

## Persia (Ancient Iranians)

### Practices

Modern understanding of ancient Iranian religion and its' associated funerary practices is impeded by the limitations of the available sources. The earliest religious texts of the closely related Indo-Aryan speakers, principally the Rigveda, (a collection of more than 1,000 hymns to various deities) are indispensable for making historical reconstructions of the development of Iranian religion.

The ancient religion worshiped many deities. While both male and female deities were worshiped the society and its gods were male dominated. Additionally, there evolved a dualistic ideology that came to permeate all aspects of life. Originally thought of as chaos and order, this evolved into the concepts of good and evil.

The Iranians conceived of the cosmos as a three-tiered structure consisting of the earth below, the atmosphere, and the stone vault of heaven above. Beyond the vault of heaven was the realm of the Endless Lights, and below the earth was the realm of darkness and chaos.

The Iranians did not build temples, instead preferring to worship in the open. Of most importance was fire, and the key ritual was the yazna, a ritual meal where the guest (a deity) was sent an invitation; on his arrival from afar he was greeted, shown to a comfortable seat, given meat and a refreshing and invigorating drink, and entertained with song extolling his great deeds and virtue. The sacred drink, hauma., was served at this feast. Hauma was made by pressing plants to extract their juice; this juice was then mixed with milk, and a perhaps a bit of water.<sup>1</sup>

From the use of the old Iranian word, daxma, meaning grave, we can infer that interment was the prescribed method used for the dead. Additionally, kings were interred in freestanding or rock-cut tombs, their bodies being coated with wax.<sup>2</sup>

The ancient Persians viewed death as a continuation of life, with no notions of heaven, hell, reward or punishment. After death the disembodied spirit, the 'urvan' (ravan in modern Persian) lingered on earth for three days before departing downward to a subterranean kingdom of the dead. This place was ruled over by Yima.

In this kingdom spirits (urvans) lived a shadowy existence, and were dependent on their descendants on earth for survival. Offerings were made to feed and clothe them through rituals at specified times. The first three days right after death was the most important of all.

Later beliefs added the idea that those who served the gods could join them in afterlife in a kind of paradise.<sup>3</sup>

More funerary customs can be gleaned from the epic poem Ferdowsi Shahnameh. These include:

- Tearing clothes as a sign of mourning
- Cutting hair off a horse's tail owned by the deceased
- Inverting the horse's saddle
- Splashing and dispersing azure color on horses and elephants
- Hanging martial instruments on his horse

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<sup>1</sup> "Ancient Iranian Religion." Encyclopedia Britannica Online. Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d. Web. 10 Jan. 2014. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/293595/ancient-Iranian-religion>

<sup>2</sup> "Encyclopedia Iranica." RSS. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 Jan. 2014. <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/burial-ii>

<sup>3</sup> "Culture of Iran: A History of Moharram & Other Rituals of Death in Iran." N.p., n.d. Web. 10 Jan. 2014. [http://www.iranchamber.com/culture/articles/rituals\\_of\\_death.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/culture/articles/rituals_of_death.php)

- Splashing black soil on thrones, the head, etc.
- The bending of the waist against a coffin (bowing against the coffin)
- Washing the dead person with musk, camphor, ambergris and rose water and overflowing their head with musk, camphor, ambergris, and rose water.
- Garbing the deceased in silk
- Carrying the dead's coffin on the shoulder to respecting them and closing the tomb<sup>4</sup>

### Deities and Important Concepts

- Ahura Mazdā ("Wise Lord")  
Creator of the universe and the cosmic order that he maintains. He is particularly connected with the principle of cosmic and social order and truth called "arta".
- Mithra  
Though associated with the sun, specifically the first rays of dawn as he drives forth in his chariot, Mithra functioned preeminently in the ethical sphere. He is the god of the covenant, contract and treaty. He is also seen as the protector of the lands of those who worship him and abide by their treaties.
- Anāhiti  
The pure goddess who brings fresh water to the earth. She is also associated with fertility.
- Yima  
The first man, the progenitor of the human race, and son of the sun. He is thought to reign over the afterlife.

### Modern Adaptations

- Lit a fire at the start of the rit. Inform everyone that the fire is lit to honor the gods, specially \_\_\_\_ (example Ahura Mazdā, Mithra and Anāhiti). When speaking of the gods you have selected give a short explanation of who they were.

*Example:* We begin this rite by lighting a flame to honor Ahura Mazdā, wise lord who creates order and allows us to know truth. He who created the universe and maintains the cosmic order, help us to see thy structure and know thy guiding hand during our time of grieving.

- Hold a yazna as follows. Set up two chairs and decorate each of them differently. The larger, more impressive chair should be dedicated to Yima and the smaller to the deceased.

Display and read an invitation to Yima to attend the rites. Offer him food and ask that he welcomes the deceased into his realm to guard and guide them.

Display and read an invitation to the deceased. Place clothing on the chair reserved for them; offer them food and drink. Then acknowledge their presence at the rit. Sing a song or read a poem highlighting the deceased accomplishments and virtues. At the end of the service, acknowledge that they will go to with Yima past the stone vaults of heaven into paradise.

- Have pictures or statues of horses displayed. If you have a picture of the deceased riding a horse, be sure to display that.

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<sup>4</sup> Hassani Kalhori, Shahla. "Anthropological Analysis of Mourning and Burial Ceremonies in Ferdowsi Shahnameh." N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Jan. 2014.  
<http://textroad.com/Old%20version/pdf/JBASR/1.%20Basic.%20Appl.%20Sci.%20Res.,%202%2812%2913139-13143,%202012.pdf>

## Sample Readings

The Old Persian text that exist where most likely written by orthodox Zoroastrians. However, it may be appropriate to take our cue from their writings as they pay homage to Ahura Mazdā and Mithra.

### ***Ariaramnes, Hamadan (AmH)***

1.(1-4). Ariaramnes, the Great King, King of Kings, King in Persia, son of Teispes the King, grandson of Achaemenes.

2.(4-9). Ariaramnes the King says: This country Persia which I hold, which is possessed of good horses, of good men, the Great God Ahuramazda bestowed it upon me. By the favor of Ahuramazda I am king in this country.

3.(9-11). Ariaramnes the King says: May Ahuramazda bear me aid.

### ***From Arsames, Hamadan (AsH)***

2.(5-14). Arsames the King says: Ahuramazda, great god, the greatest of gods, made me king. He bestowed on me the land Persia, with good people, with good horses. By the favor of Ahuramazda I hold this land. May Ahuramazda protect me, and my royal house, and may he protect this land which I hold.

### ***ARTAXERXES II, SUSANNA A. (A2Sa)***

Artaxerxes the Great King, King of Kings, King of Countries, King in this earth, son of Darius the King, of Darius (who was) son of Artaxerxes the King, of Artaxerxes (who was) son of Xerxes the King, of Xerxes (who was) son of Darius the King, of Darius (who was) son of Hystaspes, an Achaemenian, says: This palace Darius my great-great-grandfather built; later under Artaxerxes my grandfather it was burned; by the favor of Ahuramazda, Anahita, and Mithra, this palace I built. May Ahuramazda, Anahita, and Mithra protect me from all evil, and that which I have built may they not shatter nor harm.

## Resources

- Ancient Iraian Religion  
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/293595/ancient-Iranian-religion>
- BURIAL ii. Remnants of Burial Practices in Ancient Iran  
<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/burial-ii>
- Anthropological Analysis of Mourning and Burial Ceremonies in Ferdowsi Shahnameh  
<http://textroad.com/Old%20version/pdf/JBASR/J.%20Basic.%20Appl.%20Sci.%20Res.,%202%2812%2913139-13143,%202012.pdf>
- Old Persian Texts  
<http://www.avesta.org/op/op.htm>