

Zoroastrian Rituals in Context

Edited by Michael Stausberg

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Zoroastrian *Rituals*, comprising of papers read at an international symposium in Heidelberg in 2002, is the most comprehensive work on this subject from theological, historical, artistic, archaeological, and ritualistic angles. There are too many authors and topics to cover in a short review, but those interested in this subject will find it unparalleled in its scope as well as depth.

The author stresses his independence from the Mary Boyce school right at the outset, and differs from Boyce regarding the origins of the religion. He discusses this knotty problem at length in a 56-page article from a ritualistic point of view.

He concludes this encyclopedia on rituals with a 64-page article on Monday nights at the Banaji Atash Behram and Fridays at the Aslaji Agiary in Mumbai, explaining them as “effective means to obtain divine help and assistance ... and not so much for the souls and spirits of the deceased, who are in the focus of the traditional priestly rituals.”

James Boyd and Ron Williams here further their thesis of emphasizing the aesthetic and artistic aspects of Zoroastrian and Shinto rituals.

Carlo Cereti describes how two Italians traveling to Bombay in the 19th century perceived Parsis and their ritualistic practices. They were impressed by their progress but were taken aback by their funerary practices. (One can contrast it to the recent statement by an Italian minister advising Italians to practice this Zoroastrian method for ecological reasons.)

I found the English translation of Maneckji Limji’s review of the ritual practices of Iranian Zoroastrians, written in Gujarati in 1865 very informative. Almut Hintze explains how the later Ritual of the Water (*Āb Zohr*) is influenced by the worship of the Waters in Yasna Haptanghaiti.

Dietrich Huff provides archaeological evidence of Zoroastrian funerary practices, and reveals that it was only after the Arab conquest that open exposure sites came to be surrounded by walls and a central pit became the

common bone receptacle; this arrangement only then came to be known as the *dakhma*.

Ramiyar Karanjia illuminates the reader about the importance of *baj-dharna*. Dastur Firoze Kotwal and J. K. Choksy detail the history and functions of the *stum (satoom)* prayers, which extol the souls of the deceased and the *fravashis* of the righteous ones.

Philip Kreyenbroek informs us about *Nirangestan*, a text dealing with questions of ritual, written in Avesta, with translations into Pahlavi. He concludes that the *yashts* could form part of Zoroastrian ritual, contrary to the contemporary scholarly opinion, as they could be recited on the day of the month, when the divinity in question received special worship. Gernot Windfuhr compares Zoroastrian and Taoist ritual from cosmology and sacred numerology angles.

There are articles on the *Atash nu geet*: a Parsi lay ritual; initiations in theory and in Zoroastrianism; the *Yasna* ritual in Pahlavi; Zoroastrian shrines in Iran; *sofreh* rituals among Shiite Muslims and Zoroastrians in Iran; ritual community meals in the ancient Iranian religion; and many more. Some are written in German and therefore beyond this reviewer's grasp.

In his 60 years of study of Zoroastrianism, this reviewer has never come across such a wonderful tapestry of ideas and observations about Zoroastrian rituals, woven in such an interesting and thought-provoking way. Not all of them may be accepted unchallenged, and indeed one author does challenge Boyd's interpretations in this text itself.

Stausberg has initiated a very important and often neglected search, for which he richly deserves the gratitude of Zoroastrians, whether or not they would (or could) possibly agree with so many diverse opinions.

My only and serious lament is that he chose not to touch upon the North American Zoroastrian practices in any way whatsoever, even though he contacted me in 1997 to learn about it, and even though a significant proportion of the Zoroastrian population, perhaps 20% (and more seem to follow) abides here.

It is only in these uncharted territories that the significance and role of Zoroastrian rituals will come to be tested. Stausberg has sadly missed this opportunity; we hope he makes up for it in his future endeavors. This does not, however, detract from the importance of his brave and imaginative undertaking in any way.

GOD SPEED to him!