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Zoroastrianism Special

LEGENDARY WOMEN OF THE *Shahnameh*: AN EPITOME OF COURAGE AND WISDOM
Arshadul Quadri

ZOROASTRIAN DEITIES IN BACTRIA
Julian Kredel and Jamsheed K. Choksy

THE AVESTA IN SOGDIANA
Nicholas Sims-Williams

WIND AND FIRE: SOME SHARED MOTIFS IN INDO-IRANIAN AND SINO-IRANIAN SETTINGS
Jenny Rose

IRANIAN METALWORK AND TEXTILES FROM QINGHAI/AMDO: TRACING THE SILK ROAD
IN THE HIMALAYAN REGION
Matteo Compareti

IN THE NAME OF THE LORD OF WISDOM AND MIND OR OHRMAZD
Daryoosh Akbarzadeh

AN ANCIENT SPIRITUAL BOND: THE YASNA AND THE YAGNA OF IRAN AND INDIA
Shernaz Cama

THE ROYAL *firman* AND THE ABOLITION OF ZOROASTRIAN POLL TAX IN QAJAR, IRAN
Shervin Farridnejad

ZOROASTRIAN GLOW IN AZERBAIJAN
Galina Woodova

AN OCEAN OF KNOWLEDGE: THE FIRST GUJARATI MONTHLY MAGAZINE
Murali Ranganathan

LANGUAGE SNAPSHOT OF PARSI GUJARATI
Anton Zykov

PARSI ENTREPRENEURIAL SUCCESS: AN APPRAISAL
Meher Kelawala Mistry

A EUROPEAN TRANSFORMATION: THE J.J. SCHOOL
OF ART AND THE RISE OF PARSI ARTISTS
Pheroza J. Godrej

ART LIKE SCIENCE KNOWS NO FRONTIERS: HOMI BHABA AND THE
SPIRIT OF INTERNATIONALISM
Indira Chowdhury

CONFERMENT OF MEANING TO MOUNT DAMAVAND BETWEEN INDO-IRANIAN
MYTHS AND ZOROASTRIAN PILGRIMAGES
Mariano Errichiello

A TALE OF TWO ZS: AN OVERVIEW OF THE REFORMIST AND TRADITIONALIST
ZOROASTRIAN MOVEMENTS
Pablo Vazquez

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Editor : **K. Warikoo**
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January-September 2021

CONTENTS

Message	<i>Dr. Lokesh Chandra</i>	
Editor's Page	<i>Dr. Shernaz Cama</i>	1
Legendary Women of the <i>Shahnameh</i> : An Epitome of Courage and Wisdom	<i>Arshadul Quadri</i>	3-19
Zoroastrian Deities in Bactria	<i>Julian Kredel and Jamsheed K.Choksy</i>	20-53
The Avesta in Sogdiana	<i>Nicholas Sims-Williams</i>	54-62
Wind and Fire: Some Shared Motifs in Indo-Iranian and Sino-Iranian settings	<i>Jenny Rose</i>	63-74
Iranian Metalwork and Textiles from Qinghai/Amdo: Tracing the Silk Road in the Himalayan region	<i>Matteo Compareti</i>	75-86
In the name of the Lord of Wisdom and Mind or Ohrmazd	<i>Daryoosh Akbarzadeh</i>	87-95
An Ancient Spiritual Bond: The Yasna and the Yagna of Iran and India	<i>Shernaz Cama</i>	96-104
The Royal <i>firman</i> and the Abolition of Zoroastrian Poll Tax in Qajar, Iran	<i>Shervin Farridnejad</i>	105-131
Zoroastrian Glow in Azerbaijan	<i>Galina Woodova</i>	132-157
An Ocean of Knowledge: The First Gujarati Monthly Magazines	<i>Murali Ranganathan</i>	158-176
Language Snapshot of Parsi Gujarati	<i>Anton Zykov</i>	177-183
Parsi Entrepreneurial Success: An Appraisal	<i>Meher Kelawala Mistry</i>	184-190

A European Transformation: The J.J. School of Art and the Rise of Parsi Artists	<i>Pheroza J. Godrej</i>	191-209
Art like Science knows no Frontiers: Homi Bhaba and the Spirit of Internationalism	<i>Indira Chowdhury</i>	210-218
Conferment of Meaning to Mount Damavand between Indo-Iranian myths and Zoroastrian Pilgrimages	<i>Mariano Errichiello</i>	219-229
A Tale of two Zs: An Overview of the Reformist and Traditionalist Zoroastrian Movements	<i>Pablo Vazquez</i>	230-237

Message

India and Iran, are the 'we together', in the pure sunlight of language, with the same or similar divinities, apotheosized concepts and values, wrapped in the inheritance of memories, spanning vast expanses along rivers and creating hydronymy from the Don to the Danube, the Gathas and Vedic hymns with the mind prints of common essence, Iranians translating Sanskrit sutras into Chinese, Iranians doctors curing the son of lord Krishna, or the Physician of Lord Buddha studying under white-clad masters: there are endless sharings throbbing with harmony.

Prof. Lokesh Chandra

Editor's Page

Prophet Zarathushtra composed his *Gathas* around 1600 B.C. Three Empires followed the teachings of Ahura Mazda, Lord of Light and Wisdom and spread across the known world from West to East. While studies on Zoroastrian thought and philology comprise a large corpus today, the spread of the empires, their influence on thought, ritual, politics and culture across Central Asia is still a matter of discovery and research.

In this millennium attention has been focused on these regions, tracing tangible and intangible culture from imperial Iran across the fluid boundaries created during the late Parthian and Sasanian periods. Recent discoveries by international teams from varying backgrounds of academic study have found rich artistic and linguistic material along the Silk Route. So far, these discoveries remain in volumes on Zoroastrian studies. This edition of the *Journal of Himalayan and Central Asian Studies* brings some of these findings to a wider audience. This will help make links between multicultural concepts, oral traditions as well as iconography. These multicultural links will be taken forward to a much later colonial and post-colonial period of history when adaptation and absorbing new influences once again becomes vital to the creation of a Parsi Zoroastrian culture. It is this multiculturalism, the ability to straddle different geographies and adapt to historical circumstances, while maintaining a core essence, which has been a feature of the Zoroastrian identity throughout its long history.

There has been a conscious decision to explore orality and current practices in areas such as Azerbaijan, where the Lahij community continues aspects of Zoroastrian culture, to examine metal work and textile fragments of parts of China which have recently entered public and private collections, as well as look at how adaptation to colonization created a hybrid identity which flowered in thought as well as art forms.

Many of the contributors to this issue are young and looking enthusiastically at an ancient world. Their viewpoints provide us with new areas which need examination and questions which still need to be answered. Since the authors come from different regions of the world, spellings and notations have been retained in the way they are used by these authors for authenticity. This issue of the *Journal of Himalayan and Central Asian Studies* seeks to create interest in scholars and students beyond the world of Zoroastrian studies and take research further on this vast subject.

Dr. Shernaz Cama

CONFERMENT OF MEANING TO MOUNT DAMÂVAND BETWEEN INDO-IRANIAN MYTHS AND ZOROASTRIAN PILGRIMAGES

MARIANO ERRICHELLO*

ABSTRACT

Mount Damāvand, located north of Tehrān in the high Harāz valley of Māzandarān, is part of the Central Alborz mountain range. With its 5,670 m height, this volcanic mountain represents the highest peak in Iran and is one of the natural wonders of this country.¹ Besides being one of Iran's most distinctive features and being nominated as a UNESCO World Heritage site,² its prominent position in the Iranian skyline has earned Mount Damāvand a special place in the Zoroastrian mythology and Iranian literature.

This article examines how the related myths and narratives have conferred meaning to Mount Damāvand, making it a resource with semiotic functions which travelled both East and West, influencing people and cultures across the ages.

Stronghold against foreign rule

As the birth place of the Zoroastrian first human *Gayōmard* and of the mythical king *Manuščīhr*, Mount Damāvand is one of the preferred backdrops for the wide Iranian mythology.³ Probably the most renowned myth associated with this volcano is that described by Ferdowsī in the *Šahnāme*. In his epic, the author recounts how *Fereydūn* beats the tyrant *Zahhāk* with an ox-headed mace and, following the guidance of the *yazata*⁴ *Saroš*, binds the evil ruler with strips of lion's skin and

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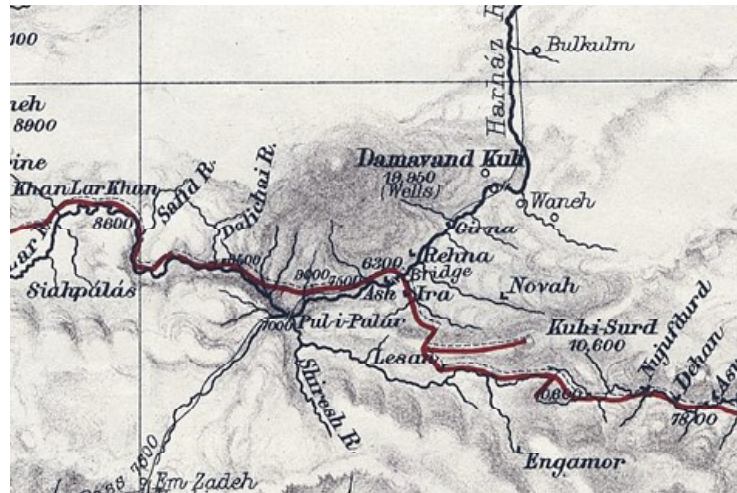


Fig. 1: Portion of a map from plane table surveys executed by Lieutenant Colonel Beresford Lovett, Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society, 1883.
 © Archives and Special Collections of SOAS, University of London, MCA/01/02/05/08.

imprisons him inside a cave in Mount Damāvand.⁵ In this story, the volcanic mountain is depicted as the place where Good triumphs over Evil and where the latter is rendered harmless. Although the story of the rivalry between *Fereydūn* and *Zahhāk* is well known among Iranians, Persian speakers and Zoroastrians because of the popularity of the *Šahnāme*, older versions of this myth can be found in the *Avesta*⁶ and in the Middle Persian literature.⁷ In fact, the terms *Fereydūn* and *Zahhāk* are developments of the Avestan *θraetaona* ‘*θraetaona* (mythical hero)’ and *Aži Dahāka* ‘dragon *Dahāka*’ whose rivalry is also expressed in the Yasna 9.8:

*yō janaṭ ažiṃ dahākəm
 θrizafanəmθrikamərəḍəm
 xšuuāš.ašiṃ hazayrā.yaoxštīm
 ašaojaṅhəm daēuuṭīm drujəm
 ayəm gaēθāuuuioḍ druuaṅtəm
 yaṃ ašaojastəmqaṃ drujəm
 fraca kərəṅtaṭ ayrō mainiuš
 aoi yaṃ astuuaitīm gaēθaṃ
 mahrkāi ašahe gaēθanaṃ*

(*θraetaona*) who slew the dragon *Dahāka*,
 having three mouths, three heads,
 six eyes, a thousand skills,
 the very powerful demonic Deceit,⁸
 evil for living beings, deceitful,
 whom the Destructive Force whittled forth



Fig. 2: “The tyrant Zahhak is imprisoned under Mount Damāvand,” *Šāhnāme*, ca. 1300. Details of iconography confirm that production was after the Mongol invasions of Iran and Iraq, and the establishment of Ilkhanid rule in 1258.

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as the most powerful Deceit
against the existence which (is) corporeal,
for the destruction of the living beings of Truth.

In the Yasna 9.8, *Aži Dahāka* is depicted as a concrete threat for the material world and humanity. In particular, this dragon is an expression of the Indo-Iranian myth of the dragon which is associated with “the idea of an evil, foreign king ruling over the Iranians.” (Daryaei 2020 : p 109).

Another Iranian myth including Mount Damāvand in its scenery is that of *Āraš-e Kamāngir* (‘*Āraš* the archer’) which is found in the Yašt 8.6 and “in certain Middle Persian texts, and later in *Shāhnāme*, *Vīso Ramīn*, Bal‘ami’s translation of Tabari’s *Tārīkh*, and a number of other early texts” (Hanaway 1998 : p. 556). The story goes: *Āraš-e Kamāngir* was the champion Iranian bowman who climbed

a mountain and shot an arrow eastward to mark the border between Iran and Turan.⁹ By being portrayed as the saviour from the tyranny of *Afrāsiyāb*, a mythical king of Turan, *Āraš-e Kamāngir* was embodying political hopes of a better future for Iranians.¹⁰ The mountain which *Āraš-e Kamāngir* climbed has been identified with different peaks of the region in the various textual sources, nevertheless, Balāmi associated it with Mount Damāvand.¹¹

The versions of the myth of *Fereydūn* and *Zahhāk* and that of *Āraš-e Kamāngir* described above confer to Mount Damāvand the meaning of a stronghold against external threats and a place of defence of the Iranian national identity.

Glorification of the past and dissidence

Between the 19th and 20th centuries, literature celebrating the pre-Islamic era was widely disseminated in Iran. It provided a framework to the Iranian nationalists for the glorification of the mythical past of Iran in contrast to the decline caused by the Islamic conquest. By being included into the mainstream discourse, Zoroastrianism acquired symbolic power and became representative of the Iranian identity. The *Šāhnāme* was one of the key texts of this literary revival and “provided valuable semantic and symbolic resources for dissociating Iran from Islam and for fashioning an alternative basis of identity” (Tavakoli-Targhi 2001 : pp 97-98). This epic contributed to the process of *othering* Islam and to form the national identity in which Mount Damāvand became one of its defining symbols.

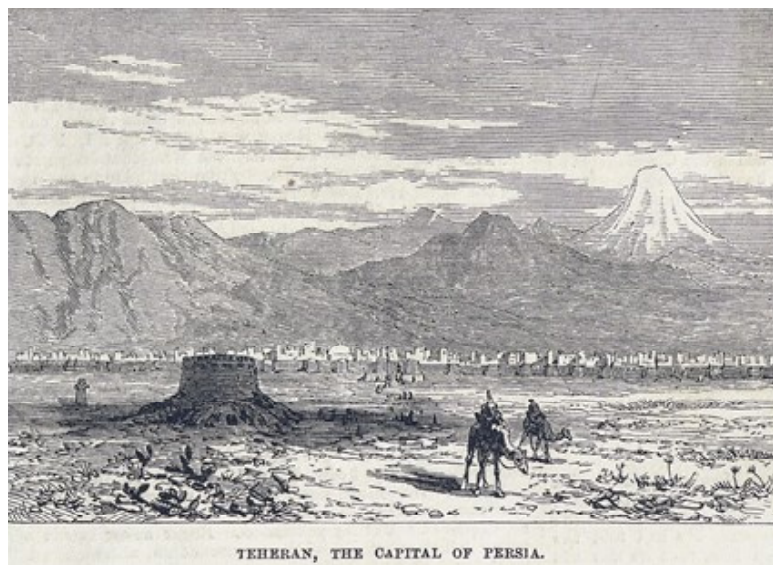


Fig. 3: “Teheran, the capital of Persia,” *The Illustrated London News*, 1873. This illustration depicts a Zoroastrian dokhma or Tower of Silence in the foreground with Mount Damavand in the background. © Archives and Special Collections of SOAS, University of London, MCA/01/03/07.

As a result of the revival of texts glorifying the pre-Islamic period, the poetry of the time took on a character of nationalism and fed into the construction of the narrative celebrating the past. An expression of this poetry is the poem *Damāvandiyeh* ('On Damāvand') which depicts Mount Damāvand in its nationalistic fashion. It was composed in 1922 by Mohammad Taqi Bahar (1886-1951), who is considered one of the poets of the Constitutional revolution (1906-1911) together with Ali-Akbar Dehkhoda, Iraj Mirza and Mirzadeh Eshqi.¹² In the first verses of his poem, also known as *Enchained White Demon*, Bahar addresses the volcano in the following way:

*Ey div-e sepid-e pāyidar band,
Eygonbad-e giti, ey Damāvand[...]*

O white giant with feet in chains
O dome of the world, O Damāvand[...]¹³

In his poem, Bahar urges Mount Damāvand "to burst open on the Iranian capital and destroy its sinful inhabitants" (Amanat 2017 : pp 442-443) like the volcanic fire did for Sodom and Pompeii. In these verses, the white cap of Mount Damāvand and its prominence are evoked by the author as symbols of power and dominance over the evil rule which, in this case, was associated with the emerging dictator of that time, who was Rezā Šāh Pahlavī (1878-1944).

In the following years, Mount Damāvand increasingly became a symbol of resistance and political activism. Sa' id Soltanpur (1940-1981), who was one of the militant poets using Persian poetry as a form of dissidence, composed the poem *Prison Lyric*. In his work, Soltanpur evokes the image of Mount Damāvand to support his struggle with the lines "You're of a mind that I stand alone, I'm of a mind that Mt. Damāvand stands behind me." (Alavi 2013: p 142). *Prison Lyric* is considered to be an expression of resistance literature and represents a good example of how Iranian poets were using their work as a form of commitment to political activism.¹⁴

Depository of lost knowledge

The revival of pre-Islamic literature in Iran also had a significant impact among the Zoroastrians of India (henceforth Parsis).¹⁵ The dominant position of the Persian language in India, which was enjoying the status of *lingua franca* until 1835, drove a significant development of Persian print in the country. In the light of the dissemination of Persian literature in India, the Parsis were harking back to the glory of their ancestry in Iran.¹⁶

In that period, India was under the British rule and the construction of a national identity was an ongoing process as well. Although the Parsis enjoyed a privileged position by being the main business partners of the British, the Westernisation process

had its challenges for them, too. In particular, the Christian missionary John Wilson was attacking Zoroastrianism in an attempt to convert Parsis to Christianity. Furthermore, the introduction of Western education exposed the Parsis to European scholastic subjects and to a more secular way of living. In particular, Orientalist scholarship started to engage with the *Avesta* and the emerging philological discoveries shook the religious certainty of the Parsis.

In this context, Behramshah Naoroji Shroff (1858-1927), a Parsi from Surat, started the spread of an esoteric interpretation of Zoroastrianism called *Ilme Kṣnum* ‘Science of Blissing’. Shroff, who soon gained a good number of followers, claimed to have been initiated to such esoteric knowledge by spending three years and half with the *Sāheb Delān* ‘Master-Hearts’,¹⁷ who were living in a secluded colony in Mount Damāvand.¹⁸

Analysed in its historical context, the religious debate on the interpretation of the *Avesta* was dominated by Western philology. The introduction of *Ilme Kṣnum* offered to Parsis an alternative characterised by an esoteric approach and revealed knowledge. As a consequence, Mount Damāvand began to symbolise the place where hidden Zoroastrian knowledge lay. In the dedication note to his first book *jarthoštī dharm samajavā māṭe ilme kṣnumnī cāvī* (*The key of Ilme Kṣnum to understand the Zoroastrian religion*), published in Surat in 1911, Shroff writes:

Pyārām irān vatanmām jarthoštī daenno surya ast thayo ane jarthoštī vighākālā ane dharmnām pustako parāgaṇde thayām, tathā mahān jarthoštī rājy gum thai gayum ane pratāpī jarthoštī prajā ek muṭṭhībhar kōmmām samāi gai-evo sihā jarvān yāne jamāno āvatām pahelām je duraṇdeś sāhebo jarthoštī daennām bij laine gophenaśin thayā te sāleko [...]

In the beloved motherland Iran, the dusk of the Zoroastrian soul took place. The Zoroastrian education and the religious books were destroyed, the great Zoroastrian state went lost and the illustrious Zoroastrian nation was swallowed into a handful community. Before the advent of the dark times or such age, the foresighted masters, having taken the seed of the Zoroastrian soul, went living in the mountain [Damāvand].¹⁹

In this passage, Shroff builds on the themes of the nostalgia of origin, national identity, and the glorification of the past in contraposition with the decline triggered by the Islamic rule. Moreover, he adds the dynamism of the *Sāheb*’s who hid in Mount Damāvand in order to preserve the seminal knowledge of Zoroastrianism. The contribution of Shroff to the meaning-making of Mount Damāvand was significant and introduced an epistemic layer to this symbol.

The mystical journey of Shroff to Mount Damāvand became the first of a set of travels that can be framed within a return narrative. An example is that of Rustom Nazoomie who, Nanabhay Framji Mama maintains, after having visited the same community of hidden Zoroastrian masters in Mount Damāvand became a distinguished astrologer in Iran.²⁰ Furthermore, in the 1960s, a Parsi from Mumbai, Minocher Nusserwanji Pundol (1908-1975), claimed to have been in touch with the

hidden masters of Mount Damāvand. The story goes that Pundol was able to perform spiritual flights to that colony where he got initiated into esoteric Zoroastrianism.

While the mystical travels of Shroff, Nazoomie and Pundol to Mount Damāvand were all meant to recover a lost knowledge, their narratives include an element of exclusivity: the secluded community of Zoroastrian masters is visible only to predestined spiritually advanced individuals.

The return narrative is found also in the literature produced by Iranians in diaspora. An example is the case of the Iranian journalist Gelareh Asayesh who migrated to the US after the revolution in 1979. In her *Saffron Sky*, published in 1999, Asayesh recounts how the peaks of Mount Damāvand powerfully evoke the land of the pre-Islamic ancestors when travelling back to Iran (Darznik 2008 : p 59). In the same way, for Iranians in London, whose construction of identity may also dissociate from Islam, Mount Damāvand is one of the “extremely popular symbols of secular nationalism” (Gholami 2015 : p 90) by being reproduced as an element of the Iranian material culture.

Rituals Performance and Displacement

In the present times, Mount Damāvand still evokes the pre-Islamic past for those who live in Iran. The Zoroastrians of Iran, who are nowadays reduced to a community of less than 20,000 individuals,²¹ visit regularly Mount Damāvand, where priests perform *Jashan* ceremonies.²²

Nevertheless, the volcanic mountain has symbolic value also for Iranians who do not profess the Zoroastrian religion. The anthropologist Abe, in his ethnographic work performed between 2009 and 2011, found that Mount Damāvand is part of the material culture of environmentalists as a site of social memory. During his fieldwork, he found a poster of the mountain hanged on a wall of an NGO office. For those environmentalists, Mount Damāvand embodies the hope of the “return to the “height of civilisation” that [...] ancient Iranians enjoyed” (Abe 2012: p 270). The volcano still represents a form of dissidence, but this time against the consequences of modernisation on the natural environment.²³

Mount Damāvand is an essential component of material culture also among the Parsis of India.²⁴ Framed pictures of Mount Damāvand, also informally known as Damāvand *Koh*,²⁵ are often hung on the walls of Parsi houses, offices and public halls. From the end of the 20th century on, Parsis began organised tours from India to Iran. Groups usually composed by ten or twenty Parsis are led by one or more Zoroastrian priests to visit their lost motherland. Tours last between two or three weeks and one of the most important stops is certainly Mount Damāvand.

During their visits to Mount Damāvand, Parsi priests perform a *Jashan* ceremony, like their Iranian counterparts do. For the Zoroastrians of India visiting Mount Damāvand could be a touching experience to the point that “seeing it with one’s own eyes made tears of joy well into them” (Dadrawala 1997 :p 40). Some



Fig. 4: A group of Parsi priests (Er. Parvez Bajan, Er. Adil Bhesania, Er. Kerman Sukhia, Er. Mehernosh Tata, Er. Ruzan Tata and Er. Shahzad Tata) performing a Jashan ceremony in the foothills of Mount Damavand, 2016.

© Courtesy of Ervad Parvez Minocher Bajan.

Parsis also claim to have experienced miraculous events when visiting the volcano. These experiences include the perception of a “spiritual energy that seemed to pervade the atmosphere” (Dadrawala 1997 :p 99), meeting with shepherds who then inexplicably disappear in a heartbeat, the perception of divine presences and visions of flying beings. Bliss and mystery are essential parts of the experience that Parsis have when going to Mount Damāvand.

Drawing upon the methodological approach developed by the American historian of religions Jonathan Z. Smith,²⁶ sacred places can be defined by the combination of story, ritual and place. The myths found in the Zoroastrian literature, together with the performance of *Jashan* ceremonies *in situ*, fully place Mount Damāvand in the Zoroastrian sacred topography. Furthermore, considering that they physically travel to the mountain, the journeys of Zoroastrians to Mount Damāvand can be considered real pilgrimages.²⁷ As is common among pilgrimages of other religions and traditions, themes such as the grief for the decline and loss of the motherland, stories of occasional miraculous events, and the idea of the return to restore the national identity are all elements which characterise the journeys of the Parsis.²⁸

Conclusions

The meaning-making of Mount Damāvand has its root in the Indo-Iranian mythology, where the volcano has been portrayed as a symbol of national identity against foreign rule. During the 19th and 20th centuries, the values and beliefs associated with this symbol have served the Iranian nationalism in the process of *othering* the ruling power. By conferring meaning associated with pre-Islamic past, the volcano acquired the semiotic functions of re-appropriation of national identity and political activism. In the same way, Mount Damāvand offered inspiration to Iranians in the diaspora and to the Zoroastrians in India. In fact, the narrative of the return to the motherland was common to these communities. In particular, for the Parsis, this narrative involved mystical travels which enabled spiritually advanced individuals to recover the lost knowledge. In colonial India, the episteme became the weapon to defend the borders of the foundational constituent of Parsi identity: the Zoroastrian religion.

Mount Damāvand as a symbol represents the primordial struggle between Good and Evil in a twofold fashion characterised by a fixed and a mutable aspect. On the one hand, the immutable side of this symbol is the representation of the Good or the authentic *self*. On the other hand, the mutable side corresponds with the Evil or the *other*. In effect, this adaptable side has offered the opportunity to adjust the semiotic functions of Mount Damāvand to the different forms of Evil or *others* at any given time: *Afrāsiyāb*, Islam, Reza Šāh Pahlavī and the colonial West, among others.

The versatile semiotic values of Mount Damāvand have helped to form the vision of an aspirational reality which can replace the turmoil of one's current situation. The means of transmission of this symbol evolved to include the tangible material objects, such as posters and framed pictures, in addition to the allegory of myths and oral traditions. In a similar fashion, the aspirational reality embedded in the myths and depicted by the stories of the mystical travels has progressively materialised, as Zoroastrians physically journey to the mountain.

Mount Damāvand is an example of how symbols are resources which individuals, across the millennia, can draw upon to further their inspiration and ultimately lead to action. The meanings are transferred into the material world where rituals and spiritual experiences enable the *self* to overcome the *other*, as *Ōraetaona* did with *Aži Dahāka*.

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1. For further information see the Global Volcanism Program of the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History <https://volcano.si.edu/volcano.cfm?vn=232010> (accessed: June 24, 2020).
2. See <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5278/> (accessed: June 24, 2020).
3. Tafāzžolī and Hourcade 1993. pp. 627-631.
4. The Avestan term *yazata* 'worthy of being worshipped' proceeds from the verbal

- root *yaz* 'to worship' and refers to Zoroastrian divine entities.
5. Dabash 2019. pp. 123-124; Ferdowsi 2016. p. 63.
 6. It can be found in Yasna 9, Yašts 5 and 19, and Vīdēvdād 1.
 7. It can be found in the *Greater Bundahišn*, the *Dādestān ī Mēnōg ī Xrad*, the *Dēnkard*, and the *Jāmāsp Nāmag*.
 8. The occurrence of *daēuuīm drujŸm* is problematic and is interpreted in different ways by scholars of Avestan. I am translating *daēuuīm* as acc. sg. f. of the adjective *daēuuī-* 'demonic' qualifying the feminine noun *druj-* 'Deceit'.
 9. Turan is a historic geographical region in Central Asia.
 10. Katouzian 2009. p. 21.
 11. Tafazzolī and Hanaway 1986. pp. 266-267.
 12. Alavi 2013. p. xiii.
 13. Bahar 1984. pp. 356-358.
 14. Alavi 2013. pp. 23-24, 141-142.
 15. After the Islamic conquest which marked the end of the Sasanian Empire, Zoroastrians were persecuted. Between the 8th and 10th centuries, groups of Zoroastrians fled to the north-west of India, where they established and flourished. According to the census conducted in 2011, the Parsi community is composed by 57,264 individuals and is considered the largest Zoroastrian community in the world. <http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/C-series/C-05/DDW-0000C-05.xlsx> (accessed: June 20, 2020).
 16. Tavakoli-Targhi 2001. pp. 77-112.
 17. Parsis refer to them as *Ābed Sāheb* 'Devout Master,' too.
 18. For a biography of Shroff see Mama 1944, Master-Moos 1981 and Hathiram 2013.
 19. Shroff 1911. pp. 1-2.
 20. Mama 1944. pp. 13-14.
 21. Stausberg 2015. p. 187.
 22. *Jashan* ceremonies are thanksgiving, celebratory or commemorative rituals that can be performed in special occasions in public or private venues. Iranian Zoroastrians performing rituals at Mount Damāvand are commonly portrayed in local news: <http://amordad6485.blogfa.com/post/4785> (accessed: June 27, 2020); http://www.hamazoor.com/persian/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=5169 (accessed: June 27, 2020).
 23. Abe 2012. pp. 270-273.
 24. This paragraph is based on data which I have collected during my fieldwork carried out between October 2019 and March 2020.
 25. This term is of Persian origin and means 'mountain.'
 26. Smith 1987. pp. 86-87.
 27. Coleman and Eade 2004. pp. 1-25.
 28. Dadrawala 1997; Reader 1993. pp. 220-246.

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