

The Essence of Benevolent Nature^[i]

By Dr. Sam Kerr

Of all the Creation stories we read none touches scientific realities as much as the Gathic concept does in the making (and the unmaking) of life. It talks of the awesome wonder of Creation, which embodies a sacred moral and ethical code to which the sanctity of all life is subordinate. The sacredness of the Tree of Life has been found in every form of spirituality as a widely recognised symbol from prehistoric times. Indigenous peoples on all Continents had spiritual locations identified as their 'sacred sites'. As agricultural and pastoral societies developed they built sanctuaries of trees, which were their guardians, never to be cut down or mutilated. In Vedic *Yajna* (Av: *Yasna*) twigs of *Palash*, the 'flame tree' were used as auspicious aromatic fuel for the sacred fire. Our scriptures, too, talk of special wood and plants used to fuel the Fire.

Vendidad 14.3 '....the righteous and good soul doth offer only those plants, which bear the sweetest fragrance as fuel for the Fire of Ahura Mazda.....'

Ahura Mazda's fourth Creation:

Parallel with scientific observations of the sequence of development of life on Earth, it is symbolic our scriptures should emphasise that, following on the Sky, the Earth and the Waters, Ahura Mazda's fourth Creation was Plant Life ahead of his fifth and sixth creations - Animals and Humans.

Gatha Spenta Mainyu 48.6 '....and Mazda through righteous acts first created and clothed the bare Earth with trees and plants.'

This creation of first life on Earth, a **green mantle of freshness/flourishing greenery of vegetation** (Avestan: '**Varena**' meaning '**an exquisite garment**', see also the Gathic words **Varena and Varana**) cladding the naked Earth, was well planned to initiate the life-giving atmospheric capsule of air (our environment with the precise proportion of Oxygen, Carbon Dioxide and Nitrogen). This was ordained by Ahura Mazda to evolve for the sustenance of his next two Creations - Animal and Human life until the end of Zravaane Daraegho Khadaate (limited Earth time).

Vendidad 9.46: '.....and the Druj shall flee, like an arrow well darted,

as hastily as would the previous season's green freshness covering the Earth.'

To the Gathic/Avestan peoples, among **'the first documented greenies'** on record, all life - not just human life - has a higher destiny. Their personification of the spirit of sacred plant life - the Creator's supreme attribute 'Ameretat'- the Lord of Immortality as the protector of such life, thus endowed all vegetation on Earth with sacredness, forever. The wanton destruction of plant life and cutting down of trees was deemed strictly unacceptable and its conservation, as a noble value, became inherent in our traditional beliefs.

Hadokht Nask XXII.13 quotes the comparative value of regretful actions: '.....ridiculing others, encouraging acts of idolatry, withholding charity from the needy, cutting down treesthen, it becomes obligatory to commence chanting the Gathas.'

Only when it became absolutely necessary was some clearance permitted but a strict limit became mandatory.

Vendidad 9.2: 'In truth, a good Mazdayasnian, well versed in the texts of the scriptures, will fell trees only in one area of 9 lengths of the extended arms within the 4 sides of a square' (about 18 square meters).'

Vendidad 16.2 adds: 'a good Mazdayasnian.....he carefully selects areas devoid of plants, trees or sources of firewood during the necessary clearance for a path, passageway or road.'

Soviet archaeologists have identified three cultures of the second millennium BCE (over a vast area of pastoral grassland and wooded forest regions) similar to the Gathic settlement. Those specifically in the Kazakhstan region were proto-Indo-Aryans and proto-Aryans of the Andronovo culture living off the alluvial soil, watered by the Rivers Ob, Lena and many smaller rivers and tributaries. Zarathushtra's people were settled pastoralists, who tended cattle and sheep and goats and who kept dogs for herding and hunting in the rich grasslands and dense forests abounding in the white-barked birch trees (*'spætinish razurao'* of **Ram Yasht XV.31**). They saw themselves as custodians as well as dependants, thus becoming one with the natural world. They managed to harvest an astonishing variety of products from the forest. The running waters and the natural landscape of the grasslands in the vicinity promoted special veneration. Such was there reverence for trees

that planting them in the name of noted persons and loved ones was an ingrained custom

Fravardin Yasht XIII.79 'nameni apo, yazmaide; nameni urvaro, yazmaide (reverence by name to the waters; reverence by name to the trees)

The sociology of such co-existence in Zarathushtra's teachings enabled his followers to practice the most intensive and sustainable of agriculture known to early humans. The tree, in our scriptures, stands for stately dignity and for everything that is fertile and abundant. It was already known to the Avestan people that greenery and foliage attract clouds and, therefore, rain.

The effect of the Sun's rays

Tir Yasht VIII.7: '.....Ahura Mazda gave admirable light and heat to the Sun to make the Earth fertile by felicitating the growth of Vegetation and increasing'

and of the Moon beams were known.

Mah Yasht VII.4 'When the light of the full Moon shines, the attraction of moisture from the waters causes green coloured off-shoots to begin to sprout.....'

Through ages the magnificent Cypress tree (**deraakht-e-sarv**) has remained an emblem representing all that was beautiful, majestic and lasting. The luxuriant growth of its branches and its deep evergreen hue last the whole year round.

Our Avestan 'Paradise' – a haven on Earth:

To the aesthetically sensitive Iranians, Nature and culture coalesce in the serenity, greenery and flashing colours of parks, gardens and reserves. The created landscape, indeed, exhibits the urge of the free human spirit to exhilarate. Such aesthetic sensitivity of cultivating gardens was enjoyed by the ancient Iranian kings and commoners alike in our 'ancestral homeland'. Every available area of land - the slopes as well as flat land was used for their flowerbeds and rows of cypress and pines. The **main feature was the surrounding wall** that protected the garden against wind and provided the privacy of a blissful seclusion away from the dust and distraction.

The word '**Paradise**' stems from the Avestan word '**Pairi-daeza**', literally meaning '**an enclosure surrounded by walls**' ('**Pairi**'

surrounding / 'Daeza' wall). During Achaemenian times a garden, orchard or park was called Pairi-daeza.

Vendidad 3.18 & 5.49 talk of 'a walled enclosure covering the allotted ground built by the Mazdayasnians.'

Priceless ancient Iranian paintings depict closely the Avestan word, 'Pairi-daeza' – ('walled enclosure'), later corrupted to the word Paradise. They depict all the features a typical Iranian '**chahaar baug**', so called because it has four areas divided by paths with flowering shrub and scrub or, sometimes narrow water channels in the shape of a cross dividing the enclosed area into four divisions. This magnificent layout has been carried through and symbolised by the ancient concept of the 'four quarters of the world' divided by four rivers.

The walls ensure their private, enclosed nature and the strategic use of shade-giving ornamental and protective wind breaks (Plane and Ash trees, tall oriental Poplars, native Cypress, Palm, Judas trees, Willows and some exotics) in lateral sunken beds towering over the shrub, afford protection for the delicate plants and refreshment for the visitor.

Sometimes, one central alley is broad with raised walkways flanked by flower beds (perennials, Roses, Lilacs, evergreen Viburnum shrubs, Forsythias) between which are rills and pools, shaded by fruit trees (wild Sour Cherries, Almonds, Pomegranates, Walnuts, Vines and Orange groves) and fragrant shrub with masses of colours (Anemones, Muscari, Ranunculi) under-carpeted with Clover and sparkling with spring flower-bulbs (Tulips, Irises, Poppies) nestling under the shade.

At other times, the broad central passageway is occupied with cascading water, flowing down a steep gradient having walkways by its sides with orchard trees spread out towards the high walls - an oasis garden.

Occasionally, a garden is fashioned around a natural spring. Water jets and fountains are essentially latter-day (comparatively modern) non-Iranian inclusions added during the renovation of gardens hundreds of years old.

This **Paradise on Earth**, the walled garden with its lingering aura of fragrance in the air has been symbolically identified in prose form as a personal world of spiritual reverence and affection in contrast to the stark materiality of the outside world. As its gate, the only entrance to this enchanted world, opens by favour of the Creator, we, earthbound beings, transiently enter to reflect on and enjoy a far more transcendental world of nature's closeness.

Sadly, the concept of a Paradise as a blissful place has been attributed entirely to the post-Sassanian period after conquest. Even the Egyptians have been credited as originators by virtue of the fact that a record exists of a nobleman's landscaping of trees and shrubs in a painting found on a tomb wall dating 500 BCE. In a hot, dry and dusty desert land, such a place could only be limited to the palatial abode of the nobleman and perhaps of the Pharaohs. The laying down of parks and gardens for the commoners was just not thought of.

By 1000 BCE in Maa(n)da [Gk: Media]the Medes, in the first recognisable Zarathushti Empire in their 'new world' (outside their 'ancestral Homeland') and later the Achaemenians, developed the first concept of public **parks, botanical gardens and game reserves** meant for the enjoyment of all. Such nature reserves with ornamental trees, fruit trees, well-tended meadows and game also became open spaces for the refreshment of the mind and relaxation of the body. This influence then spread to Greece and Rome (by 300-400 BCE).

Xenophon, the Greek historian 430-354 BCE, who learnt about the aesthetics of gardening during his travels in Asia, called it '**Paradeisoi**', a Greek equivalent of an Airyanic word. The Greek word '**Paradeisoi**' (as garden) entered the first Bible in the Greek language. Then, becoming the 'Garden of Eden', the word 'Paradise' was embraced by all three Abrahamic religions.

Plane Trees: Socrates 469-399 BCE learnt of the splendour of Iranian Gardens at the palace in Sardis of Cyrus (the rebel Prince) younger brother of Xerxes II, who attended to the trees himself. Xerxes, after defeating the rebel prince, paid divine honours to the plantation of Plane Trees and entrusted a senior commanders to nurture the plantation.

Achaemenian documents record welfare of orchards and wilderness reserves took precedence over other matters of welfare in the State. Daraius I took time off to introduce new foliage - Plane Trees from beyond the Euphrates into Iran. To newly constructed Cities he allotted one third of the land area inside the walls to houses and two thirds to the trees, orchards and gardens. In medieval times the cities, like the modern city of Tehran, were adorned with Plane Trees.

Cypress Trees: Initially taken by the Romans to Italy and their European colonies, the Cypress has not exhibited such longevity in Europe, where it rarely survives even 2000 years, mainly succumbing to a tumorous growth in the main trunk. Among the many species of the Cypress these tumours have not been

observed in Iran and the whole of the ancient Classical World (once part of Greater Persia). Such is the Iranian reverence for plant life that single trees, the **Sarv e Abarkouh** and the **Sarv e Cham** (Cypress in the villages of Abarkouh and Cham) have been nominated '**Miraas e farhangi - Iran's National Treasure**' (National Cultural Heritage). These trees have possibly lived well over 4000 years by virtue of the ideal environment - a crisp dry chemically unpolluted desert environment of the Yazdi Dasht e Kavir. At the base of the majestic tree in Cham is a shrine having a living flame maintained continuously by the devoted villager custodians.

Sensitivity of plant life:

It is not correct to presume that, without the human and animal type perceptive consciousness, plants have no feeling. The old concept of an ability to feel was based on an erroneous idea that impulses from the brain are electrical in nature. Nerve impulses have been shown to be due to chemical changes at the synapses. Chemical changes of differing natures are found in every organism. All life has the ability to perceive, feel and react. The sensitivity of plants has even been attributed to the domain of thought. Plant emotions are observed to behave like other Extra Sensory Perception-class signals. Even the fragrance of flowers can alter under differing environmental conditions, as also the diverse aura of people can reflect upon plants near them.

The fragrance of flowers can alter under differing environmental conditions, as also the diverse aura of people can reflect upon plants near them. The fact that foliage reflects a certain warmth (and silent affection) when nurtured with care, has been referred to in **Rashna Yasht XII.17** [Rashna, the Yazata of Truth / Justice has been called '**upairi-urvaraa(n)m**' (**highly affectionate**)]. During my visits to the villages around Yazd I was fascinated to hear about the villagers' everlasting affection for their Cypress and of the result of their nurturance - phrases like "**we are attached to it**" and "**it grows on us**". Historical records have shown that after Caliph Ja'afar al Mutawaqqil in 861 CE ordered the cutting down of the 'Sarv e Kashmar' in Khorasan a strong resolve occurred among all Zarathushti villagers in Iran to plant and nurture a Cypress in their village courtyard - to grow "**like the tree of Zaradust, taller and bigger than any other in the land of Iran.**"

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