

# Giving Sense to it All: The Cosmological Myth in Pahlavi Literature

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## Abstract

The article provides a literary analysis of three Middle Persian tales: the *Story of Jōišť ī Friyān*, the *Memorial of Zarēr*, and the *Explanation of Chess and the Invention of Backgammon*. Similar to most works of Zoroastrian narrative literature, composed in the late Sasanian and early Islamic era, they are based on oral traditions and contain numerous references to personalities and events also familiar from other Iranian sources. But, different from comparable stories belonging to the same context and time, they are thematically closely interwoven with the Zoroastrian cosmological myth. The reason for this striking intertextual connection is sought in their authors' intent to provide didactic narratives for religious instruction to an audience hoping for eschatological deliverance from social oppression and spiritual evil.

## Keywords

Zoroastrianism, Pahlavi Literature, Middle Persian, Zoroastrian Mytho-History, Millennial Scheme, Cosmology, Cosmogony, Intertextuality

*To Uwe Bläsing on his 60th Birthday*

Until well into the 20th century scholarly interest in Pahlavi literature was mainly concentrated on translations, the production of critical editions, and the interpretation of selected text passages, with the aim to elucidate aspects of pre-Islamic Iranian history, religion, and social organisation, or to establish links to non-Iranian traditions.<sup>1</sup> Only lately, improved understanding of the oral background of most Zoroastrian works has resulted in focussing on issues related to a composition's structure, themes, and func-

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<sup>1</sup> For general surveys of the extant Pahlavi literature and references to separate studies see, e.g. Tavastia 1956; Boyce 1968; de Menasce 1975, 1983; Cereti 2001; and Macuch 2008.

tion.<sup>2</sup> One important insight gained through this new approach is the realisation that Zoroastrian writings, fictional and non-fictional alike, not only develop along clearly noticeable narrative lines or comply to genre-specific rules, but may also follow structural patterns or arrangement models, which, although most probably well-understood at their time, are not always obvious to the eye of the modern reader.

The 'hidden' arrangement model under discussion on the following pages is not the only pattern discernible in the mentioned compositions,<sup>3</sup> but it is by far the most frequently used. Its popularity comes as no surprise, as it is associated with a key tenet of the Zoroastrian religion, the cosmological myth or millennial scheme, a paradigmatic account, which presents world history as a continuous process, divided into three main periods: Creation (*bundahišn*), Mixture (*gūmēzišn*) of good and evil, and the Separation (*wizārišn*) of these two principles from each other.

More or less elaborate references to the sequence of events, recounted in this sacred narrative, can be found in Zoroastrian writings, covering a period of more than two thousand years. The oldest known example of the myth's functioning as a structural template is the famous *Vīdēvdād*, a liturgical text mainly devoted to issues of ritual purity, composed in Young Avestan language, and fixed in its current form sometimes between the 6th and the 4th century B.C. While the *Vīdēvdād*'s content is presented following the wide-spread question-and-answer model, the succession of invoked themes and events evolves on the base of a blueprint taken from Mixture, sacred history's second main period (Skjaervø 2007: 122 ff.). In addition to this, the inclusion of the *Vīdēvdād* into the *Yasna* liturgy, which results in a composition used during the *Vīdēvdād Sāde* ceremony, thought to contribute to the annihilation of the forces of evil, is conceived in a way that the passages preceding and following the intercalated text<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> On oral tradition, in general, see, e.g. Ong 2002 and Vansina 1985 with further references. Its place in Zoroastrian culture and reflexion in Pahlavi texts are discussed, e.g., by Bailey 1943: 149-76; Kreyenbroek 1996; Huyse 2008; and Skjærvø 2005/6; idem 2012.

<sup>3</sup> For (numerological) arrangement models employed in Pahlavi exegetical texts see, Vevaina 2010b with further references. For 'hidden' patterns discernible in narratives pertaining to the Achaemenian tradition, see e.g. Windfuhr 1994: 269 ff.; Lincoln 2012: 375-392.

<sup>4</sup> On the composition of Zoroastrian liturgical texts by means of intercalation of other Avestan writings between the central texts of the *Yasna* ceremony, see, e.g. Cantera 2013a.

can be interpreted as reflecting the periods of Creation and Separation respectively (Cantera 2013a: 106ff; 2013b: 44).<sup>5</sup> Another example from the Avesta is Yašt 8.12-29, which contains the famous story about the struggle between god Tištrya, represented by a white stallion, and his adversary demon Apaoša, embodied by a black steed. The main themes of this compelling narrative—Tištrya's transformation into a 15-year-old youth, a golden-horned bull and a white stallion (Yt. 8.12-19), his first clash with Apaoša and the latter's temporary victory (Yt. 8.20-22), Ahura Mazdā's support for Tištrya (Yt. 8.25), Tištrya's final victory over Apaoša, and the successful distribution of the waters (Yt. 8.26-29) mirror the changing fortunes and the final triumph of the Good Creation during the periods of Creation, Mixture and Separation.<sup>6</sup>

Within the context of Zoroastrian literature in Classical Middle Persian (approx. 8th-10/11th centuries A.D.)<sup>7</sup> the cosmological myth has been identified as a reference point of numerological speculations contained in the 28th chapter of the *Wizīdagihā ī Zādspram* and the 13th chapter of the *Supplementary Texts to the Šāyist nē-Šāyist* (Windfuhr 2001: 564). Moreover, the fact that religious treaties and other texts, which like the *Vīdēvdād* are organised according to the question-and-answer model, tend to commence with discussing doctrines pertaining to Creation and to finish with explaining eschatological concepts, may also be attributed to their composers' efforts to follow the myth's basic arrangement order (Gignoux 1986: 338; Sheffield 2014: 207).

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<sup>5</sup> According to Choksy (1989: 135-136), Zoroastrian purification rituals, which he associates with the notions of invasion (of the profane into the sacred), entrapment (of the invader in time and material space), and expulsion (of evil and impurity from the body) are usually 'patterned on the cosmic archetype provided by sacred history'. See also Cantera (2015: 94) on the three phases of the *Baršnūm* ceremony representing the three main periods of world history.

<sup>6</sup> For a text-critical edition and literary analysis of Yašt 8, see Panaino (1990; idem 1995) who, however, does not link Yt. 8.12-29 to the cosmological myth.

<sup>7</sup> According to Andrés-Toledo (2015: 524), Zoroastrian Middle Persian sources can be divided roughly into three main periods of literary activity: Sasanian Middle Persian (3rd–7th centuries A.D.), Classical Middle Persian (8th–10th centuries A.D.), as well as Late Middle Persian and Neo-Pahlavi (11th–19th centuries A.D.).

Similarly adjusted to the millennial scheme is the chronological framework of Zoroastrian pre-Islamic (mytho-)history,<sup>8</sup> which is thought to consist of four 1000-year-cycles, corresponding to the three millennia of Mixture (from the appearance of Gayōmard until Zarathustra receiving the Good Religion from Ohrmazd) and the first millennium of Separation (until the end of the Sasanian dynasty).<sup>9</sup> In fact, within the Zoroastrian milieu<sup>10</sup> the use of the cosmological pattern as a matrix for the arrangement of historical events continues well beyond Sasanian times. A remarkable example for the level of sophistication, which can be achieved in using this organising device, is the so-called *Qeṣṣe-ye Sanjān* (QS). In this 16th century poem in New Persian language, its author, the Zoroastrian priest Bahman Kay Kobād, recounts how the ancestors of the modern Parsis left their homes in Iran and settled in India. As masterly analysed by Williams (2007: 23ff.; 2009a: 23ff.), key events narrated in the QS are arranged in five sequential clusters (opening doxology, journey of the community, dispersal, victory and defeat in India, the journey of the Bah-rām Fire, closing doxology) each of which consist of three parts (preliminary, principal, and closing), thematically linked to the three main periods of cosmic history.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Under Zoroastrian ‘mytho-history’ I understand narratives pertaining to a Zoroastrian context, which in terms of content and structure are retelling the cosmological myth, while informing the reader about the life and deeds of human beings living (from the author’s point of view) in the past. Such an allegorical relationship between an account and the myth may be of various degrees of complexity. Some narratives refer to the myth merely by relating a conflict between good and evil humans, which follows the pattern: 1) aggression of evil, 2) struggle of good and evil, 3) triumph of good over evil. Others contain a whole array of thematic references and images, which allow to trace the contours of the myth in much greater detail.

<sup>9</sup> For the reconstruction and interpretation of Zoroastrian pre-Islamic (mytho-)history, including a discussion of the related Persian and Arabic sources, see Windischmann 1863: 147ff.; Spiegel 1871: 500ff.; and, more recently, Yarshater 1983: 383ff., who regards the history’s forth cycle as being part of the Mixture period.

<sup>10</sup> There is at least one case where the cosmological pattern can be detected in a narrative clearly *not* composed within a Zoroastrian setting: the famous ‘Irradiant’ folk tale, which was committed to writing in the 1940s in English language by a Persian speaker from southern Luristan (cf. Zaehner 1965; idem 1992: 67).

<sup>11</sup> Employing William’s method of analysis, one could also interpret the QS’s opening and closing doxologies as the ‘ideal condition’, which existed before material Creation and

A closer examination of the comparatively few original specimens of Middle Persian literature, which have reached our time, reveals that the above mentioned treaties, all of them representatives of the non-fictional genre, are not the only Pahlavi writings, which are (at least partly) invoking the millennial scheme. And they aren't the most typical either. In this respect they are clearly outdone by three literary texts, which not merely allude to the cosmological myth in general terms, but follow its storyline in detail unparalleled by any other Iranian source previously investigated in this regard. I am referring to the *Mādayān ī Jōišť ī Friyān* (MJF), the *Ayādgār ī Zarērān* (AZ), and the *Wizārišn ī čatrang ud nihišn ī nēw-ardaxšīr* (WČN), narratives, which over the years have attracted their fair amount of scholarly attention, but have not yet been studied in the given context.<sup>12</sup>

On the following pages I would like to highlight the thematic and structural parallels between the mentioned Pahlavi stories and the cosmological myth, analyse the factors which may have contributed to the emergence of these parallels, and attempt to explain the reasons behind the systematic interweaving of myth and worldly events.

#### THE MILLENNIAL SCHEME

According to the Pahlavi books, Zoroastrian world history follows an assumption of linear development. Historical progress is driven by the all-pervasive conflict between good and evil, which appears in the beginning of time and can only be resolved at its very end. The conflict unfolds on two fundamentally different levels of reality: the spiritual (*mēnōg*) and the

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which is to be re-established in the result of Separation. In this way, the 'ideal condition' would frame three narrative clusters (corresponding to material Creation, Mixture, and Separation), which multiplied by their respective three thematic parts would yield 'nine', a popular number in Zoroastrian ritual and mythology (cf., e.g. Keith 1955: 408ff.) and, in the context of the 'classical' millennial scheme (see below), associated with the 9000 years of conflict between good and evil in the material sphere.

<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that all references made in this paper to the MJF, AZ, and WČN are, if not mentioned otherwise, concerned with the current versions of these narratives (i.e. the Middle Persian texts represented in the Zoroastrian manuscripts), as opposed to existing New Persian and/or Arabic varieties, as well as versions, which have been postulated (or recreated) by modern scholars.

material (*gētīg*) sphere.<sup>13</sup> These states of existence are not opposed to each other in ethical terms, but exist in a complementary relationship, with the spiritual world inhabited by gods and demons, and the material one dominated by mankind. Human beings are born into the material sphere; they are creatures of God and as such good by inception. However, differently from animals they are given the choice between remaining with God Ohrmazd and joining the forces of his archenemy Ahriman. An exemplary Zoroastrian is expected to opt for Ohrmazd's creation and to live his life guided by the principles of thinking good thoughts, speaking good words, and doing good deeds. It is largely in the result of the conscious performance of these pious activities that a person will be able to reach paradise after death.<sup>14</sup> At the same time acting according to religious requirements is thought to contribute to mankind's collective effort directed at supporting Ohrmazd's struggle against Ahriman. At the End of Time, which is impatiently awaited by all believers, good will win over evil and the undisturbed rule of Ohrmazd, as it had existed at the world's beginnings, will be restored. In-between these two limiting points lie 12,000 years of history, believed to consist of three main periods, each of them named after the process, which defines nature and purpose of its key events.<sup>15</sup> The first period is:

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<sup>13</sup> For a detailed discussion of the notions of *mēnōg* and *gētīg*, see Shaked 1971, 2001-2012.

<sup>14</sup> As for the nature of these activities, cf. Cantera 2015: 316: 'The oldest ritual texts focus on ritual action as the only way towards achieving individual and universal redemption. In Pahlavi literature the focus is on regulations for daily living and the fulfilment of established social functions and religious obligations. However, ritual action never lost its importance in the salvific process'.

<sup>15</sup> The following account is based on the so called 'classical' or 'orthodox' version of the Zoroastrian cosmological myth. In fact, the extant sources provide us with a number of (sometimes significantly) deviating variants of this legend, and, as aptly put by Shaked (1994: 14) 'we do not have any certainty that any of the conceptions [...] was more "orthodox" than any other'. However, of all known varieties, the 'classical' version is the one most frequently and most completely evoked in the Pahlavi books, so it can be assumed that it was also the one preferred by the authors of these books and the majority of their original audience. Unfortunately, none of the extant Zoroastrian sources contains the complete myth, so the version presented here is a compilation of extracts from the following texts: GrBd. and WZ (mostly for the periods of *Bundahišn* and *Gumēzišn*), as well as ZWY, PRDd, and AYZ (for the remaining part). For more detailed references to the consulted sources,

1) *Bundahišn* or Creation, which lasts for 6000 years and is divided into two parts of equal length, the first taking place in the spiritual, the second in the material sphere. The beginning of Creation's first part is characterised by the primeval balance of eternal pre-existence. In this ideal state Ohrmazd resides on high, in endless light while Ahriman, the Evil Spirit, dwells in the depths, in never-ending darkness. Between them is the void. Being aware of Ahriman's existence and his aggressive nature Ohrmazd prepares himself for future conflict. He brings into being the spiritual prototypes of the Good Creation and fashions Finite Time, limiting its duration to 12,000 years.<sup>16</sup> Ahriman, attracted by the light and driven by jealousy, attacks Ohrmazd's domain in order to possess and destroy it. But when he sees God's might, he retreats into gloom,<sup>17</sup> where he forges his own (evil) creatures. At the end of the first 3000 years of *Bundahišn*, Ahriman re-appears at the border between light and darkness and threatens to destroy Ohrmazd and his creation. Initially Ohrmazd offers peace, which the Evil Spirit rejects, interpreting it as a sign of his adversary's weakness.<sup>18</sup> God rebukes Ahriman's pretensions and predicts his failure in carrying out his wicked plans. However, Ohrmazd is also aware that a fight between the forces of good and evil is imminent, and that he will be able to win this fight only if it is limited in time. He proposes Ahriman a pact, which restricts the approaching war to 9,000 years. Only Ohrmazd knows that the first third of these 9,000 years will pass according to his wish, that during the second third the wills of him and his adversary will both be current, and that at the end of the last third Ahriman and his creatures will be destroyed forever. The Evil Spirit, who does not

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see columns 1 and 2 of the synoptic chart below. The 'orthodox' myth's overall time frame of 12,000 years is also mentioned in Pahl.Vd. 2.19: 'Ohrmazd maintained this creation 3,000 years in the spiritual state, 3,000 years in the material state without the Adversary, 3,000 years from the coming of the Adversary to the creation until the coming of the Religion, and 3,000 years from the coming of the Religion to the Final Body'. For 'non-orthodox' versions of the cosmological myth see Rezanian 2010, especially pp. 124ff. On the myth in general, see also Hultgård 1992; Kreyenbroek 1993; idem 2002.

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed study of the perception of time as reflected in the Pahlavi books, see Rezanian 2010.

<sup>17</sup> According to WZ 1.4., Ahriman is stopped by Ohrmazd's 'holy divine speech' (*abēzag gōwišn <ī> yazdīg*).

<sup>18</sup> Only in GrBd. 20-21. The WZ does not mention Ohrmazd's peace initiative.

recognise the trap into which he is lured, agrees to God's proposal. After the agreement is made, Ohrmazd recites the all-powerful *Ahunawar* prayer, through which he demonstrates to the Evil Spirit His own final victoriousness and the powerlessness and destruction of evil. Ahriman becomes stupefied, loses consciousness, and falls back into darkness. This is the end of *Bundahišn's* first, i.e. spiritual part.

The beginning of its second, i.e. material part is also the starting point of the 9,000 years duration of the agreement between Ohrmazd and Ahriman. Preparing himself for war, God gives his creation material form, fashioning among his supporters the Amahraspandān, Truthful Speech and the prototypes of plants, animals, and mankind. In response to Ohrmazd's actions the Evil Spirit forges his own followers, including the demons, Lying Speech, and the frog. At the completion of the 3000 years of *Bundahišn's* second part the adversaries are ready for battle. Active warfare starts in:

2) *Gumēzišn*, the period of the mixture of good and evil, which lasts for 3000 years. The combat is initiated by a sudden, violent attack of Ahriman on Ohrmazd's creation. Within the limits of the material sphere the Evil Spirit and his helpers spoil the light with darkness, they pour salt into the water, pollute the fire with smoke, and destroy the prototypes of living beings. Although the Good Creation defends itself, mankind, which is responsible for upholding God's will on earth, has a hard time in pushing back the forces of evil. Finally, when everything seems already lost, Ohrmazd entrusts prophet Zarathustra with the Good Religion, the most effective weapon against Ahriman and his supporters. With this the tables have turned, and *Gumēzišn* gives way to:

3) *Wizārišn*, the period during which good is finally separated from evil and the forces of Ohrmazd prevail. *Wizārišn* lasts for 3000 years, divided into three parts of equal length. At the end of each part, a posthumous son of Zarathustra is expected to appear and to lead mankind in its struggle against Ahriman. The first 1000 years, called the Millennium of Zarathustra, commence with the prophet disseminating the Good Religion and end with the birth of his son, the Ušēdar. *Wizārišn's* second millennium is characterised by the birth of the Ušēdarmāh. Eventually, at the termination of the third millennium, appears the Sōšyans, the last of Zarathustra's posthumous sons, under whose guidance the process of re-

moving evil from the world is completed. The combined efforts of Ohrmazd, other divine beings and Iranian heroes of the past render the demons ineffective; the dead arise from their graves and sinners are punished for a last time. Ahriman's head is cut off or, according to other sources, the Evil Spirit crawls back into the darkness from which he had once appeared and remains there forever. With this, Finite Time has come to its end, the spiritual and material spheres merge, and mankind enters a state of post-existential, unlimited perfection.

To sum it up, existence during *Bundahišn* is perceived as a kind of ideal condition, a state of serenity and balance. This is especially true for the period's very beginning, when everything exists only in spiritual state and Ohrmazd and Ahriman are still completely separated from each other. *Gumēzišn*, the second period, which can be understood as the antithesis of *Bundahišn*, is associated with movement and chaos, consequences of the infiltration of evil into the material sphere, its mixture with Ohrmazd's creation and the latter's struggle for survival. The three millennia of *Wizārišn* see the gradual reversal of the negative developments, which had taken place in the past. Being the third and final period in history, and the only one guided by Zarathustra's teachings, *Wizārišn* culminates in the ultimate eradication of evil. In the result of Ahriman's disappearance the material and spiritual spheres amalgamate into one state of existence, which like the early stages of *Bundahišn* is characterised by serenity and balance; only that this time life is imagined to have acquired an even more perfect form, the so called Final or Everlasting Body (*tan ī pasēn*), as there is no evil left anymore to disturb.

#### THE THREE PAHLAVI STORIES

Differently from the cosmological myth, the complete version of which has to be reconstructed from different sources, the MJF, AZ, and WČN have reached us as complete texts. All three are composed in the form of comparatively short,<sup>19</sup> entertaining stories, which breathe the spirit of traditional Zoroastrian historiography. References to the heroes and events

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<sup>19</sup> West (1904: 104ff.) counts approximately 3,000 words for the MJF, the same amount for the AZ, and 820 words for the WČN. By way of comparison: according to the same author, the AWN has around 8,800 words, the WZ 19,000, and the PRDd. 26,000.

described in the MJF and the AZ are found in other Pahlavi writings, as well as in the Avesta.<sup>20</sup> The WČN is part of a popular narrative tradition, mostly transmitted in New Persian and Arabic, which centres around the wise Buzurjmihir and Khusrau Anushirvan, the prototype of the powerful and just Iranian king, modelled after the popular image of the Sasanian rulers Khosrow I (r. 531-79 A.D.) and/or Khosrow II (r. 590-628 A.D.).<sup>21</sup>

The following short summaries of the MJF, AZ, and WČN shall serve as basis for comparison with the cosmological myth:

The *Mādayān ī Jōišť ī Friyān* (MJF)<sup>22</sup> or ‘Story of Jōišť ī Friyān’ recounts how the wise and God-fearing youth Jōišť ī Friyān succeeds in outwitting the wicked sorcerer Axt in a verbal contest.

The narrative, which is presented in form of riddle questions (*frašn*) set in a frame story, starts with Axt and his army’s sudden intrusion into Jōišť’s homeland. The sorcerer threatens to raze the country to the ground unless one of its inhabitants, who should not be older than 15 years of age, would be able to solve riddles put forward to him. After a number of unsuccessful contesters are slain, a man named Māraspand suggests Jōišť’s candidacy. Axt writes Jōišť a letter inviting him to a formal contest during which he should answer 33 riddles or be killed.

Accepting the challenge, Jōišť appears at Axt’s court and after assuring himself of divine support responds to the first question. Axt, surprised by his adversary’s correct answer, falls into a stupor. Back to his senses the sorcerer acknowledges Jōišť’s superiority and continues the competition. In its course Axt, in a misguided attempt to prove his adversary wrong, first orders to kill his own brother, and then, overcome by anger, slays his wife, who dared to take the side of her brother Jōišť. The 29th riddle is so difficult, that at first it seems that the youthful hero is not able to solve it

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<sup>20</sup> For the MJF, see, e.g. Yt. 5.81-83, Yt. 13.120, Dk. 3.196, 389, WZ 25.10. For the AZ, see, e.g. Yt. 5.108, 112, 117; Yt. 19.87; as well as Boyce 1987-2012; Cereti 2010 with further references.

<sup>21</sup> The literary and (pseudo-)historical background of the WČN is discussed in Panaino 1999: 93ff. For references to stories about Buzurjmihir in New Persian and Arabic, see Khaleghi- Motlagh 1989; Shaked 2013: 221, n. 10, 11.

<sup>22</sup> Text-critical editions of the MJF include West 1872 (see Haug/West 1874 for a glossary); Ja’farī 1987 (for a critical evaluation of this edition, see Kłagisz 2007); Weinreich 1992, 1994; as well as Cantera/Andrés-Toledo 2006).

and might also be killed by the evil sorcerer. But then Jōišť is helped by Ohrmazd, who provides the riddle's solution. Jōišť's correct answer sends Axt into a second stupor, from which he awakes crediting God Ohrmazd for his adversary's accomplishments. Four successfully solved riddles later Axt has lost the contest.

Now it is Jōišť's turn. In a counter move he poses three riddle questions to the sorcerer. Axt does not know the answers and in order to save his life rushes to hell, asking Ahriman for assistance. But the Evil Spirit can't help him, as giving the correct replies would initiate the events expected for the End of Time. Deprived of hope Axt returns from hell, renounces Ahriman and the demons, accepts defeat, and is executed by Jōišť in accordance with the rules of the contest.

The *Ayādgār ī Zarērān* (AZ)<sup>23</sup> or 'Memorial of Zarēr' commemorates an event thought to have taken place during the early years of Zoroastrianism. According to the legend, King Wištāsp, who had accepted the pure religion from Ohrmazd, is challenged on this account by Arjāsp, lord of the Xyōn. Arjāsp sends Wīdrafš the sorcerer and the knight Nāmxwāst at the head of an army to Ērānšahr. In a letter he threatens Wištāsp to destroy the land unless the king and his men would give up their new religion. In spite of their foe's overwhelming military might, the Iranians decide to resist. The valiant Zarēr, Wištāsp's brother and commander of the army, formulates the terms of battle in a message to Arjāsp, while king Wištāsp musters all his subjects for the upcoming war. When Wištāsp, who initially hesitates to take up the fight, asks the wise Jāmāsp about the outcome of the conflict, he is told that although Zarēr and many others will die in the encounter, Arjāsp and his army will finally be defeated.

In the battle 12 myriads of Xyōn are opposed by an equal number of Iranians. At the height of the encounter, Zarēr, the Iranians' main hero, who had fought heroically and killed many Xyōn, is foully slain by Wīdrafš the sorcerer. All seems to be lost. But then, Bastwar, Zarēr's son, although forbidden by Wištāsp to join the battle because of his youth, disobeys the king's orders and enters the fight.

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<sup>23</sup> The main text-critical edition and translation remains Monchi-Zadeh 1981; for an evaluation of this edition and references to others, see MacKenzie 1984.

On the advice of his dead father's soul Bastwar kills Wīdrafš by shooting a conjured arrow into his heart. Encouraged by this success he takes over the command of the Iranian forces, slays many other Xyōn, and in a three-step combat manoeuvre leads his fellow knights to victory. As a result, the Xyōn army is completely annihilated, while its leader, lord Ar-jāsp, is captured, mutilated, and expelled from Ērānšahr.

The *Wizārišn ī čatrang ud nihišn ī nēw-ardaxšīr* (WČN)<sup>24</sup> or 'Explanation of Chess and the Invention of Backgammon'<sup>25</sup> is set during the reign of the Iranian king Xusraw Anōšag-ruwān. In the beginning of the story, the king of India Dēwišarm sends to his overlord Xusraw a huge caravan richly laden with tribute and escorted by an envoy called Tātarītos. Among the many precious gifts from India is a beautiful chess set. In a letter Dēwišarm challenges Xusraw to explain the rationale behind the game or to pay tribute himself. Although chess is not known to the Iranians, Xusraw accepts the challenge, asks for three days of respite, and consults the wise men of Ērānšahr on the issue. But it turns out, that none of them is capable of explaining the game. Finally, on the third day, the king's minister, the wise Wuzurgmihr declares himself able to solve the problem. Moreover, he proposes to invent a comparable game and to send it as a challenge to Dēwišarm, predicting that the latter will fail to explain its meaning and thus in turn be forced to pay heavy tribute to Xusraw. The overjoyed king agrees and rewards his wise minister with 12 thousand dirham. Wuzurgmihr explains the rationale behind chess and then plays and wins three games against Dēwišarm's envoy. Tātarītos credits God for Xusraw's success, acknowledges defeat and submits to the Iranian king's treasury all riches sent by Dēwišarm. On Xusraw's request Wuzurgmihr reveals to the king the meaning of backgammon, a game which he had created and named *nēw-ardaxšīr* in honour of the eponymous founder of the Sasanian dynasty. Xusraw approves of the game and sends it accompanied by Wuzurgmihr and an opulently laden caravan to India. There Dēwišarm and his sages are presented with the Iranian game. As they fail

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<sup>24</sup> Text-critical editions and translations of the WČN include Salemann 1887; Pagliaro 1951; Brunner 1979; as well as Panaino 1999 (with references to other editions, pp. 13, and 59ff.).

<sup>25</sup> The title of the story is not part of the original manuscript tradition but was introduced by WČN's editor Jamasp-Asana (cf. Panaino 1999: 63, n.1).

to explain its meaning, the Indian king is obliged to pay one more time heavy tribute to his Iranian suzerain. Wuzurgmihr receives the riches on behalf of Xusraw and carries them in triumph to Ērānšahr.<sup>26</sup>

#### WHERE MYTH AND STORIES MEET

In order to facilitate the comparison of the three Pahlavi stories with the cosmological myth, each of the four narratives will be divided into thematic building blocks. The notion of such ‘groups of ideas’, i.e. semantic units, from which an oral text is build, goes back to M. Parry and A. B. Lord, who developed the concept of ‘thematic structure’ on the basis of ancient Greek and contemporary south Slavonic epic literature as an integral part of what later came to be known as Oral-Formulaic Theory (OFT).<sup>27</sup> The method of isolating thematic blocks is not new to Iranian studies. It was used for example by Huyse (1990: 178ff.) in a short investigation dedicated to textual parallels between Achaemenian and Sasanian inscriptions and by Skjaervø (1994: 210f.) in his well-known analysis of the composition of Avestan hymns.<sup>28</sup>

As neither Perry/Lord, Huyse or Skjaervø, nor our respective texts provide us with unambiguous formal indicators, which could help to separate thematic building blocks from each other, these units have to be defined exclusively on the basis of semantic criteria.<sup>29</sup> Although this opens the

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<sup>26</sup> The actual story is followed by a passage (§§ 37-38 in Panaino 1999) containing a detailed explanation of the rationale behind chess. Pagliaro (1951: 100), Brunner (1979: 43), and Panaino (1999: 89) are of the opinion that this section does not belong to the original text, but is a later addendum. Their assumption is supported by the structural parallels between the WČN and the cosmological myth, postulated in this paper, which do not support the contents of the final lines of the WČN's current version.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Parry 1930; Lord 1960; Parry 1971.

<sup>28</sup> A critical discussion of the OFT's applicability to Iranian material is provided by Yamamoto (2003: 11ff.). Although she underlines that ‘thematic structure’ is not limited to texts deriving from oral sources, she does not question this concept as such.

<sup>29</sup> According to Yamamoto (2003: 34ff., 85ff., 92), larger semantic units comparable to thematic building blocks can be isolated in New Persian literary compositions, which have a background of oral transmission. She calls these units ‘episodes’, and identifies a number of ‘formal markers’, i.e. words or short phrases, which systematically signal the occurrence of such units within a narrative. Although some of these words (e.g., *čūn/čiyōn* ‘when’, *ka* ‘when’, *ō/ud* ‘and’, *pas* ‘after’, *tā* ‘until’) are also present in the three Pahlavi texts under consideration, they do not seem to fulfil there an equivalent marking function.

door to the vagueness, which comes with subjective interpretation, possible inaccuracies will be kept within limits, as each content-related division established for one of our texts has to make sense not only within one or two but within *four* compositional frameworks.

The following synoptic chart illustrates how the plots of the MJF, the AZ, and the WČN correlate with the Zoroastrian concept of historical development: Columns 3-5 contain the linear, syntagmatic flow of each of the three stories, isolating their main thematic building blocks in order of appearance;<sup>30</sup> column 2 sets these blocks into contextual and chronological relation to events unfolding within the main cosmological periods, listed in column 1.<sup>31</sup>

Cosmological Myth		MJF	AZ	WČN
Period	Event			
1. Bundahišn 'Creation'  (GrBd: Cereti/ MacKenzie 2003; WZ: Gignoux/ Tafazzoli 1993)	<i>Undisturbed rule of god Ohrmazd over his domain</i> (GrBd. 1.1-14; WZ 1.1-4).	1.1 Not represented.	1.1 King Wištāsp and his men have accepted the good religion from Ohrmazd (§§ 1-3).	1.1 Xusraw Anōšag-ruwān reigns over Ērānšahr (§ 1).
	Initial attack of the Evil Spirit on Ohrmazd's domain (GrBd. 1.15; WZ 1.5).	1.2 Axt and his army invade Jōišť's homeland (2-6).	1.2 Wīdrafš the sorcerer and the knight Nāmwxwāst lead a Xyōn army to Ērānšahr (§ 4).	1.2 Dēwišarm, king of India, sends a huge caravan laden with treasures including a set of chess, and accompanied by his ambassador Tātarītos to Ērānšahr (§§ 1-2).

<sup>30</sup> The numbering in columns 3-5 refers to Weinreich 1992 (MJF); Monchi-Zadeh 1981 (AZ), and Panaino 1999 (WČN).

<sup>31</sup> Please note that the process of comparison starts out from the three Pahlavi stories. This means that only blocks, which are represented in at least one of these stories (columns 3-5) are also included into the inventory list of events pertaining to the cosmological myth (column 2).

Cosmological Myth		MJF	AZ	WČN
Period	Event			
	The Evil Spirit threatens Ohrmazd to destroy him and his creation (GrBd. 1.22; WZ 1.5).	1.3 Axt threatens to destroy Jōišť's homeland unless one of its inhabitants is able to solve his riddle questions (5-8).	1.3 Arjāsp, lord of the Xyōn, in a letter to Wištāsp threatens to destroy Ērānšahr unless the king and his men give up their new religion (§ 5-12).	1.3 Dēwišarm in a letter challenges Xusraw and the wise men of Ērānšahr to explain the meaning of chess or to pay tribute himself (§ 3).
	<i>Ohrmazd predicts to the Evil Spirit his inability to destroy him and his creation</i> (GrBd. 1.24; WZ 1.6).	1.4 Māraspand introduces Jōišť to Axt and predicts to Axt Jōišť' s victory (11-17).	1.4 See below.	1.4 See below.
	Ohrmazd proposes to the Evil Spirit a pact to do battle for 9000 years. The Evil Spirit agrees. (GrBd. 1.26-27; WZ 1.8-11).	1.5 Axt in a letter to Jōišť challenges him to solve 33 riddle questions or to be killed. Jōišť (agrees and) appears at Axt's court (18-22).	1.5 Wištāsp's brother, the valiant Zarēr, formulates in a letter to Arjāsp the terms of battle with the Xyōn (§§ 17-21).	1.5 Xusraw (agrees and) requests three days respite (§ 3).
	<i>Ohrmazd fashions his supporters for the upcoming war against evil</i> (GrBd. 1.13, 1.32-44, 1.50-54, 1.58-59; WZ 1.4, 1.25).	1.6 Jōišť ensures himself of divine support for the contest with Axt (22-47).	1.6 Wištāsp musters all his subjects for the battle against the Xyōn (§§ 23-34).	1.6 Not represented.
	See above.	1.4 See above.	1.4 The wise Jāmāsp foretells the course of the battle and	1.4 See below.

Cosmological Myth		MJF	AZ	WČN
Period	Event			
			Arjāsp's defeat (§§ 35-49, 66-67).	
	<i>Ohrmazd recites the Ahunawar prayer, demonstrating to the Evil Spirit His own final victoriousness and the powerlessness and destruction of evil. Ahriman becomes stupefied</i> (GrBd. 1.29; WZ 1.12-24).	1.7 Jōišť responds to the first question. Axt, surprised by his adversary's correct answer, initially falls into a stupor, than acknowledges Jōišť's superiority (48-65).	1.7 Not represented.	1.7 Not represented.
2. Gūmēzišn 'Mixture'  (GrBd: Ankersaria 1956; WZ: Gignoux/ Tafazzoli 1993)	The Evil Spirit attacks a second time, corrupts or kills Ohrmazd's creation in the material state (GrBd. 4; WZ 2).	2.1 The contest continues. Axt kills his own brother and Jōišť's sister, his wife (66; 181-197; 246-293).	2.1 The battle starts. Wīdrafš the sorcerer kills Zarēr (§§ 70-75).	2.1 The wise men of Ērānšahr fail to explain the meaning of chess (§ 4).
	See above.	1.4 See above.	1.4 See above.	1.4 Wuzurg-mihr predicts the outcome of the contest (§§ 6-7).
	Ohrmazd's creation fights back against the forces of evil. Zarathustra receives the Good Religion from Ohrmazd. (GrBd. 6-7; WZ 3-23).	2.2 With Ohrmazd's help Jōišť solves the 29th riddle; Axt credits God for Jōišť's success (293-340). Jōišť wins the contest (364-365).	2.2 Advised by Zarēr's soul Bastwar kills Wīdrafš (§§ 104-108).	2.2 Wuzurg-mihr explains the meaning of chess and wins 3 games against Tātarītos, who credits God for Xusraw's success, acknowledges defeat and submits all

Cosmological Myth		MJF	AZ	WČN
Period	Event			
				riches to Xusraw's treasury (§§ 9-16).
<b>3. Wizārišn</b> 'Separation'  (GrBd: Ankesaria 1956; WZ: Gignoux/Tafazzoli 1993; ZWY: Cereti 1995; PRDd: Williams 1990; AYZ: Agostini 2013)	Zarathustra disseminates the good religion. Mankind besets the forces of evil (WZ 24; ZWY 7-9; PRDd 46.16-21, 47.5-21, 48.1-36).	<b>3.1</b> Jōišť challenges Axt to solve three riddle questions himself or to be killed (365-372).	<b>3.1</b> Bastwar inspires his fellow knights and leads the Iranian army to victory (§§ 109-110).	<b>3.1</b> Wuzurg-mihr reveals the meaning of backgammon to Xusraw and is sent to India to challenge Dēwišarm (§§ 19-33).
	The forces of evil are helpless against Ohrmazd's creation (ZWY 9, PRDd 48.37-94).	<b>3.2</b> Axt does not know the answers to the three questions and approaches Ahriman, who is unable to help him (372-397).	<b>3.2</b> In the result of a three step combat manoeuvre the Xyōn army is annihilated (§§ 111-112).	<b>3.2</b> Dēwišarm and the wise men of India fail to explain the meaning of backgammon (§ 35).
	The Evil Spirit is vanquished (GrBd. 34.27-31; PRDd 48.94-96); AYZ 17.16)	<b>3.3</b> Axt admits defeat and is killed by Jōišť (400-409).	<b>3.3</b> Arjāsp is captured, mutilated and expelled from Ērānšahr (§§ 113-114).	<b>3.3</b> Dēwišarm is obliged to pay one more time heavy tribute to Xusraw (§ 36).

A closer look at the chart reveals a number of interesting details. First, columns 3-5, which are related to MJF, AZ, and WČN respectively: Although the majority of the identified thematic blocks is represented in all three stories, there are some, which occur only in one or two of them: 1.1 is only present in AZ and WČN, 1.7 only in MJF, and 1.6. only in MJF and AZ. Also, there is one unit (1.4), which in AZ and WČN does not keep strictly to the myth's chronological order. Moreover, depending on the narrative flow of the individual story a block can be of varying length: e.g., 1.3 is longer in AZ, shorter in MJF and WČN; 3.3 is shorter in WČN and AZ, longer in MJF. All these discrepancies are typical features of narratives rooted in oral tradition, where individual thematic building blocks can be

expanded, compressed, moved within the story, or even removed from it altogether, according to the demands of the occasion.<sup>32</sup> Making the necessary concessions to these genre-related specificities, which in their own way sustain the assumption of the MJF, AZ, and WČN's oral ancestry (see below), it appears that the three Pahlavi stories develop along very similar thematic and chronological lines.

Let us now turn our attention to column 2. It contains thematic building blocks related to the millennial scheme. However, it does not include all semantic units, which could have been isolated within the entire myth, but only the ones selected in accordance with the three stories' narrative inventory listed in columns 3-5. Reading column 2 top down it appears that even if we disregard the above mentioned 'irregular' thematic units (italicised 1.1, 1.6, 1.7, and 1.4), the narrative material which remains is more than adequate, both in terms of contents and in order of appearance, to re-create the myth, not only in its broad outlines, but in characteristic details.

#### ALLUSIONS TO THE MYTH

In addition to the demonstrated thematic and chronological parallels, our three texts are also characterised by the presence of compositional elements, which contribute to the narratives' overall meaning and in the same time create images alluding to the cosmological myth.<sup>33</sup> First of all, these are numbers, but there are also other units, like words, expressions, or motives:

1. Numbers
  - 1.1. AZ (§ 69): 12 myriads of Xyōn facing an equal number of Iranians; WČN (§§ 2, 8, 32): 1200 camels laden with presents for Xusraw; 12 thousand dirham given as a reward to Wuzurgmihr; 12 thousand horses, servants and precious pieces of military equipment sent to Dēwišarm ↔ The 12 thousand years duration of the millennial scheme.
  - 1.2. MJF (65-69): 900 priests and 9 pious maidens killed by Axt ↔ The 9000 years of conflict between good and evil in the material sphere.

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<sup>32</sup> For examples of a similar treatment of thematic building blocks identified in (other) pre-Islamic Iranian texts, see Huyse 1990; Skjærvø 1994: 210ff.

<sup>33</sup> On the widespread use of intertextual allusions in Pahlavi (exegetical) literature, see Vevaina 2010a.

- 1.3. WČN (§ 11 passim): 3 games of chess played and won by Wuzurgmihr; MJF (20 passim, 366 passim): 33 riddle questions asked by Axt; 3 riddle questions asked by Jōišť ī Friyān; AZ (§§ 111-112) Bastwar's three-step-action in which he leads his fellow knights to victory ↔ The myth's 3 main periods and/or the three parts of Separation.
2. Other elements:
  - 2.1. MJF (10 passim), WČN (§ 3 passim): The verb *wizārdan* describing the action of explaining riddle questions or the rationale behind the game of chess ↔ *Wizārišn* 'Separation', the name of the myth's third main period.
  - 2.2. MJF (11-12): Māraspand (< av. *maq̄ra.spanta*- 'holy word, formula'), the name of the man, who by introducing Jōišť to Axt stops the evil sorcerer from killing innocent people and paves the way for his final defeat ↔ Ohrmazd's use of the 'holy divine speech' (mp. *abēzag gōwišn* <ī> *yazdīg*) to repulse Ahriman's initial attack.
  - 2.3. MJF (62-64), AZ (§§ 101-106), WČN (§ 11): The image of single combat between Jōišť and Axt, Bastwar and Wīdrafš, Wuzurgmihr and Tātarītos ↔ The struggle between Ohrmazd and Ahriman.
  - 2.4. WČN (§§ 29-31): The rationale behind the game of backgammon ↔ The fate of mankind starting from Ahriman's assault on the material sphere until resurrection.
  - 2.5. MJF, AZ, WČN: The motive of the single hero (Jōišť, Bastwar, Wuzurgmihr) saving his community from imminent danger/destruction ↔ Zarathustra's role in human society.
  - 2.6. MJF (391-393): Direct reference is made to the events unfolding at the End of Time.
  - 2.7. MJF (406-409), AZ (§§ 113-114), WČN (§ 36): The final killing, mutilation/expelling or humiliation of the main adversary ↔ The treatment dealt out to Ahriman at the End of Time.
  - 2.8. MJF, AZ, WČN: The improved situation reached at the end of the story<sup>34</sup> ↔ The return of the world to its initial ideal state, but on an even more perfect level.

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<sup>34</sup> In the MJF and AZ this is achieved by freeing the country from evil and getting rid of its main representative (Axt or Arjāsp) once and for all. In the WČN king Dēwišarm's defeat returns him to his initial inferior position vis-à-vis his Iranian suzerain Xusraw, and his payment of double tribute signals the achievement of an improved situation.

## A SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP

The textual parallels and the shared imagery listed above suggest the presence of an extraordinary strong structural and thematic dependence of the MJF, AZ, and WČN on the cosmological myth. But the other Iranian texts mentioned in the beginning of this paper, didn't they also follow the millennial pattern? So why then should this particular relationship be so special?

If we reduce the myth, as it is narrated by the thematic blocks in column 2 of the synoptic chart to its essentials, we arrive at a simple plot: 1) Good is aggressed by evil, 2) Good and evil are engaged in a fight, which good is almost losing, 3) Then, fortunes turn and good wins. According to Williams (2007: 24ff.; idem 2009a: 24ff.) such a threefold course of action, which is also the structural backbone of the millennial scheme, was an integral part of the Zoroastrian pre-modern worldview, permeating many forms of its doctrinal and mythological expression, as well as ritual and devotional performance.<sup>35</sup> Most, if not all of the other mentioned Iranian texts could be regarded as simply illustrating the diffusion and application of this threefold division.

However, as can be seen from the material presented above, such a general explanation would hardly fit the case of our three stories. Indeed, the MJF, AZ, and WČN reflect the cosmological myth in such a way that one could state without much exaggeration that the four narratives, although each of them is set in a different context and employs its very own cast of characters, are basically telling the same tale.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, differently from the Zoroastrian compositions mentioned above, the MJF, AZ, and WČN do not cover a chain of events unfolding over hundreds of years,

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<sup>35</sup> For an emic view (formulated in the 9th century A.D.) on the reflection of this pattern in Zoroastrian society, see Dd. 36.53-56.

<sup>36</sup> At the same time, the three stories also contain themes, which have no parallel in the known versions of the cosmological myth. Some of these themes they even share: The evil hero's initial challenge to his good counterpart is formulated in a letter (MJF 18-22, AZ §§ 8-12, WČN § 3); a close relative of the good hero is killed by the forces of evil, but his/her tragic death contributes to the hero's victory (MJF 258-293, AZ §§ 70-75, 104-106); one of the good protagonists is temporarily doubting that evil can be vanquished (MJF 318-323; AZ §§ 50-62).

but present themselves as self-contained short stories narrating one specific episode in the life of their main protagonists.<sup>37</sup>

Having highlighted the parallels between the three Pahlavi stories and the millennial scheme, we shall now consider how the authors' creative environment may have facilitated the occurrence of these connections. For a start, let us explore the dating of the MJF, AZ, and WČN and the literary milieu in which they were composed.

#### TIME, PLACE AND WAY OF TRANSMISSION

As it is often the case with Zoroastrian texts, we do not possess any direct information about when the MJF, AZ, and WČN's current versions were created, nor do we know the places where they were written down or anything about their authors. For all this, we will have to rely on indirect evidence.

The oldest copies of the MJF are accompanied by colophons dated 1269, 1321, and 1397 A.D., with at least the last of them undoubtedly composed in India.<sup>38</sup> Besides this, the colophons from 1269 and 1321 indicate that the text was copied from a manuscript (*dast-nibēg*), related to a priest (*hērbed*) from Nēšapūr (Weinreich 1992: 84-85). Independent of these testimonies, linguistic criteria suggest that the current version of the text may have been authored in post-Sasanian times, possibly around the 10th century.<sup>39</sup>

The oldest copy of the AZ is contained in the well-known manuscript codex MK, which was copied in India in 1322. According to B. Utas (1975: 418), who investigated the text's structure and linguistic features, the cur-

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<sup>37</sup> Although this is also true for the story of Tištrya's battle with Apaoša (Yt. 8.12-29), and for the Old Persian account of King Darius' achievements (cf., e.g. Lincoln 2012: 15, 41-42), these tales are not told in comparable myth-related detail.

<sup>38</sup> Namely in the town of Bharuch (*šahrestān bahrōč*), situated in Gujarat. The 1397 colophon (contained in the manuscript codex M51b) follows the MJF and incorporates the colophon dated 1269, which does not mention the place of copy. It is also not mentioned in the colophon dated 1321, which accompanies the MJF in codex K 20; cf. Weinreich 1992: 45.

<sup>39</sup> For more details, see Weinreich (1992: 45, 44 n. 4), as well as Cantera/Andrés-Toledo (2006: 69-70) who besides the 10th-11th also propose the 7th-9th century.

rent version of AZ was composed at ‘a time not far distant from [i.e. before - M.W.] ... the 13th century’.<sup>40</sup>

The codex MK also contains the oldest version of the WČN. There are a number of well-founded estimates concerning the creation of the text’s current version, all of them pointing at the early post-Sasanian era: From a literary-historical point of view Nöldeke (1892: 26; idem 1920: 18) places the emergence of the story into the ‘first centuries after the advent of Islam’. Pagliaro (1951: 100), attributes its language to a time ‘following the composition of the *Kār-nāmag* and the AZ’, which he regards as late-Sasanian works. And Panaino (1999: 91), who recently published an excellently commented text-critical WČN edition, in which he promotes the idea of a written ‘genuinely Middle Persian redaction’ originating in the 6th or 7th century, concedes that it is the latter, which ‘would have served as a base for the WČN version actually at our disposal’.

Differently from the MJF, which is somehow connected to the Iranian town of Nēšapūr, there are no indications of the places where the AZ and WČN might have been composed. However, their comparatively early first recorded appearance (1322) in combination with the general observation that most (if not all) preserved Pahlavi texts copied at that time in India pertain to the Zoroastrian Iranian manuscript tradition, makes it likely that the current versions of these two compositions were also authored in the Parsis’ original homeland.

Concerning the social background of the three stories’ authors, i.e. the people who have composed (as opposed to copied) the versions preserved in the extant manuscripts, there can be little doubt that they were, if our dating is correct, members of the Zoroastrian clergy, as it is unlikely that anybody else would have employed the Pahlavi script for literary purposes in post-Sasanian times.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Cf. also Boyce (1968: 56) who considers that the AZ’s current version was written down ‘probably after the Arab conquest’. Pagliaro (1925: 544) dates it on the basis of lexical criteria ‘not much later than the 6th century’.

<sup>41</sup> Vevaina 2015: 213, notes that with the possible exception of the 10th century *Škand-gumānīg Wizār*—perhaps written by a layman (Mardān-farrox ī Ohrmazddād)—all pre-modern Zoroastrian texts now at our disposal appear to have been produced by Zoroastrian priests.

Although their refined formal structure and the many intertextual allusions they contain suggest that the MJF, AZ, and WČN's current versions are rather the results of literary efforts made by authors well-versed in exegetical scholarship, than transcripts of popular tales circulating mouth to mouth,<sup>42</sup> the narratives' oral ancestry can hardly be questioned. The most thoroughly investigated text in this regard is the AZ, which on the basis of linguistic and thematic evidence is commonly assumed to pertain to a century-old orally transmitted epic tradition in Parthian language.<sup>43</sup> While the WČN's linguistic features still have to be evaluated,<sup>44</sup> the analysis of its content allowed Brunner (1979: 43) to assume that '... it may have flourished ... as a courtly tale transmitted orally, from the reign of the Sasanian king Xusraw I'.<sup>45</sup> MJF's transmission background is discussed by Kłagisz (2014: 164), who, in accordance with W. J. Ong's 'characteristics of orally based thought and expression' (Ong 2002: 36-56), comes to the conclusion that the text is 'a product of conscious work of an author or a scribe who used oral material (and) created his own story'.

#### ORAL TRADITION AND THE PERCEPTION OF HISTORY

To the modern reader's eye the MJF might appear as a kind of fairy tale, the WČN as an aetiological account explaining the origins of two popular board games, and the AZ as a legend about an obscure battle fought in a bygone age. However, it is unlikely that these stories were regarded in this way by their authors and their original target audience. In fact, rhymed versions of the AZ and the WČN are an integral part of Ferdowsi's *Šāh-*

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<sup>42</sup> I am grateful to Dr. David Buyaner (Berlin), who shared this observation with me.

<sup>43</sup> AZ's oral and/or Parthian background is discussed in Bartholomae 1922: 22; Benveniste 1932; Utas 1975; Lazard 1985; see also Boyce 1987-2012 with further references.

<sup>44</sup> A cursory view suggests a similar use of language in the WČN and the MJF. A stylistic feature shared by both stories is the text-initial statement *ēdōn gōwēnd kū ...* 'It is said that ...', (MJF 2, WČN § 1), which can be interpreted as the authors' reference to oral sources and/or as an introductory formula, which 'appeal(s) to the fondness of the audience for hearing things said in a familiar way', cf. Crosby 1936: 102-3. On the use of a similar formula ('Furthermore it is said: ...') introducing a Manichean parable in Parthian (M44/R/9-10), see Benkato (forthcoming).

<sup>45</sup> The notion of WČN's oral ancestry is also supported by Panaino (1999: 83ff.), who assumes that the precursor of the WČN's current version may have circulated in a late Sasanian courtly milieu.

*nāme*,<sup>46</sup> an epic poem completed in the beginning of the 11th century and regarded by its author and his contemporaries as narrating Iranian history. This suggests that Zoroastrians living in the time of the MJF, AZ, and WČN's composition might have perceived the three tales not as works of fiction, but as describing events, which actually *took place* in their country's past.<sup>47</sup>

Interestingly, the mentioned *Šāh-nāme* versions of the AZ and WČN differ from their Pahlavi counterparts not only because they are versified and told in another (New Persian) language, but also because they are built from a somewhat different set of thematic blocks. Such a parallel (and possibly even simultaneous) existence of diverging variants of the same plot is nothing extraordinary, as it is rooted in the very nature of oral transmission, which almost excludes the existence of a fixed, normative version of any narrative account.<sup>48</sup> In an oral environment even well-

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<sup>46</sup> For the WČN's *Šāh-nāme* version, see Mohl 1868: 384ff. A detailed (Italian) summary of it is provided by Panaino (1999: 125ff.) who also quotes a (shorter) Arabic WČN version (p. 131ff.) contained in Tha'ālibī's 'History of the Persian Kings' (Zotenberg 1900: 622ff.)

An AZ version in New Persian based on different *Šāh-nāme* editions was compiled and commented by Monchi-Zadeh (1981: 75ff.). He also (p. 10ff.) refers to (shorter) Arabic AZ versions in Tha'ālibī (Zotenberg 1900: 262ff.) and in Ṭabarī's 'Annales' (de Goeje 1881-1882: 676ff.). For a translation of the AZ's *Šāh-nāme* version into German and a discussion of its possible connection to the Pahlavi AZ, see Geiger 1890. The literary relationship between the AZ's and the WČN's New Persian, Arabic and Pahlavi versions is discussed by Nöldeke (1892: 1ff., 20ff.), who, like Geiger, does not consider an oral background of these stories, but regards them as pertaining to a written tradition.

The absence of a MJF-like tale in Ferdowsi's *Šāh-nāme* and in the Arabic texts devoted to the rulers and warriors of Iran could be conditioned by the fact that the story's main hero *Jōišť ī Friyān* is neither a king like Guštāsp or Kīsrā Nušīnravān, nor a valiant knight like Zarēr or Rostam, but just a devote Zoroastrian. See also Kellens 2015, who assumes that Yt. 5.82, which contains an earlier (Young Avestan) version of the encounter between *Jōišť* and Axt, was not composed on the basis of narrative material inherited from the past, but was elaborated as a 'new myth' (*mythe nouveau*) symbolising the relationship between the ritual fire and the sacrificer.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Macuch (2008: 127ff.): 'Since no difference was made in historiography between factual, legendary and mythological material, various sources were obviously used to compose Iran's epic history, blending official records, genealogies of the kings and ancient chronicles with the ancient Zoroastrian tradition parts of which have been preserved in the extant Avestan and Pahlavi books.'

<sup>48</sup> The only known exception from this rule in pre-Islamic Iranian tradition is the Avesta, a collection of ritual texts recited during religious ceremonies. Although the Aves-

established, structurally sophisticated texts are subject to constant re-composition. While in this case compositional features like rhythm and rhyme might limit the extent of change, less refined stories can easily be subjected to all kinds of formal and thematic modifications.

The described situation, characteristic for cultures strongly influenced by traditions of orality, also prevailed in Zoroastrian Iranian society, which, although in possession of two functional indigenous writing systems (Avestan and Pahlavi), continued until well into early Islamic times to prefer oral transmission of non-administrative texts over their written diffusion.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, pre-modern Zoroastrian authors did not have to conform to the concept of ‘creative originality’, but were expected to work with traditional, well-known literary material. This is not to say that their listeners appreciated stories of old for their own sake, as a kind of value-free news from the past. What they, as typical representatives of an oral society (in transition) were interested in, was a narrative, which while referring to names and events familiar to them from other historical accounts addressed their current social and spiritual needs.<sup>50</sup>

After having located the MJF, AZ, and WČN’s current versions within the narrative environment of early post-Sasanian Iran (approximately 7th to 11th century), now for a few remarks on literary and religious factors, allowing for the interweaving of a myth dominated by the Zoroastrian religion’s main supernatural entities with stories recounting the exploits of human beings.

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tan texts were also transmitted orally, in (a) certain moment(s) in time (probably when the language in which they had been composed was not anymore well understood by the officiating priests) the use of a standardised version of each text was agreed upon, so as to guaranty ‘correct’ recitation, thought to be indispensable for a successful performance of the ritual. On the fixation and/or canonisation of Avestan texts, see Skjaervø 2012; Rezaia 2012.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. e.g. the following statement from the *Dēnkard* (last reduction after the 9th century A.D.), which concludes a passage discussing the transmission of religious traditions: DkM 460.7-8 ‘[...] it is reasonable to consider the living spoken word more important than the written’ (cf. Bailey 1943: 163).

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Huyse 2008: 152: ‘[...] one of the main features of an oral society on its way to (generalised) literacy is a clear tendency to preserve of what remains of the old tradition. A second particularity is [...] that such a society is constantly trying to find an equilibrium by eliminating the recollection of past events unless they still have a direct bearing on the present’.

## FROM MYTH TO HUMAN STORY

In a cultural context dominated by oral tradition an author has the possibility to work with one or more already existing narrative versions of the same plot. Besides this, he may enlarge this core material with elements taken from other oral or written compositions familiar to his audience. One can only speculate about the content of the 'literary repository' available to Zoroastrian authors, but that it was likely to have contained the cosmological myth is suggested by the latter's frequent and detailed citations in the Pahlavi books. Moreover, the central place assigned to it in the Zoroastrian worldview makes it equally probable that the myth was well known not only with the priests, but also among the laity.

Once the myth was available to the authors of the MJF, AZ, and WČN as potential creative material, what could have encouraged them to merge it with the stories' core plots? First of all, as we have already seen on the example of other texts dealing with Iranian history, the millennial scheme seems to have been regarded as a suitable model for the arrangement of all kinds of tales related to the past.<sup>51</sup> That it could be applied not only broadly to a chain of long-term developments, but also, as it is the case with our three stories, to just one specific episode in the life of a narrative's main protagonist, is shown in the example of the already mentioned Avestan legend about the struggle between Tištrya and Apaoša (Yt. 8.12-29). Actually, broad and specific approach are both already apparent in the cosmological myth itself, as it covers a period of several thousand years, but centralises around the exploits of two main characters, Ohrmazd and Ahriman. And in the same way as in the spiritual sphere God and the devil oppose each other as the central representations of the primary antagonistic principles of good and evil, their human agents in the material world engage in devastating wars or deadly

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<sup>51</sup> Probably, the traditional interpretation of Zoroastrian history in the light of the millennial scheme is based on the concept of divine prototypes, which are assumed to exist in the spiritual sphere and to serve as models for corresponding occurrences in the material world; cf. Skjærvø 2011: 338: '[...] Ahura Mazdā's new world of thought was populated with various objects [...] set in their proper places according to the principle of Order. These later become the models (*ratus*) for the corresponding objects in the world of the living; for instance, the divine year is the model for all years, the divine social structure is the model for all social structures, and so on'.

riddle competitions. Moreover, the symbolic identification of Wištāsp and Xusraw with Ohrmazd, and Arjāsp and Dēwišarm<sup>52</sup> with Ahriman is made possible by the Zoroastrian notion of the good ruler being God's and the rebellious leader being the devil's likeness on earth.<sup>53</sup> Jōišť, for his part, is not a king, but being portrayed as an exemplary Zoroastrian and a 'Righteous Man' (*ahlaw mard*)<sup>54</sup> he is associated with prophet Zarathustra,<sup>55</sup> the best of all human beings, and besides God and the devil the third main character in the cosmological myth.

All mentioned factors enabled the authors of the MJF, AZ, and WČN's current versions to associate their stories with the cosmological myth while avoiding that their efforts would be judged as contradicting religious concepts and/or violating literary conventions. At the same time, their decision to mix the myth into the story may simply have been based on an already well-established Zoroastrian tradition to narrate accounts devoted to the confrontation between good and evil by referring to the structural framework of the millennial scheme.

In fact, the last assumption would already provide a sufficient explanation for the occurrence of the observed textual parallels. But should the example set by tradition be regarded as the only driving force behind our authors' choices? In my opinion, the presence of so many and such de-

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<sup>52</sup> Although the Indian king might look rather harmless in comparison with blood-thirsty Arjāsp or wicked Axt, he is nevertheless a disobedient ruler who by challenging his Iranian suzerain attempts to destroy the existing God-given order. Dēwišarm's relation to the forces of evil might also be suggested by his name, which a Persian speaking audience could have perceived as being connected to the words *dēw* 'demon' and *šarm* 'shame; pudendum'; cf. Pagliaro (1951: 98, n. 2) who proposes to translate the name with 'onta, confusione dei demoni'.

<sup>53</sup> On this concept, see, e.g. Zaehner 1961: 299; as well as Panaino 2004; idem 2009 with further references.

<sup>54</sup> Designated as such in MJF 201. For the Zoroastrian notion of the 'Righteous Man' and Zarathustra as his most prominent manifestation, see König 2005.

<sup>55</sup> Or, even with Ohrmazd himself: cf. GrBd. 26.10 'And his (Ohrmazd's) material counterpart (*daxšag* 'sign') is the Righteous Man'. Cf. also Supp.ŠnŠ 15.8 '[...] because the Righteous Man (*mard ī ahlaw*) is the counterpart (*angōšīdag*) of Lord Ohrmazd. When a Righteous Man acts, then his action becomes that of Ohrmazd' (after Kotwal 1969: 59). As for Jōišť's association with Zarathustra cf., e.g. Dk. 3.196, where Axt is portrayed as the latter's opponent in a religious dispute. Other parallels between the MJF's youthful hero and the Iranian prophet shall be discussed in a separate publication.

tailed correspondences between each of the three stories and the cosmological myth may suggest an additional motivation.

#### GIVING SENSE TO IT ALL

Regardless as to the extent to which the current versions of the MJF, AZ, and WČN are a result of their composers' own creativity or a compilation of previously existing material, for the priests who put these tales into writing, they must have been acceptable and beneficial in socio-religious terms. Otherwise, it would be difficult to comprehend, why they would have invested their time and energy into fixing them on paper, let alone modifying their narrative structure. If we exclude the possibility that the respective authors could have worked exclusively for their personal consumption, a choice, which would be extremely untypical for a literary tradition dominated by oral culture, we are then confronted with the questions, why were they writing these stories and whom were they writing them for?

As already mentioned above, in an oral society historical recollections tend to abandon memories of past events, which do not seem relevant for the interpretation of the present, or to bring these memories into accordance with contemporary developments. While this process of literary adaptation ensures the preservation of narrative material related to an earlier period, it also guarantees that accounts of the past remain relevant for the present and thus meet the expectations of their audience.<sup>56</sup>

In post-Sasanian Iran, the 7th to the 11th centuries, the period established above as the approximate time of composition of the MJF, AZ, and WČN's current versions, were an era of upheaval and religious tension. From the few information we have about communal life during these troubled times,<sup>57</sup> we can deduce that the violent demolition of the old order, the economic and social sanctions introduced by the new rulers against non-Muslims, and the official encouragement of conversions to Islam must have provoked among Zoroastrians a feeling of marginalisation coupled with a yearning for better times. In the field of literature

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<sup>56</sup> On the phenomenon of congruence between a society and its oral traditions, see, e.g. Ong 1982: 47-49; Vansina 1985: 120-123.

<sup>57</sup> On the life of Iranian Zoroastrian communities during the first centuries of Islam, see, e.g. in Choksy 1997; Daryaei 2015.

such sentiments are assumed to have found their expression in the composition of apocalyptic texts, which depict the horrors of alien invasions and natural disasters, and promise divine relief from daily misery through the approaching end of the world.<sup>58</sup> As it is typical for works rooted in oral tradition, such texts often contain narrative material, which was taken from (mytho-)historical accounts related to the (pre-Islamic) past and adapted to the audience's contemporary situation.<sup>59</sup>

Although our three stories are not counted among the works of the Middle Persian apocalyptic genre,<sup>60</sup> their core material, which refers to the Sasanian and pre-Sasanian era, could have been subjected by their authors to a similar adaptation process. If one takes a look at the events described in MJF, AZ, and WČN and the responses to them attributed to the stories' main positive characters, one can easily point out features, which might have reminded Iranian Zoroastrians living during the early centuries of the Islamic take-over of their own individual and collective experiences. There is, of course, the violent military assault on their homeland and/or community (MJF, AZ) and the constant threat of physical annihilation, subjugation or humiliation (MJF, AZ, WČN) by an overbearing, cruel (MJF, AZ) and shrewd (WČN) non-Zoroastrian/non-Iranian adversary. But as the narratives, in order to remain attractive to the audience, have also to reflect (or at least to construct) a reality, which with all its present sorrows and future burdens is still worth living as a Zoroastrian, the underlying atmosphere of peril is countered by a message of hope. This message is delivered through the positive hero's triumph over the

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<sup>58</sup> The late (i.e. post-Sasanian) redaction of Zoroastrian apocalyptic texts and their relation to the socio-religious context prevailing at the time of their composition is discussed, e.g. in Daryaee 1998; idem 2004 where other references can be found.

<sup>59</sup> A detailed example (from *Jāmāsp-nāmag* 88-106) for the adaptation of traditional narrative material to a (new) apocalyptic context is provided by Olsson 1983: 31ff.

<sup>60</sup> The MJF is generally regarded as being part of didactic (*handarz*) or wisdom literature (see, e.g. Tavadia 1956: 107; Boyce 1968: 54; Cereti 2001: 185; Macuch 2008: 170; König 2010: 116). The WČN is counted either among 'secular/court literature' (cf. Tavadia 1956: 139; Panaino 1999: 87; Cereti 2001: 203), or as part of the *handarz* genre (cf. Boyce 1968: 63; de Menasce 1983: 1185; Macuch 2008: 165; Brunner 1979: 48). The AZ is classified as 'secular/court literature' by Tavadia (1956: 135) and Cereti (2001: 200), as a 'non-didactic narrative poem' by Boyce (1968: 56), as 'epic poetry' by de Menasce (1983: 1167), or as an 'epic romance' by Macuch (2008: 177).

enemies of faith, which reassures the audience of the supremacy of Zoroastrian/Iranian religion (MJF, AZ, WČN), arms (AZ) and ideology (WČN), the superior qualities of their spiritual, political (MJF, WČN) and military (AZ) leaders, unfailing divine support (MJF, AZ, WČN), the possibility of relief even in moments of greatest distress (MJF, AZ, WČN), and, most important of all, of the inevitability of good's final victory over evil (MJF, AZ, WČN).

Besides these general assertions, which, like the constant menace to the Good Creation, echo the guiding themes of the cosmological myth, the three Pahlavi stories also contain notions, which can be interpreted as elements of advice relevant during times of social and religious turmoil. Thus, the successful actions of the narratives' main positive heroes could have been perceived as suggesting that collective endurance within a hostile non-Zoroastrian environment was only to be achieved through unity based on shared identity and belonging (AZ, MJF, WČN), that giving in was not an option (MJF, AZ), and that individual heroism and self-sacrifice were encouraged and appreciated (AZ, MJF).

In short, the MJF, AZ, and WČN's current versions might have been composed for an audience consisting of people, who were able to identify with the positive heroes of the stories, because they perceived Iran's glorious past as a source of pride and strength, they were concerned about the validity of their values in the face of ever increasing social and religious pressures, and worried about their community's chances of survival in an uncertain future. Moreover, the didactic and at the same time entertaining character of the stories, their relatively small size, simple narrative style, and vivid imagery suggest that they could have been composed not only for the consumption of a few literate priests, but as material for religious instruction,<sup>61</sup> most probably delivered in the form of readings<sup>62</sup> to a lay audience.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> The importance of historical narratives for Zoroastrian religious instruction can be deduced from the frequent (and often extensive) references to them contained in exegetical and theological treaties like *Dēnkard* volumes 3 and 9 or the *Bundahišn*. Cf. also Shaked 1979: XVI: "The great bulk of *andarz* books surviving in Pahlavi seem to have belonged to the type of compositions, which could be used in religious instruction. That much else must have existed in the Sasanian period which was lost and did not come down to us can be seen from ... books which are closely related to the *andarz* type, that is to say, books

In such a context of reception, the interweaving of the MJF, AZ, and WČN with the cosmological myth would not only allow the authors to narrate their stories using a well-established, religiously sanctioned ordering framework applicable to accounts describing the conflict between good and evil. It would also permit them to attribute higher purpose and meaning to their own and their audience's daily life and struggle,<sup>64</sup> because it reveals ostensibly random events as being part of a greater plan, as following divinely sanctioned patterns culminating in the annihilation of Ahriman, the triumph of Ohrmazd's will and everlasting happiness for mankind.<sup>65</sup>

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which are meant to be instructive or edifying, besides being entertaining, though they use a narrative style, not the style of short gnomic sayings, like *Xusrō ud rēdag*, *Wizārišn ī čatrang* or *Draxt asūrīg*. On didactic narratives in Pahlavi literature, see Thrope 2013; König 2010 with further references.

<sup>62</sup> Considering the high value attributed by pre-modern Zoroastrian society to oral traditions and the complexities connected to the Pahlavi writing system, it is likely that in early post-Sasanian times the transmission of religious knowledge to laypersons was mostly (if not exclusively) practiced in oral form. Even much later, in the 19th century, Dastur Hoshangji reports that the AWN's Gujarati version used to be read for moral instruction before large assemblies of the Zoroastrian community in India (cf. Haug/West 1872: LV). An indication that the MJF could have been intended to be delivered orally might be contained in the first lines of the text's postscript: MJF 410-411: *ēn mādayān kē paywandēd ud bowandagihā be xwānēd ... pad ruwān ī ōy kirbag ēdōn bawēd čiyōn ...* 'Who hands down this story and reads/recites it completely ... there will be so much merit (attributed) to his soul, as if ...' For *paywastan*, *paywand* 'to hand down' in connection with the transmission of religious tradition, see Bailey, 1943: 149. On the oral delivery of didactic narratives (parables) as part of religious instruction in an Iranian Manichean context see Colditz (2011) and Benkato (forthcoming).

<sup>63</sup> In the Sasanian era, lay Zoroastrians, including women and children had the possibility to receive formal instruction in religious matters (cf. Macuch 2009). There are no attestations of such a practice during the early post-Sasanian period. However, if we consider that the general upheaval in Iran in the wake of the Arab conquest led to a strengthening of eschatological expectations (see, e.g. Choksy 1997: 48ff.) and with it, most probably, also to a renewed interest in other matters of faith, it is rather likely that religious instruction to lay people was continued, most probably in forms adapted to the new social environment.

<sup>64</sup> See Williams (2009a: 25, 224) who comes to a similar conclusion concerning the reasons for the introduction of the cosmological pattern into the *Qešše-ye Sanjān*.

<sup>65</sup> Taking into account that the post-Sasanian dating proposed for the composition of the MJF, AZ, and WČN's current versions remains rather tentative, it is not excluded that

## ABBREVIATIONS

AWN	Ardā Wirāz Nāmag, see Vahman 1986.
AYZ	<i>Ayādgār ī Jāmāspīg</i> , see Agostini 2013.
AZ	<i>Ayādgār ī Zarērān</i> , see Monchi-Zadeh 1981.
Dk.3	the 3rd book of the <i>Dēnkard</i> , see de Menasce 1973.
DkM	<i>Dēnkard</i> ed. Madan, see Madan 1911.
GrBd.	<i>Greater Bundahišn</i> , see Anklesaria 1956.
GrBd.1	the 1st chapter of the <i>Greater Bundahišn</i> , see Cereti/ MacKenzie 2003.
MJF	<i>Mādayān ī Jōišť ī Friyān</i> , see Weinreich 1992; idem 1994.
Pahl.Vd.	<i>Pahlavi Vidēvdād</i> , see Moazami 2014.
PRDd.	<i>Pahlavi Rivāyat accompanying the Dādestān ī Dēnīg</i> , see Williams 1990.
Supp.ŠnŠ	<i>The Supplementary Texts to the Šāyest nē Šāyest</i> , see Kotwal 1969.
WČN	<i>Wizārišn ī čatrang ud nihišn ī nēw-ardaxšīr</i> , see Panaino 1999.
WZ	<i>Wizīdagihā ī Zādspram</i> , see Gignoux/Tafazzoli 1993.
Yt. 8	Yašt 8, see Panaino 1990.
ZWY	<i>Zand ī Wahman Yasn</i> , see Cereti 1995.

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the context-induced introduction of the cosmological pattern into one or more of these stories took place already before the Arab conquest, e.g. during the last century of Sasanian rule when the country was shaken by the wars with Byzantium and frequent ‘barbarian’ invasions from the north-east (AZ), the heretical Mazdakite movement challenged the ‘orthodox’ Zoroastrian worldview (MJF), and imperial expansionist politics could be sustained by propagating Iranian superiority and Sasanian domination as God’s will (WČN). Be it as it may, a pre-Islamic dating does not exclude the possibility that the current versions of the MJF, AZ, and WČN were composed and used for didactic purposes.

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