

The Legitimacy of the Vendidād

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The Claim by the Disbelievers: Reformists and the misinformed Parsis have the incorrect assumption that Zarathushtra lived around 600 BC, leading to the misconception that the Vendidād is a manmade text of rules introduced late in history long after the life of Zarathushtra and therefore this “book of rules” has no legitimacy.

The Vendidād comes from the Avestan word *Vī-Daēvō-Dāta*, which means “Given against the Daevas”. It entails the ritualistic laws and practices of the Zarathushti religion. It is the 19th Nask and is the only Nask that survives in its entirety to this day. The language of the Vendidād resembles Old Avestan, a language that was prevalent around the time of Asho Zarathushtra, but scholars say that it also has portions written in Young Avestan. Zarathushtra and His followers belonged to the Old Avestan society, one that prevailed at the eastern end of the Iranian plateau, where the Kayanian Dynasty once hailed.

According to scholars of recent times, Zarathushtra lived around the middle of the 2nd millennium BC, around 1400-1600 BC. This date contradicts the one that has somehow been accepted by many Parsis that Zarathushtra lived as late as around 600 BC.

The date for Zarathushtra being in 600 BC was simply the work of the Greeks for their ulterior motive to legitimize Pythagoras through their claim that he was personally taught by Zarathushtra, during the Median and Persian (Achaemenid) eras. As noted by Mary Boyce in her respected publication, *A History of Zoroastrianism: The Early Period*:

Had it been otherwise, and had Zoroastrianism been carried in its infancy to the Medes and Persians, these imperial people must inevitable have found mention in its religious works.

But the fact that, that wasn't the case, it substantiates the argument that Zarathushtra lived long before the Median and Persian (Achaemenid) periods.

Another evidence points to the fact that the language used around 600 BC was Old Persian. Stretching out Zarathushtra's timeline all the way to as recent as 600 BC does not allow one to put various events of Zoroastrian and ancient Iranian history in proper temporal perspective. The Gathas, as we know, were composed by Zarathushtra in Old Avesta, a language totally different than Old Persian. Also, the fact remains that the Gathic language shares semantics with another Indo-Iranian philological specimen, the Hindu Rigveda, composed in Sanskrit. Scholars have established the timeline for the Rigveda anywhere between 1700 BC and 1300 BC. In fact, it is quite revealing to note that the presence of Zarathushtra is clearly mentioned in the Rigveda. Therefore, the date of 600 BC is very misleading and deceptive, as the Avestan language must be around the time of Rigvedic Sanskrit due to the linguistic similarities.

Yet another strong piece of evidence supporting the presence of Zarathushtra in 2nd millennium BC emerges from the Fravardin Yasht. Paragraph 16 of the Yasht clearly indicates that Zarathushtra was propagating the Mazdayasni Zarathushti religion during the time of some opposer named Nodhas (Avestan: *Nāidyāongha*), the son of Goatama. Edulji Kanga's footnote in his translated Khorddeh Avesta points out that *Nāidyāongha Goatema* of the Avesta is the same as *Gaotama Nodhas* of the Rigveda. *Gaotama Nodhas* was a Rushi (an Rigvedic seer), who is dated around 1500 BC – hence the era around the mid 2nd millennium BC.

The above arguments supporting the presence of Zarathushtra in and around 1500-1600 BC are therefore undisputable. It establishes without much contention that Zarathushtra lived before the 1st millennium BC and was definitely well into the 2nd millennium BC.

With the ironclad assertion that Zarathushtra lived in the middle of the 2nd millennium BC and nowhere in the 1st millennium BC, we have also established when the Mazdayasni Zarathushti religion came into being. We can now answer the question of when the Vendidad was written and address the skepticism of those Parsis that has gripped them for quite some time on the legitimacy of the Vendidad.

Let's first examine the empirical evidence, which is obtained from observation and archeological discoveries.

The Vendidad describes elaborate laws regarding the disposal of dead bodies. It outlines the use of a Dakhma (Tower of Silence) to not pollute the holy creations of fire, water, and the Earth. The body is to be placed at a region of higher altitude, where scavenging birds, microorganisms, and the energy of the Sun which drives biological decomposition processes ultimately leaves the bones behind. After a year, these bones are picked up and stored in box or compartment called an ossuary (Pahlavi: *Astōdān*). The earliest Zarathushti ossuaries have been found in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (ancient regions of Khvarizem and Sughda/Sogdiana) and date back to around 1500 BC, which is around the time of Asho Zarathushtra and is encompassed within the Avestan period. This indicates that the tenets of the Vendidad were in practice as early as 1500 BC.

Similar evidence is also present from the Median and Achaemenid eras. The royalty used tombs but were able to follow the requirement of the Vendidad to not pollute the holy creations of fire, water, and the Earth. This is an excerpt from *Iranica Online* which eloquently summarizes a practical application of the Vendidad:

The wealthy who did not practice exposure, avoided the pollution of the holy creations of fire, water and earth by the first embalming the corpse and placing it in a solid coffin, and only then entombing it, often in a stone (rock-cut) sepulcher. The royal Achaemenid tombs were thus prepared as a result of wishing to obey in a practical way the ordinance of the Vendidad.

This indicates that the Medians and Persians (Achaemenids) had a solid understanding of the Vendidad, thus substantiating that it was already a well-established scripture during their time.

Aside from archeological evidence, the other side of the story is told through linguistic and scriptural evidence. As mentioned before, it must be noted that the language of the Vendidād resembles Old Avestan, with some Young Avestan portions. We also know that the Avestan language was existent during the time of Zarathushtra, in the region of eastern Iran. It therefore stands to reason that it could not have been written in the Old Persian language which dominated in and around 600 BC. Similarly, it could not have been written in the Parthian or Sassanid periods as the language during these periods was Pahlavi – the religious texts produced during these periods were also exclusively composed in Pahlavi. Therefore, the disbelievers must accept the fact that our pious Vendidād was composed significantly before 600 BC.

The list of 16 nations mentioned in Fargard 1 of the Vendidād do not mention Media (*Māda*), Persia (*Pārsa*), or any other western regions that were conquered by the various historically recorded Iranian empires. In fact, no western regions are mentioned at all in any Avestan text, “Young” or “Old”. Therefore, it is obvious that they were composed before various tribes migrated from eastern to western Iran. P. Oktor Skjaervø, a well-respected scholar, quoted the following:

The fact that the oldest Young Avestan texts apparently contain no reference to western Iran, including Media, would seem to indicate that they were composed in eastern Iran before the Median domination reached the area.

Researchers suggest that this occurred around 900-1000 BC. This is supported by Assyrian records, where the first Iranian tribes (Persians and Medes) were observed in western Iran as in a 9th century BC, as per an inscription made by King Shalmaneser III. There should be no question over the fact that the Young and Old Avestan texts were written before 1000 BC. However, the question remains as to how much older they were.

To answer this question, we must examine the Fravardin Yasht once more. According to the Fravardin Yasht, one of the first righteous disciples of the Good Religion, Saena, son of Ahumstut, was responsible for inducting 100 pupils into the faith around the time of Zarathushtra. If the Rushis were around the time of Zarathushtra, then Saena must be around 1500 BC as well. In fact, the Fravardin Yasht also mentions as many as seven generations of Saena. One can estimate a timespan of around 200 years to account for these seven generations. We can therefore shift forward in time by 200 years, which comes to around 1300 BC. Also, since the Fravardin Yasht was written after the death of the seventh generation (as these are souls revered of those who have passed away), we can come to a date of around 1250 BC. **Therefore, considering that the Vendidād has parts that resemble Old Avestan and ones that are in Young Avestan, it would be originally written around the time of Zarathushtra, at around 1500 BC, and the last “edits” made around 1250 BC, which was the time of another Young Avestan scripture - the Fravardin Yasht.** It’s also crucial to note that even though the final “edits” of the Vendidād were made a few hundred years after Zarathushtra, its content was already known prior to that time as it was being transmitted orally. That is how and why the Vendidād scripture got implemented by those around 1500 BC.

Verdict

Considering that the language of the Vendidād resembles Old Avestan, with certain portions in Young Avestan, it can be placed at the latest, a few hundred years after the time of Zarathushtra, which is still in the 2nd millennium BC. According to various evidence, the Vendidād was originally composed at around 1500 BC, with the newest portions in Young Avestan being dated at around 1250 BC. The latter date being the approximate date of all Young Avestan texts, including the Fravardin Yasht. Due to the close positioning in time to the Prophet Himself, the Vendidād was most likely penned by His immediate disciples and/or their direct descendants, who had received teachings directly from Zarathushtra Himself. In fact, the evidence amassed above allows for one to understand the context of the Dinkard's description of how the Nasks (a set of 21 holy scriptures which includes the Vendidād) came to being – that it was Zarathushtra who received the knowledge from Ahura Mazda, and then others wrote it down and then stored in the Royal Treasury at the time.

With all the compelling evidence stated, we trust that the readers, particularly the doubters within the Parsi community start to truly believe that the Vendidād is not just a “book” written by ordinary men. Make no mistake, this pious scripture was written by those who were close contemporaries to Zarathushtra Himself and completed by Their direct descendants.