

# PARSEE RELIGIOUS CEREMONIAL OBJECTS IN THE NATIONAL MUSEUM

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## INTRODUCTION

The Division of Historic Religions in the United States National Museum has lately been enriched by the addition of a collection of objects, illustrating some of the Parsee beliefs and rites, which was brought by Dr Emily Brainard Ryder from Bombay, India. A few remarks on the Parsees and their religious tenets may precede the description of this collection.

The Parsees form a community of about 100,000, of which the greater part, about 90,000, is settled in India, chiefly in Bombay, the rest being scattered here and there in Persia. They derive their name from the province of Pars, or Fars, broadly employed for Persia in general, from which country they migrated after its overthrow by the Arabs 641 A. D.

Their faith, which was for centuries previous to the Mohammedan conquest the state and national religion of Persia, is based on the teachings of Zoroaster (Zarathustra) who, according to the most reliable tradition, flourished in Bactria<sup>1</sup> between the middle of the seventh and beginning of the sixth centuries B. C.<sup>2</sup>

The substance of the Parsee creed is this: There is one supreme God, Ormuzd (Ahura Mazda), creator and ruler of the universe, author of all good. Associated with him in the government of the world are seven subordinate spirits, the Amshaspands (Amesha-Spentas), or archangels. Opposed to these powers of good is Ahriman (Angra-Mainyus) at the head of the malevolent spirits, the cause of all that is evil and noxious in the world. The conflict between these primeval causes of light and darkness, of good and evil, has been going on since the beginning of time and their

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<sup>1</sup> About corresponding to the modern Balkh in Afghanistan.

<sup>2</sup> Compare A. V. William Jackson, *Zoroaster the Prophet of Ancient Iran*, New York, 1899, pp. 14, 174, 205-225.

influence pervades the whole universe, but will end in the triumph of the good over the evil.<sup>1</sup>

The Parsees believe in the immortality of the soul, the resurrection of the body, and a last judgment.

The moral teachings of the Parsees are comprised in the triad of pure thoughts, pure words, and pure actions (*Humata, Hukhta, and Hvarshata*). The virtues inculcated in particular are purity alike of body and soul, truthfulness and uprightness, charity and benevolence, the destruction of noxious creatures and the care of useful animals, and the keeping pure of fire, water, earth, and the air as the beneficent creations of Ormuzd.

The sacred scriptures of the Parsees are contained in the Avesta, or Zend Avesta, in which the following main divisions are distinguished :

1. *Yasna*, the chief liturgical work, and the oldest and most sacred part of the Avesta, including, as it does, the Gathas, hymns, or psalms composed in an older dialect and derived from the sayings or sermons of Zoroaster himself.

2. *Visparad*, containing minor litanies, invocations to the various chiefs of the spiritual and terrestrial creation.

3. *Yashts*, invocations and hymns to the ancient Iranian divinities and heroes.

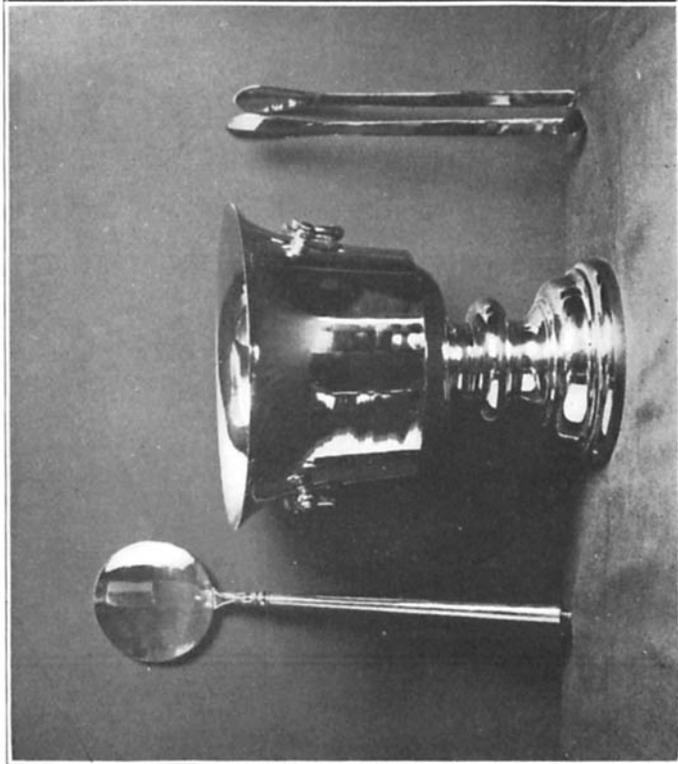
4. *Khorda Avesta*, or Minor Avesta, comprising minor liturgical texts, as the Nyaishes and Gahs, or the five daily prayers, the Afringans, or benedictions, etc., a kind of extract from the Avesta for laymen.

5. *Vendidad*, a code of religious and civil laws and precepts, a kind of Parsee Pentateuch.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Parsees protest against the imputation of dualism, *i. e.*, the doctrine of two original independent spirits, one good and the other bad, to their theological system. The primeval principles of good and evil (*Vohumano* and *Akemmano*, or Spenta-Mainyus and Angra-Mainyus), the Parsees claim, were, though opposed to each other, united in every existing being, even in Ahura Mazda himself, and by their union produced the world of material things and of spiritual existences. Compare Karaka, *History of the Parsis*, London, 1884, 2, 187; also Martin Haug, *Essays on the Sacred Language, Writings and Religion of the Parsees*, Bombay, 1862, p. 258.

<sup>2</sup> The present Avesta, which equals perhaps one-tenth of the Bible in extent, is believed to be but a small remnant of the original Zoroastrian sacred literature which was lost during the invasions of Persia by Alexander the Great (330 B. C.) and the Arabs (641 A. D.). According to the Arabian chronicler Tabari (died 923) the Persian sacred scriptures were inscribed on twelve thousand cowhides, and Hermippos, a Greek philosopher of the third century B. C., credits Zoroaster with the composition of two million verses.





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1, Fire ladle; cat. 216,053. 2, Fire urn; cat. 216,051. 3, Fire tongs; cat. 216,052. 4, Offering tray; cat. 216,054.

The Parsees, constituting perhaps the smallest community in the world, occupy a most prominent place among the several nationalities of India. They are distinguished by honesty, energy, and capacity, and their reputation for benevolence and generosity is world-wide.

#### THE COLLECTION

1. *Fire-urn*.—Made of brass and nickel-plated; height,  $13\frac{1}{4}$  in.; diameters,  $11\frac{1}{2}$  in. and  $7\frac{1}{2}$  in. (Plate XII, figure 2. Museum number 216,051.) Fire, by reason of its usefulness, brightness, purity, and incorruptibility, as also the sun, are considered by the Parsees as bearing the most perfect resemblance to the nature and perfections of the supreme God, and therefore as his most adequate symbols. Both are therefore objects of religious reverence. The Parsees are the only Eastern people who entirely abstain from smoking, and most of them would rather not blow out a candle if they could help it. One of the most important rites of Parsee worship is to keep up a perpetual fire in their temples.<sup>1</sup> For this purpose fires are taken from various places of manufacture, to which, if possible, fire caused by lightning is added. Each of these fires has to undergo a "purification" in the following manner: A perforated metal tray containing small chips and dust of fragrant sandal-wood is held over it until the chips are ignited. From this new fire another one is produced in the same way until the process is repeated nine times. The several fires thus purified are collected together into a metal urn which is placed upon a stone altar in a separate chamber. The sacred fire is fed day and night with pure dry pieces of wood and other fragrant substances by priests in turn who, when officiating, cover the lower part of their face with a piece of cloth, called *padan*, so as not to defile the fire by their breath.

The Parsees are taught in their youth to face some luminous object while worshipping God. When praying in the temple they turn toward the sacred fire; when in the open air, toward the sun.

2. *Fire ladle*.—Made of brass and nickel-plated. Length,  $13\frac{1}{2}$  in.

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<sup>1</sup> The Parsees distinguish three grades of fire temples: 1, *Atash-dagdah*, which can be touched both by priests and laymen; 2, *Atash-adaran*, which can be touched by priests only; 3, *Atash-behram*, the highest of all. Non-Zoroastrians are excluded from any fire temple.

(Plate XII, figure 1. Museum number 216,053.) The sacred fire and everything that is connected with it must not come in contact with anything that may contaminate it. A ladle is therefore used for taking up the wood chips offered for the urn.

3. *Fire tongs*.—Made of brass and nickel-plated. Length,  $13\frac{1}{2}$  in. (Plate XII, figure 3. Museum number 216,052.) Used for picking up the wood chips for the sacred fire, which would be defiled if touched with the hands.

4. *Offering tray*.—Made of brass and nickel-plated. Diameter,  $17\frac{3}{4}$  in.; depth,  $1\frac{1}{2}$  in. (Plate XII, figure 4. Museum number 216,054.) The Parsees have a kind of sacred meal in honor either of the dead or the guardian angels. Fruits and flowers are spread on a metal tray or on plantain leaves, while glasses are filled with fresh milk, pure water, wine, and sherbet. A priest recites the prayers called *Afringans*, which are either expressive of remembrance of the dead or which invoke the aid of the angel in whose honor the meal was prepared. After this consecration, which only a priest may perform, the meal is partaken by the invited guests.<sup>1</sup>

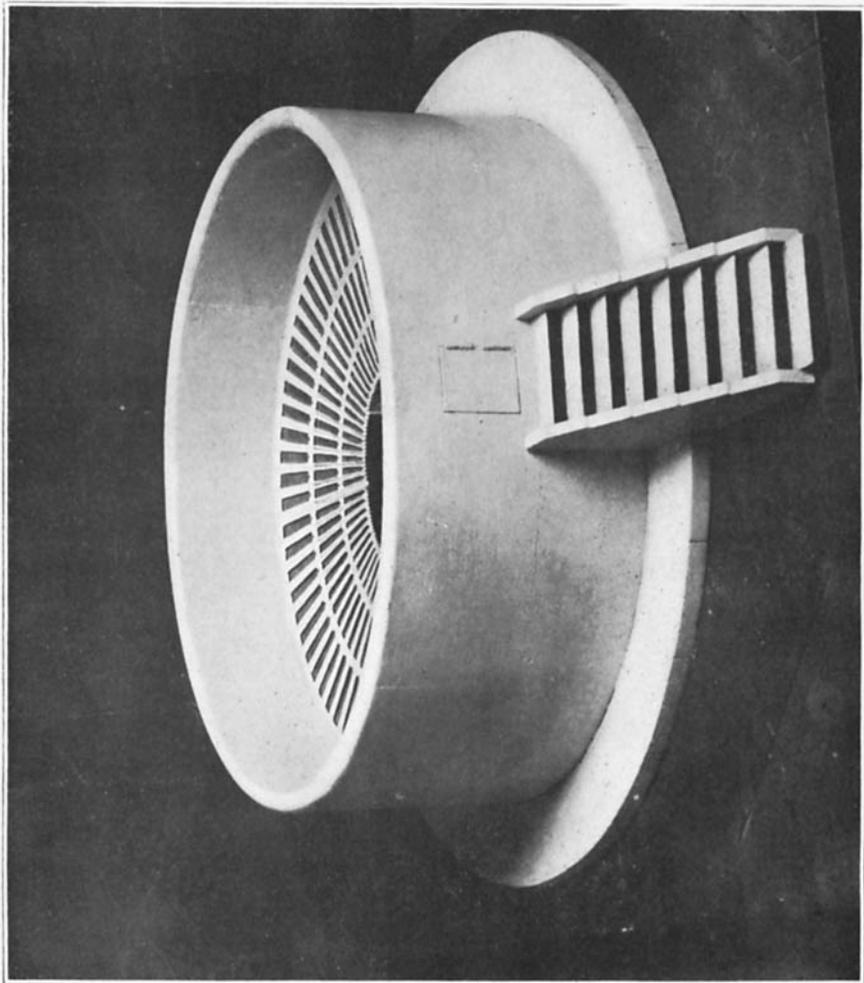
5. *Tray*.—Made of brass and nickel-plated. Diameter,  $12\frac{1}{2}$  in.; depth,  $1\frac{5}{8}$  in. (Museum number 216,055.)

6. *Religious Costume*.—(Museum number 216,056.) This consists of (a) an ample double-breasted coat of cotton, reaching to the ankles, called *jama*; (b) a belt, called *pichori*, made of cotton, about one yard wide and several yards in length, which is folded once and passed round the waist as many times as its length will admit; (c) loose cotton trousers; (d) a pair of cotton gloves, and (e) a kind of turban of brown figured silk. This costume is used by the Parsees on formal and solemn occasions. The dress of the priests is the same, only that the head-gear is likewise of white cloth.

7. *Tower of Silence*.—Model made of wood. Height, 18 in.; diameter, 28 in.; length of platform, 48 in.; width, 40 in. (Plate XIII. Museum No. 215,412.) In agreement with the Zoroastrian doctrine that the four elements — water, fire, air, and earth, as the good creations of Ormuzd, should be maintained pure and undefiled, the Parsees neither burn nor bury their dead, nor do they consign them to water, but allow them to pass over into another living body by ex-

<sup>1</sup> Compare Haug, op. cit., p. 199; Karaka, *History of the Parsis*, p. 171.





MODEL OF THE TOWER OF SILENCE IN THE NATIONAL MUSEUM

posing them on mountain heights, on so-called "towers of silence" (*dakhma*), to be consumed by vultures. The tower of silence is a circular structure of stone, plastered with lime, from 60 to 90 feet in diameter and from 20 to 30 feet in height, open at the top, otherwise resembling a gasometer. Inside is a circular platform paved with large stone slabs, called *pavis*, upon which the bodies are laid. The *pavis* are ranged in three concentric rows, diminishing in size from the outer to the inner ring, the outer being reserved for men, the middle for women, and the inner for children. The corpse is deposited wrapped in clean white cloths, which, however, must be old and worn out in order to admit of ready destruction. The "heaven-sent" birds, which are always in the vicinity of the tower, swoop down upon the corpse as soon as it has been exposed, and it is said that it is quite stripped of flesh in an hour or two. In the center of the platform is a pit (*bhandar*), about 30 feet in diameter, from which four drains lead into four wells sunk in the ground outside of the tower. Into this pit the denuded bones are later deposited where, under the tropical sun, they soon crumble into dust and are then, with all other remaining matter, conducted through the drains to the wells. The drains are provided with disinfectants (charcoal and sandstones) to purify the matter before it enters the ground, so as to preserve the earth from pollution.

The principal towers of silence in use at present by the Parsee community of India are found on Malabar hill at Bombay.