very evil nature of the act of killing, and also to discover how *xrafstras* have been understood in history, which animals are *xrafstras* and why they are considered to be *xrafstras*. These are very important points in the study of Zoroastrianism. The Zoroastrians through their long history experienced great changes in their living conditions and knowledge. Sometimes these changes caused them to modify a few contradictions in their dualistic view of the world. With regard to *xrafstras*, it is quite interesting to reveal how the Zoroastrians reacted when they came across unclassifiable animals in their new circumstances, or when they were forced to modify their classification system under the influence of another civilization.

I. *Xrafstra* in the *Gāthās*

Zoroaster seems not to have examined the world of Evil in detail as he did the world of *Ahura Mazdā*. In the *Gāthās* the word *xrafstra* appears three times, but it is difficult to fix a single meaning to it. The latest translation of the *Gāthās*, by S. Insler,¹⁾ gives it the meaning 'fierce', but this does not fit well with later usage of *xrafstra* as a noxious creature. The later usage must have originated from Zoroaster's own beliefs as did other religious beliefs of the Zoroastrians.

The question now arises what '*xrafstra*' meant to Zoroaster, and what its etymology was. Many scholars have proposed different explanations of this matter, nevertheless, none of them is generally accepted yet, for there is no remaining evidence in any ancient Indo-Iranian language of an equivalent to the Gāthic *xrafstra*. The following are some definitions of *xrafstra*.

C. Bartholomae explained that the word *xrafstra* was formed from *xraf-* and *stra-*.²⁾ *Xraf-* is from *kərəf-*, that is the corpse and *stra-* means devourer, therefore *xrafstra* literally means a corpse-eating animal. And further he interpreted that this word was abused as referring the nomadic tribes who opposed Zoroaster's reform.

J. Darmesteter divided *xrafstra* into *xrafu-*, that is wisdom and *stara-* which means scattered, and understood the meaning of *xrafstra* to be one whose wisdom is scattered or a dullard.³⁾

Then H. W. Bailey proposed a new interpretation, namely that *xrafstra* comes either from *xraf-s-t-ra* or *xrafs-tr-*, which suggests an Indo-European word **Skrep-* derived in turn from a verb meaning to 'sting' or 'bite'.⁴⁾ In this context there is a similarity between the Greek word *Skornios* for scorpion and its element *kr-* or *khr-*, and the ancient Indian word *Kṛpāna-s* meaning sword or *Kṛpāni* meaning shears. In later usage, however, *xrafstra* does not specifically mean scorpions, but reptiles in general.

These are the main arguments about the etymology of *xrafstra*, but none of them can be applied to all three examples given in the *Gāthās*. Now we will examine in context each reference to *xrafstra* in the *Gāthās*.

The first example appears in the *Yasna* 28.5:

anā maθhrā mazisθtəm vāurōimaidī xrafstrā hizvā

Through this Holy-Word into-the-most-excellent (Path) shall-we-ever-turn with-(our)-tongues *xrafstra*⁵⁾

This passage follows the question how Zoroaster can see *asha* (righteousness); therefore *xrafstra* here must point to some concrete image. Presumably if one tries to convince someone with words (*hizvā* is instrumental), this must be a human rather than the noxious creature of later usage such as a scorpion or snake. Of course it is possible to say that 'noxious creatures' can include humans. And here, as the context clearly shows it is the object to which the words work, it may refer to a hostile nomadic tribe or ignorant people. Even if it means a scorpion, this must be a metaphor for a man of scorpion-like nature.

The next example is found in the *Yasna* 34.5:

parēvā[̇] vīspāish (parē) vaoxəmā daēvāishcā xrafstrāish mashyāishcā

We-shall-speak of-*Ye* (as) above all-(others) [(as)-apart] from the-*Daēvas* and from *xrafstra* men

Here the question is whether or not *daēva*, *xrafstra* and *mashya* (man) should be taken as appositions.⁶⁾

With regard to the structure of the passage, the apposition of *daēva* and

mashya is quite frequent in the *Gāthās*, but this is the only example of the noun *xrafstra* being placed between them.⁷⁾ Furthermore there is a problem in considering them to be appositions in this case. Though *mashya* is a general word for man, when it is in apposition to *daēva*, it can mean a wicked man. Accordingly if this passage describes the legions of the wicked formed by *daēvas*, *xrafstras* and wicked men, it also implies the forces of Good, that is *Amasha Spəntas*, beneficent animals and good men, each corresponding to its counter enemy. If we take into consideration the order of importance of these three in Zoroastrian theology, this apposition must give a rather startling impression.⁸⁾ Therefore it is more likely that the *xrafstra* in this passage refers to men in a metaphorical sense.

There is another interpretation,⁹⁾ namely that this use of *xrafstra* modifies both *daēvas* and men, but it is not a wholly convincing explanation, because it depends on the assumption that *daēva* did not always mean a wicked creature in the *Gāthās* as it did in later usage. But *daēva* in the words of Zoroaster himself is often used together with *using-*, *kavi-*, and *karapan-*, and these four all mean wicked, so it is probably correct to say that the etymology of *daēva* which is the shining one did not mean anything to Zoroaster himself.

The third example is in the *Yasna* 34.9:

*vanghōugh avistī mananghō aēibhyō mash ashā syazdat yavaṭ ahmaṭ
aurunā xrafstrā*

From Such She-withdraws (Herself) utterly together with *Asha*, just as (these) uncultured *xrafstras* (do) from us

Here *xrafstra* is modified by the adjective *auruna-*, which means wild or untamed.¹⁰⁾ When this adjective is added to *xrafstra*, it implies that there may be other *xrafstras* which may be civilized or tamed. In addition, this adjective has never become fixed to *xrafstra* and so it is difficult to think that this word is only used to stress the uncivilized or untamed nature of *xrafstras*. The typical *xrafstras* such as snakes, scorpions and later, insects do not need such an adjective because they will never be tamed.¹¹⁾ So in this passage *xrafstra* must mean men or beasts of prey such as lions or panthers, which are suited to the adjective wild, or at least to some animals which flee from the sight of human beings.

It is now clear that to Zoroaster, '*xrafstras*' meant all noxious creatures including men and beasts, so any etymological explanation cannot completely apply to both the later usages and the three Gāthic examples.

II. The Development of the Concept of *Xrafstra*

In the *Younger Avesta*, *xrafstra* undoubtedly means the noxious creatures

created by *Angra Mainyu* as in later usage. So we shall take an example from the *Yasht* which is dedicated to the southern star *Vanant*:

paitishtātāe aḡastaca zōizhdishtaca apayantamaheca angrahe mainyēush xrafstra (Yt. 21.1)

(*Vanant* Star is invoked) in order to withstand the accursed and most foul *xrafstras* of the most abominable *Angra Mainyu*¹²⁾

This is a very genuine description of *xrafstra*, saying that they are accursed (*aḡasta*-) and most foul (*zōizhdishta*-) and that they originated from *Angra Mainyu*.

The most frequent appearance of the term *xrafstra* in the *Younger Avesta* is in the *Vendidad*, in which it is ordained what rules the Zoroastrians must follow in order to keep their purity. This text is said to have been completed finally around the first century B.C., therefore some parts of it may have been written at least one thousand years later than the *Gāthās*.¹³⁾

For Zoroastrians, to be in a condition of purity and thus to embody the Ahuric world in everyday life, it is essential to have a clear knowledge of what is pure and impure. The *Vendidad* makes this distinction and also teaches one how to avoid uncleanness and how to return to a state of purity, once the condition of impurity has been entered. In this definition, purity is not simply used to denote freedom from uncleanness, but is also sometimes used of someone who is declared clean according to the rule.

It is very important for Zoroastrians to know that they are obeying the rules or following the correct path because righteousness (*asha*) stands upon the base of their faith. This value system is applied very widely, and it is said that if a ritual is performed without regard for the proper condition of purity, this ritual will not contribute to the victory of *Ahura Mazda* at all, but rather it will increase the power of *Angra Mainyu*. Thus the importance of purity is so great that it is said:

yaozhdā mashyāi aipi.zathəm vahishta

Purity is for man, all through life, the greatest good¹⁴⁾

In what context are *xrafstras* referred to in the *Vendidad*? Chapter seventeen tells us about the taboos of cutting the hair and nails. Although the Zoroastrians believe that the human body is created by *Ahura Mazda* in the same way as a cow's body, it differs in that the produce of the human body such as saliva, breath, blood, all the wastes, superfluous or fallen hair and grown nails is considered to belong to *Angra Mainyu*, so the Zoroastrians carefully avoid touching such matter with pure things such as fire, water and earth. Therefore cut hair, fallen hair, and nails are wrapped in cloth and sealed while Avestan words are recited, and then they are buried in a

hole.¹⁵⁾ If they are disposed without proper prayer, they will greatly increase the power of the *daevās*:

*āhva vyarəthāhva zəmō xrafstra ham.bavainti yim mashyāka spish nqm
aojaitē yim mashyāka yaom yahōhva nizhganghənti vastra vastrāhva
(Vd. 17.3)*

for want of the lawful rights being observed, those *xrafstras* are produced in the earth, which men call lice and which eat up the corn in the corn-field and the clothes in the wardrobe

Here a lice (*spish*-) represents the *xrafstras* and this accords with later usages. But the latter part of this passage gives a description of *xrafstras* in general, for no lice may act thus. This passage also speaks of people who were settled to farm and who lived a rather prosperous life.

Furthermore in Chapter seven which describes the correct treatment of dead bodies, the figure of *Nasu*, demon of the corpse, is described thus:

*nasush upa.dvqsaiti apāxədhraēibyō naēmaēibyō maxshi.kəhrpa
ərəgnaitya frashnaosh apazadhanghō akaranəm.driwyā yatha zaozhdish-
tāish xrafstrāish (Vd. 7.5)*

The *Drug Nasu* comes and rushes upon him from the region of the North, in the shape of a raging fly, with knees and tails sticking out, all stained with stains, and like unto the foules *xrafstras*

Here a fly represents the *xrafstras*, and this passage splendidly describes the actual body of the fly.

In the first chapter of the *Vendidād*, there is a list of districts created by *Ahura Mazdā* and its corresponding counter-creation by *Angra Mainyu*. In the counter-creation there are some *xrafstras* such as *azhay-raoidhita* (a red snake) and *skatay*-¹⁶⁾ (possibly a locust) which brings death to domestic animals. As mentioned before, the apposition of district names and their counter-creation means that each corresponding word must have an opposing relation. For example, *azhay*- (snake) corresponds to *Airyanəm Vaējah* that is the ideal home of the Iranians, which in the myth is said to have been robbed by the dragon king *Azhi Dahāka*, so the hostile relation is understandable. Corresponding to *skatay*- is Sogdiana (Sughdha), this may suggest another reading for *skatay*-. As it brings death to the cow and *daya*-,¹⁷⁾ it may be a fly rather than a locust¹⁸⁾ as a fly harms domestic animals.

Chapter sixteen discusses female impurity. Zoroastrianism decrees that a woman should be segregated during her period, and that after a period every woman should purify herself by washing her body with cow's urine (*maēsman-*

gēush-) and water. Then it is said that:

*xrafstrəm awaḡanaēta maoirīm dānōkarshəm yaḡ vā hama duye saite
kahyāciḡ angrō.mainyavanəm xrafstranəm awa.ḡanyāt yaḡ vā aēte zaēna
(Vd. 16.12)*

they shall kill *xrafstras*, to wit: two hundred of corn-carrying ants, if it be summer; two hundred of any other sort of the *xrafstras* made by *Angra Mainyu*, if it be winter.

In this case an ant represents the *xrafstras* of summer. By *xrafstras* which should be killed in winter, the text could not mean large wild beasts, or poisonous snakes because the creatures had to be small enough for at least two hundred of them to be killed by a woman. Here also the idea of killing *xrafstras* clearly shows that it means the purge of uncleanness.

Once one comes across a *xrafstra*, one is expected to recognize that it is an enemy, and it is one's duty to kill it if possible or to avoid it so as not to be infected. In the Pahlavī documents, it is said, 'this-too, is a great-advantage that whenever men see them (*xrafstras*), they slay them or abstain from them'.¹⁹⁾ In this case, there is no question as to whether it is right for Ahuric power to perform the act of killing, which belongs to the realm of *Angra Mainyu*, because it brings death to the living. Rather it is a positive struggle against the forces of the counter-creation of *Angra Mainyu* using its own means. Usually when Zoroastrians take the life of a creature of *Ahura Mazda* whilst hunting for sport or food, they are supposed to say an Avestan prayer so that they can turn this act into a meritorious act of sacrifice, not just a killing. This rule is not applied to the killing of *xrafstras*, however.

It was reported by Herodotus that "the Magi (Zoroastrian priest) kill with their hands every creature, save only dogs and men; they kill all alike, ants and snakes, creeping and flying things, and take much pride there."²⁰⁾ Agathias in the sixth century reported that "the greatest of all the religious festivals they (Persians) celebrate is the one that is called the slaying of evil things,²¹⁾ in which they kill a vast number of reptiles and such other beasts as are wild and inhabit the wilderness and offer them to the Magi as though to demonstrate their piety."²²⁾ An instrument which a priest should carry all the time is called *xrafstra-gan-* (*xrafstra* killer).²³⁾ At present in Yazd district, the instrument being used for killing certain *xrafstras* is a stick with a sharp point. This is a very unreliable weapon to use against beasts such as lions, hyenas or big serpents, but it is effective against small animals like lizards, rats or insects.

It is repeatedly mentioned that the killing of *xrafstras* is meritorious. It is said that "to perform meritorious deeds . . . one should kill some *xrafstra*."²⁴⁾ In Medieval Persia, *Ardāy Virāz* who is said to have travelled in the other

world, said that 'he saw souls who had killed *xrafstras* in this world in the highest heaven.'²⁵⁾

As related by Agathias mentioned above, the festival of killing *xrafstras* has been practiced in Kerman district in recent times,²⁶⁾ and at the festival of *Spənta 'Armaiti*, the Guardian of the earth, people were expected to kill *xrafstras*. An European traveller in the seventeenth century observed this custom and reported, "ils ont un jour dans l'année auquel toutes les femmes de chaque ville ou village s'assemblent pour aller tuer toutes les grenouilles qu'elles peuvent trouver dans la campagne, et c'est un commandement de leur prophète parce qu'un jour il en fut incommodé"²⁷⁾ The Parsis of India also celebrated *xrafstra zadan* on the same day.²⁸⁾

Another important rule concerning *xrafstras* is the prohibition on touching them. In Zoroastrianism, there is a very rigid difference between purity and impurity, closely connected with its dualistic view of the world, so that the purity that is *Ahura Mazdā's*, and the impurity that is *Angra Mainyu's* must be equal in power. But anything pure is considered to have lost its purity once it touches anything unclean. In other words impurity is like a contagious disease. Impurity, however, cannot be made pure through contact with a pure object. This fact may reflect the original pattern of the struggle in which the perfect creation of *Ahura Mazdā* was eroded by means of *Angra Mainyu's* invasion and destruction as its result.

In order to remain pure it is necessary to avoid uncleanness. Therefore to touch *xrafstras*, either alive or dead, is prohibited. To eat the flesh of *xrafstras* is also forbidden.²⁹⁾

To Zoroastrians the cow is the purest animal and all its produce, even its excrement and urine, is considered to be pure. However if the cow ever eats a dead body, the most unclean of objects, its flesh, milk, skin and dung (for fuel) should not be used.³⁰⁾ This rule is valid for all domestic animals such as sheep and chickens. The pig was not originally a tabooed animal for Zoroastrians, but pig-breeding gradually declined probably out of respect for muslim dietary laws. It is said, "because it eats foul matter, its flesh should not be eaten. If a person binds it and gives it grass for food, then after the length of a year its flesh can be eaten."³¹⁾

The dog is also highly venerated by Zoroastrians. Chapter fourteen of the *Vendidād* relates how one should compensate for having accidentally killed an otter, known as the water-dog and believed to belong to the dog-species. The penance is to kill ten thousand of each kind of the *xrafstras* listed below³²⁾:

snakes moving on the belly, snakes of those that have the shape of a dog, tortoises, round frogs, water frogs, corn-carrying ants, tiny and ill-smelled ants, worm living in the dung, frightful flies.

This list became the proto-type for lists of *xrafstras* used until recent times. These creatures and lice mentioned before are all *xrafstras* referred to in the *Vendidād*.

Here for reference purposes is a more detailed list given in the Pahlavī documents compiled around the ninth and tenth centuries.

In the *Bundahishn*, consisting largely of translation with commentaries of Avestan passages, there is a chapter which classifies *xrafstras*.³³⁾ According to this there are three kinds of *xrafstra*, namely watery, earthly and winged. Because of the peculiar problem of Pahlavī language, many parts of the text are unreadable, and moreover it is difficult to identify each *xrafstra*. Here are some of its examples.

Among watery *xrafstras*, a frog is the worst. Of the earthly *xrafstras*, sometimes classified as watery ones, the worst is a dragon-serpent, which must refer to *Azhi Dahāka*.³⁴⁾ There are also black-tailed lizards, pointed crabs, desert and land bats,³⁵⁾ and other snakes of many kinds. In addition there are scorpions, parasites, tortoises, and then frogs, silkworms, corn-carrying ants, biting ones, nocturnal ones, bee-eaters, black flies, honey-bees, spiders, locusts, gnats, ravens³⁶⁾ and such like. Among the winged *xrafstras*, is listed the winged serpent. This is a creature which is believed to be born from an anthill undisturbed for three hundred years. This cannot be identified with any real animal.

There are several other lists in the *Rivāyats*,³⁷⁾ compiled from correspondences about religious matters between the Zoroastrians in Iran and Parsis in India after the fourteenth to the eighteenth century. *Xrafstras* listed are elephants, lions, panthers, wolves,³⁸⁾ hyenas, wild dogs, cats, wild cats, *karkuza*(?)s and others. There are also biting *xrafstras*, such as snakes, scorpions, wasps, black flies, flies which produce worms and corn-carrying ants.

In spite of the great time gap between these three documents, the impression they give as a whole is quite similar. In the next chapter we shall examine each kind of *xrafstra*.

III. Examples of *Xrafstra*

(1) reptiles

The reptiles are the representatives of *xrafstras* usually, and among them the snake is the greatest *xrafstra*. Avestan *azay-* is a common noun for snake. But because *Azhi Dahāka* was the greatest enemy in myth, the Pahlavī word *az* ('z) came to mean not just a snake but a dragon. And instead in Pahlavī *mar* (m'l) is generally used for a snake. There also are other words for snake in Pahlavī, such as *garzag* (*glck*)³⁹⁾ and *gaz* (*gz*),⁴⁰⁾ but none of them are identified with a specific snake.

Gaz was derived from a verb *gaz-* which meant to sting or to bite. The same verb is the etymon for *gazdumb* or *gazdum*, that is scorpion, another

xrafstra. The poison of both scorpion and snake is food for the wicked in hell,⁴¹⁾ so their poisonous nature is a main ingredient of their *xrafstra*-ness.

Iranian people knew of a land, no longer identified, which they called *Airyānəm Vaējah* (*Phl.Ērānvēj*) and which they considered as an ideal land created for them by *Ahura Mazdā*; but the evil hand of *Angra Mainyu* reached out and the above-mentioned red serpent, probably *Azhi Dahāka* and winters were counter created.⁴²⁾ *Azhi Dahāka* was a dragon king with three heads who brought death to Yima, first king of *Airyānəm Vaējah* robbing him of his kingship, but after that he was thrown down by the hero *Thraētaona* and was ordered to be bound till the end of the world. But *Airyānəm Vaējah* once contaminated by the hand of *Angra Mainyu* was not an ideal land any more and it is said that winters there were very severe and lasted for ten months. The number of winter months differs in each document,⁴³⁾ therefore there is no way of saying which is right, although it is not important for present purposes.

In this winter of *Airyānəm Vaējah* they say there were a lot of snakes.⁴⁴⁾ The Oxus River which runs into the Aral Sea was once believed to have run through *Airyānəm Vaējah*, and at some ancient time, it was also thought to have been connected with the Araxes River (Arag River)⁴⁵⁾ in Armenia. There is a report telling us that there were a great many snakes on the banks of the Araxes River.⁴⁶⁾ That is to say, the river and snakes seem to be closely related. The River *Dāitya*, running through *Airyānəm Vaējah* was believed to be full of *xrafstras* because of *Angra Mainyu's* counter-creation.⁴⁷⁾ It is understandable that there should be snakes in watery places, but usually reptiles like snakes hibernate in the winter. Therefore it must be taken into consideration that 'mar' may not only mean snake but also something else as in the example of the dog-like snake in the previous list.

Among the reptiles, lizards are disliked as much as snakes. Lizard is spelt *klb'h* (or *klb'sh*), *klbwk* (or *klbnk'*), *klbk*, *kwlbk* and *klpwk* (or *klpnk'*) in Pahlavi and is read *karbash* or *karbūk* (or *karbunag*). There are also several forms such as *karpāsah*, *karpāsū*, *karbas*, *karbasū*, *karfash*, *carbū* and *karpū* in modern Persian. There is another kind of lizard in modern Persian, the *chalpāsah* a small and poisonous lizard. These names are all derived from the same root and confirm the definition of *xrafstra* as a creature which stings or bites. Therefore the Avestan *kahrpuna*⁴⁸⁾ corresponding to this word must mean a lizard in this context.⁴⁹⁾

There is another reptile, the crocodile, that is far bigger than most *xrafstras* in later texts. One version of the Zoroastrian myth tells a story about *Jam* and *Jame*, his twin sister, who were the ancestors of human beings.⁵⁰⁾ Once *Jam* lost his mind and married a witch, then he married *Jame* to *Dēv* (*Daēva*). In due course the witch bore *Jam* monkey and bear, and *Jame* bore *Dēv* crocodile, tortoise, frog and cat.⁵¹⁾ Because of this myth these living creatures are believed to have something in common with each other.⁵²⁾

(2) quadruped

Foreign travellers in modern times observed that Zoroastrians did not like cats.⁵³⁾ As mentioned above, all cats including lions, panthers and tigers are classified as *xrafstras*,⁵⁴⁾ but the degree of dislike these quadrupeds evoke in Zoroastrians is not so high as with other types of *xrafstras*. This is probably because the horror they cause is not the same as that caused by a snake or insects which creeps unnoticed into our daily life. It has been said that they are disliked because of their nocturnal nature,⁵⁵⁾ but it is more likely that the main reason for their being termed *xrafstras* depends on their diet. Carnivorous animals eat dead flesh which is the most unclean substance. Even the purest of animals such as a cow, once it has eaten something unclean, needs purification. However any herbivorous animal even if it is wild, the deer for example, is considered to belong to Good, and its flesh is clean and may be eaten.

No shape originally belongs to *Angra Mainyu*. As *Ahura Mazdā's* creation is operated in two stages of *mēnōg* and *gētīg*, the counter-creation of *Angra Mainyu* should also correspond to each stage. But the *gētīg* creation, that is of shape, was so splendid that *Angra Mainyu* could not create the opposing shape, so instead he stole or imitated the shape of *Ahura Mazdā's* creation and fixed the shape of the *xrafstra*.⁵⁶⁾ Therefore its shape is imperfect and ugly.

By the time Zoroastrians had built a great empire and became accustomed to the great cultural traditions of ancient Babylonia and Egypt, they found a contradiction in their dualistic value system. The above-mentioned pretext of stealing shape is generally used to justify this contradiction. For example, a lion was of no use to nomadic people and their humble way of life in the country side, and it was quite understandable for them to classify it as a *xrafstra*. But then they came across a civilization which greatly respected the figure and the power of the lion, considering it to be a symbol of the sun, which people decorated their palaces with lions to represent the majesty of kingship. When the Zoroastrians managed to create an even more powerful empire, they needed to venerate the traditions of the conquered area in order to assure the stability and the continuation of their own rule.

Furthermore, astrology or astronomy of Babylonia provided a very useful justification for this contradiction. According to this science the constellations were the guardians of humans. Zoroastrians believed that the stars belonged to the legions of *Ahura Mazdā* from the beginning.⁵⁷⁾ When they learned of this idea of constellations, they included them in the great creation of *Ahura Mazdā*. *Angra Mainyu* took their shape of his counter-creation. And when he imitated the shape of Scorpio for the figure of scorpion, he did not imitate it well, so the scorpion is ugly. But when he tried to imitate Leo, he copied it so well this time that the lion has a dignified and majestic figure. Therefore the splendid figure of the lion is taken from the good shape

of the constellation Leo and even if its nature is wicked, it is naturally worthy to adorn the palace. This is also part of the reason why there were some seals depicted with the figure of *xrafstras* in the Sasanian times.

The domestic cat also has nothing to do with the nomadic life, and had been loved as a pet in Egypt for a long time. Familiar as they were with Egyptian culture, the Zoroastrians must have been used to the idea of a family cat. Although the self-indulgent nature of the cat may have caused the Zoroastrians certain misgivings about the danger of it ever touching any *xrafstras*, it is not rare for Zoroastrians to keep a cat at home nowadays, and in the past, although King Ardashir, the founder of the Sasanian Empire, was said to have been a very faithful man, he kept a dog and a cat in his home. This dog and cat were poisoned by Parthian princes instead of the king.⁵⁸⁾

Among small animals, a mouse is greatly disliked because it eats corn in store and so brings harm to man's daily life. To kill a mouse is said "to be worthy of killing four lions."⁵⁹⁾ But the food which a mouse eats is not as bad as that touched by a snake. It is clearly forbidden to eat food touched by a snake, but the food touched by a mouse or a cat is edible as long as most of it is given to a dog, and then it is not considered to be unclean anymore.⁶⁰⁾

Thus the fact that the degree of dislike of *xrafstras* differs and is flexible saved the Zoroastrians from rigid formalism and let them adapt effectively to changes in society. The long history of the Zoroastrians brought several sudden changes in their life style and environment. The Parsis of India, indeed, found it a little difficult to apply their dualistic world view in the unfamiliar climate and ecological circumstances. For example, when the Parsis asked the Zoroastrians in Iran if a rhinoceros is a *xrafstra*, the answer was that they should observe whether it has horns or hoofs, or whether its diet is that of a domestic animal, if so, it is a good animal.⁶¹⁾

(3) insects

Another important class of *xrafstras* is that of the insects. One representative of these is the scorpion. Because of the peculiar appearance and nature of its tail, it is described as "having a biting or stinging or cutting tail." Both its poisonous nature and its nocturnal habits fulfill the qualification of a *xrafstra*. However, it has less effect upon human life than ants and flies.

An ant (*mōr*) is mentioned in the *Vendīdād*⁶²⁾ as carrying corn. Therefore the main reason for its unpopularity may be the harm it brings to the grain stores of agricultural people. It is said that 'killing it is as much as killing a lion of the forest or as much as having restored the sight of a blind man'.⁶³⁾ Among the ant-species is the flying ant⁶⁴⁾ and to kill this ant is as faithful an act as reciting *baj* for ten days.⁶⁵⁾ It is said that among the *xrafstras* counter-creation of *Angra Mainyu*, this is the most harmful. If it dies in

the air, it becomes a mosquito, if it dies on the earth, it will become an earth worm⁶⁶⁾ and if it dies in the water, it will become a leech; if it dies in the flesh of a hyena, it will become a snake and if it dies in dung, it will become a worm.⁶⁷⁾ Considering these characteristics, a flying ant (*marjus*) could equally well mean a fly.⁶⁸⁾

Usually a fly in Pahlavī is *magas* (*mks*) or *mafsh* (*mhsh*) and it corresponds to Avestan *maxshi*- rightly. A *maxshi*- in the *Vendidād* is always accompanied by the epithet *ərəghant*- (frightful or surprising) giving an impression too exaggerated for just a fly. But if we take the nature of the fly into consideration, we will be impressed by its close contact with impurity. It gathers around the most unclean things such as corpses and dung, and it emerges from a worm. It also gets into every corner of human life and follows domestic animals persistently, reminding the faithful every day of the powerful malice of *Angra Mainyu*. The reason why it is disliked so much is mostly because it does not differentiate between clean things and unclean things.

However there are exceptions amongst the insects. These are bees and silkworms. These insects were surely made by *Angra Mainyu*, but through the wisdom of *Ahura Mazdā*, it is said, they were changed to bring good to man.⁶⁹⁾ The use of silk is relatively new in Zoroastrian history. Silk was produced in Khorasan, and the Zoroastrians admitted that it became good to wear only after it was weaved and dyed. Moreover they say "of the dress which people possess and put on, silk is good for the body, and cotton for the soul. For this reason, because silk arises from *xrafstra*. And the nourishment of cotton is from water, and it grows from earth; and as a treasure of the soul it is called great and good and more valuable for the soul."⁷⁰⁾ Although the use of silk has never been forbidden, even as its popularity spread, it was thought somehow to be contrary to the dualistic animal classification, and some people tried to rationalize its use forcibly, therefore it is considered inferior to cotton which is acceptable to the faith. When a priest presides at a ritual, he should wear only white cotton clothes.

Concerning honey, the logic for its rationalization is quite similar. It was not prohibited to use honey as a medicine or for recuperation. However there is a rule that when honey is collected from the nest, it must be collected by a priest for a priest and by a layman for a layman,⁷¹⁾ or else it should be collected with one's own hand for one's own consumption. It is forbidden to take honey which has been collected by infidels.⁷²⁾

(4) frogs and tortoises

Lastly we will examine the frog and the tortoise, which are always treated as *xrafstras*, although they are not usually poisonous nor do they sting.

There is a myth concerning the frog. "In the Sea *Vourukasha*, it (the frog) was swimming around the white *Hom*, the tree of everlasting life, and would have gnawed it down, but for the godlike fish *kar-māhī*, that keeps

watch and guards the tree wherever the frog would slip in.”⁷³⁾ Here we have the impression of a creeping spiteful creature which wickedly tries to take a life belonging to *Ahura Mazdā*. Even though some frogs are poisonous, they do not have characteristics peculiar to *xrafstras* such as stinging or corn-carrying or close to the unclean things. In this matter of *xrafstra*-ness the tortoise is similar to the frog. *Zairimyangura-* (or *Zairimyāka-*), a *Daēva* in myth, is believed to have the shape of a tortoise.

Both have a less noxious nature than that of other creatures though their roles in myth are very special. Rather what they share with other creature of *Angra Mainyu* is their ugliness and they are like a caricature of an ugly human being. On the other hand, the frog and the tortoise do have something in common, and that is their close connection with water. Both are amphibious and prefer to stay in stagnant water rather than in clear running water. This could have been interpreted by Zoroastrians to mean that water becomes turbid when these creatures live in it. It is said that “if a frog, having a thousand spawn, goes near to the water, it should be killed.”⁷⁴⁾

To pollute water is for the Zoroastrians as bad as to pollute fire. If one pollutes water, one must compensate for this sin by killing frogs.⁷⁵⁾ When one kills a frog, one usually pulls it up out of the water and lets it dry.⁷⁶⁾ As a dried and dead frog out of water does not cause any harm to anything, it symbolizes something which is helpless and useless.⁷⁷⁾ In this respect a frog is different from other *xrafstras* which are disliked very much even after they are dead.

If frogs and tortoises are classed as *xrafstras* mainly because they pollute the water, the translation of *xrafstra* as creature noxious to human beings and domestic animals needs a comment. The study of the frog and the tortoise shows that in this case noxiousness of *xrafstra* is not a concept formulated simply for the convenience of humans, but that it connotes the idea of bringing pollution to all things created by *Ahura Mazdā*, that is water, earth and human beings as well. In other words the concept of *xrafstra* can be considered to reflect clearly the essence of Zoroastrian beliefs.

Conclusion

Now that we have been examined what creatures are actually regarded as *xrafstras*, why they are so regarded and what is the appropriate attitude to each of them, a definition of the term *xrafstra* becomes clearer.

The nature of *xrafstras* may be summed up as follows: firstly there are poisonous or biting creatures that bring harm to man and cattle. In this classification there are serpents, scorpions and insects such as mosquitos, black flies and lice. Secondly there are those creatures like ants and locusts which are harmful to the corn. The mouse is a *xrafstra* for this same reason. Thirdly there are these whose shapes are ugly and abominable, and in this category,

are nonpoisonous snakes, lizards, frogs and tortoises. However, in these cases there are some additional factors which reasons cause them to be classed of *xrafstras*. Snakes and lizards may be considered to be associated with poison, and frogs and tortoises also come into another category as we shall see later.

Fourthly there are those that are closely associated with impurity. Flies and worms are *xrafstras* principally for this reason, for they have contact with dead bodies and excreta. In some cases cats are *xrafstras* of this kind, for they tend to come into contact with impurity and bring it back to the house unexpectedly. Fifthly is the group that kills other animals and eats unclean food such as dead bodies. Carnivorous animals like lions, panthers, wolves, hyenas, wild cats, tigers and crocodiles, and spiders which eat insects are all in this group.

Sixthly is the group of animals that are nocturnal or prefer darkness. This classification partly overlaps with the fifth category, so nocturnal beasts and insects of the fifth group are *xrafstras* for this reason too.

Lastly are those creatures that bring impurity and confusion to Ahuric creatures such as water and earth. Frogs and tortoises are disliked mainly for this reason.

Each *xrafstra* may belong to more than one of the above categories, and it is evident that *xrafstras* are not classified only according to the harm they do to man, but also according to the true base of the Zoroastrian faith, that is dualism: in other words Zoroastrians believe that there are two opposing principles in the universe. One is *Ahura Mazdā*, the principle of Good and the other is *Angra Mainyu*, the principle of Evil. These two rivals made war. *Ahura Mazdā* created the world to win this war.

The opposing *Angra Mainyu* also prepared for war. At the same time as the beginning of the world, war started and progressed. Each creation of *Ahura Mazdā* has its own opposition, and the main struggles operate between these oppositions, but it is also possible and necessary to fight with all other oppositions. All the results of war converge on the central opposition of *Ahura Mazdā* and *Angra Mainyu*. Therefore any victory of *Ahura Mazdā's* creatures is the victory of *Ahura Mazdā* himself and it is the same for *Angra Mainyu*. In a world which is understood in such a way, a *xrafstra* is the counter-creation of *Angra Mainyu* which stands in opposition to the beneficent animals created by *Ahura Mazdā*. Because of the nature of war, *xrafstras* fight not only with *Ahura Mazdā's* creatures, bringing them harm, but also with water and earth by bringing pollution and impurity, and with man whose proper opposition is man infected with the Evil.

Man is also expected to participate in the war as much as he can. When he practices the three basic virtues of good thought, good words and good deeds, he increases the power of *Ahura Mazdā*. And when he presides over the ritual invoked with certain name, he gives power to that specified *Amasha Spēnta* or *yazata*. All the good deeds of daily life such as polishing

metal which symbolizes the sky, preserving the purity of water and earth, looking after animals and plants and keeping his own body clean show his participation in the war of all creatures.

This also works the other way. Whenever he finds the opportunity, man is expected to try to diminish the Evil power, and kill all the *xrafstras* which he comes across. By doing so, he can accomplish his purpose in life positively and actively. At the same time he is always fearful lest the Evil power becomes predominant. The concept of *xrafstra* thus reflects well the very core of the Zoroastrian Faith.

NOTES

- 1) S. Insler, *The Gāthās of Zarathushtra*, Acta Iranica 8, Leiden, 1975, pp. 25, 55, 57 & 127. He explains thus, "The application of this word to describe wild, harmful animals is a specialization of the original meaning." (p. 127)
- 2) C. Bartholomae, *Altiranisches Wörterbuch*, Berlin, 1904, p. 538.
H. Reichelt, *Avesta Reader. Texts, notes, glossary and index*, Strassburg, 1911, p. 228.
- 3) J. Darmesteter, *Le Zend-Avesta*, vol. 1, Paris, 1892, p. 208, n. 9.
Similar interpretation in I. Taraporewala, *The Divine Songs of Zarathushtra*, Bombay, 1951, p. 106.
- 4) H. W. Bailey, A Range of Iranica, *W. B. Henning Memorial Volume*, London, 1970, p. 27.
- 5) Translations of the *Yasna* in this article taken from Taraporewala, op. cit.
- 6) In this passage, only *xrafstra* has not; *-ca* (and). It is not rare in the *Avesta* to find examples of apposition without *ca*.
- 7) This passage has been considered to be the proto-type for the apposition of these three in later literature.
- 8) In later times *xrafstra*'s importance as a noxious creature seems to have increased, presumably through scholastic developments.
- 9) Bartholomae, *ibid.* & Taraporewala, op. cit., p. 367.
- 10) L. H. Mills, *The Zend-Avesta, pt. 2, The Yasna, Visparad, Afrinagan, Gahs and Miscellaneous Fragments*, The Sacred Books of the East, 31, Oxford, 1887, p. 87.
- 11) Olympias, mother of Alexander the Great, was said to have slept with a snake, so pet snakes were not particularly rare in ancient times. In some places snakes were bred in the temples. But what about flies or scorpions?
- 12) Translation of the *Yasht* follows the SBE version.
- 13) However, there are some very old passages in the *Vendidād*, such as that recounting the Yima legend.
- 14) *Vd.* 5.21 & *Yasna* 48.5. In the *Vendidād*, this passage appears as an independent expression, but in the Gathic *Yasna*, it is just a part of one sentence.
- 15) The custom of wearing a mouth cover in the cult of fire and the prohibition on cremation and burial is because of this.
- 16) ——— *skaitim yam gavaca dayaca pouru.mahrkəm* (1.4)
- 17) Meaning is uncertain.
- 18) J. Darmesteter, *The Zend-Avesta, pt. 1, The Vendīdād*, SBE. 4, Oxford, 1880, p. 6 & F. Wolff, *Avesta, die heiligen Bücher der Parsen*, Strassburg, 1910, p. 317.
- 19) *Bundahishn*, 22.4. The citing of *Bundahishn* follows; B. T. Anklesaria, *Zand-Āhāsīh, Iranian or Greater Bundahishn*, Bombay, 1956.
- 20) Herodotus, *Historia*, 1.140.
- 21) This must be the *Kharatar-koshi* which was observed by Kerman Zoroastrians by the middle of the 19th century.

- M. Boyce, *A history of Zoroastrianism*, vol. I, Handbuch der Orientalistik, I. viii. 1. 2. 2A, Leiden, 1975, p. 229, n. 26.
- 22) Agathias, *Scholastikos*, Hist. 2. 24.
- 23) *Vendidād*, 14.8, 18.2 etc. The instrument described in the *Vendidād* is different from the *margan* (snake-killer) (M. Haug, *Essays on the sacred language, writings and religion of the Parsis*, London, 1907, p. 243, n. 3), but Darmesteter thought it the same (op. cit., vol. 3, p. 51). According to the *Bundahishn*, *margan* is a stick, with a piece of leather at the top. (27. 27)
- 24) F. M. P. Kotwal ed. & tr., *The supplementary texts to the Shayest ne-Shayest*, Copenhagen, 1969, 20.5, p. 83.
- 25) H. Jamaspji Asa & M. Haug, *The Book of Arda Virāf, text with English translation and notes*, Bombay & London, 1872, p. 38, 163.
- 26) V.n.21.
- 27) J. B. Tavernier, *Les six voyages en Turquie et en Perse*, Paris, 1682, paper back edition, Paris, 1981, vol. 2, p. 175.
- 28) H. Anquetil du Perron, *Zend-Avesta, ouvrage de Zoroastre*, vol. 2, Paris, 1771, pp. 576–8 & M. Boyce, op. cit., p. 299.
- 29) B. N. Dhabhar, *The Persian Rivayats of Hormazyar Framarz and others, their version with introduction and notes*, Bombay, 1932, p. 269, MU. I, p. 273, II. 1–4— H. F. f. 115 & f. 151.
- 30) *Ibid.*, p. 271, MU. I, p. 277 I. 7 —H. F. f. 207, II. 10–12=H.F. f. 128.
- 31) *Ibid.*, p. 260, MU. I, p. 261, III 2–5.
- 32) *Vendidād*, 14.5.
- 33) *Bundahishn*, 22.8–24.
- 34) Here they speak of two headed and seven headed dragons which cannot be identified with any myth. *Azhi Dahāka* is usually three headed.
- 35) Bat is sometimes considered to be good. Dhabhar, op. cit., p. 256, MU. I, p. 254, II. 14–17 (MU. II, p. 475).
- 36) Every bird is basically good. *Ibid.*, MU. I, p. 254, I. 19. p. 255, II. 1–8 (MU. II, p. 441). But raven seems not to be loved.
- 37) Dhabhar, op. cit., p. 256, MU. I, p. 254, II. 14–17 (MU. II, p. 475).
- 38) As a member of the dog-species, it sometimes is not a *xrafstra*. *Ibid.*, p. 269, MU. I, p. 270, II. 14–16.
- 39) D. N. Mackenzie, *A concise Pahlavi Dictionary*, London, 1971, p. 35. There is other word *shebag* (*shyṣ'k*) which means viper. (*Ibid.*, p. 79)
- 40) Bailey, op. cit., p. 26.
- 41) E. W. West, *The Book of the Mainyo-i-khard*, London, 1871, 2, 191–2, hereafter, *Mēnōg ī xrad*.
- 42) *Vendidād*, 1.3.
- 43) In the *Bundahishn*, 25.9–10, winter lasts five months. In *Mēnōg ī xrad*, 44.20, its summer lasts only for two months, but even in summer it is too cold both for water, land and plants.
- 44) *Mēnōg ī xrad*, 44.22.
- 45) Aras River. Sometimes identified with Avestan *Rangha* River.
- 46) In Darmesteter, SBE. op. cit., p. 5, there is cited from Morier, *A Second Journey*, p. 250.
- 47) *Bundahishn*, 20, 191–2.
- 48) V.p.13.
- 49) In tradition this is given as *mar banak*, so it is considered to be a cat.
- 50) *Jam* is Avestan *Yima*.
- 51) *Bundahishn*, 23.1 & Dhabhar, op. cit., p. 257, MU. I, p. 255, II. 12–19.
- 52) One characteristic may be their manner and physical similarity to a human, with an exception of a crocodile.
- 53) G. du Chinon, p. 462, cited in Mills, op. cit., p. 167.

- 54) Dhabhar, op. cit., p.268, MU. I, p. 272.
- 55) Boyce, op. cit., p. 91.
- 56) M. Boyce, Iconoclasm among the Zoroastrians, J. Neusher ed., *Christianity, Judaism and other Greco-Roman cults, Studies for Morton Smith at sixty*, pt. 3, Leiden, 1975, p. 97.
- 57) However planets are *Angra Mainyu's*.
- 58) K. Āntiā, *Kāmāmak-i Artakhshir Pāpakān*, Bombay, 1900, XIV. 13.
- 59) B. N. Dhabhar, *Saddar Naṣr and Saddar Bundeheš*, Bombay, 1909, 43.9.
- 60) Dhabhar, *Rivāyats*, op. cit., p. 270, MU. I, p. 274, II. 6.
- 61) *Ibid.*, p. 260, MU. I, p. 261, II. 2-5.
- 62) V.p.6 & p. 7.
- 63) *Saddar Naṣr*, p. 23.
- 64) *Marjush or markis*. Some interprets this as locust. *Ibid.*, 43.2.
- 65) A kind of liturgy.
- 66) Here *kerm* in modern Persian is a common noun for worm. In this case, it may mean either *kerm khaki* or *kerm dereft*.
- 67) *Saddar Naṣr*, 43.6. *xazandegan* means reptiles, but here it must be translated as worm.
- 68) In some manuscripts, *marjush* is spelled as *magas*. But if this is a fly, it is not necessary to say *magas ke miṣarad* (flying fly).
- 69) Dhabhar, *Rivāyats*, op. cit., p. 265, MU. I, p. 268, II. 4-8.
- 70) *Mēnōg ī xrad*, 16, 64-66.
- 71) Dhabhar, *Rivāyats*, op. cit., p. 266, MU. I, p. 268, II. 9-10—H.F.f. 440 (MU. II, p. 453).
- 72) *Ibid.*
- 73) *Bundahishn*, 24.1-3.
- 74) *Vendidād*, 18.65.
- 75) *Ibid.*
- 76) *Saddar Naṣr*, 43.2-3.
- 77) *Ibid.*, 5.38.