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## **Food, Purity and Pollution: Zoroastrian Views on the Eating Habits of Others**

*This article discusses the use of food as a mode of differentiation and identification according to Zoroastrian Middle Persian and Persian texts of the late antique period. In these texts, the list of foods consumed by Arabs and Indians are juxtaposed with that of the Iranian diet, and each group is given anthropological treatment. The article contends that the Zoroastrian dietary law, based on the Middle Persian texts, provides a mode of purity and impurity vis-à-vis others. Finally, the article touches upon the idea of moderation and the consumption of wine as dealt with in some Middle Persian sources.*

Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are.  
Brillat-Savarin<sup>1</sup>

Different societies have different codes and laws and dietary restrictions with regard to food consumption. These codes and laws reflect a set of values which usually distinguishes one civilization from another. These codes, rules, and laws which provide a collective mentality are slow to change,<sup>2</sup> even when there is the adoption of a new set of religious laws as in the case of the Iranian civilization in the medieval period. Iranian civilization before the Islamic conquest received its dietary laws mainly from the Zoroastrian religion. Zoroastrian law was not really concerned

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<sup>1</sup>Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *Physiologie du Gout, ou Meditations de Gastronomie Transcendante* (Paris, 1826), 1.

<sup>2</sup>Fernand Braudel, *Grammaire des civilisations*, 22nd ed. (Paris, 2008), 2; M. Aymard, "Toward the History of Nutrition: Some Methodological Remarks," in *Food and Drink in History: Selections from the Annales, économies, société, civilisations*, vol. 5, ed. Robert Forster and Orest Ranum, trans. Elborg Forster and Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore, 1979), 2.

with the nutritional value of the foods it sanctioned for consumption, but rather it divided foods into those belonging to the beneficent world (the realm of Ohrmazd) and those belonging to the world of the adversary (the realm of Ahreman). Thus, those who ate foods produced in the latter realm, or contaminated by it, were sinful and impure. Societies that did not abide by these Zoroastrian laws were seen as outsiders, and their partaking of foods prohibited by the Zoroastrian tradition made them impure. Zoroastrian Middle Persian legal texts composed in the ninth and tenth centuries CE are very much concerned with such issues of purity and contact with Muslims, Jews, and Christian. For example in the *Rivāyat ī Ēmēd ī Ašwahištān* there are issues with whether a Zoroastrian could visit a Muslim bathhouse,<sup>3</sup> or in the *Rivāyat ī Āturfarnbag ud Farnbag-Srōš* if a Zoroastrian could buy meat from a Jewish or Muslim butcher:

*pursišn: nān ud gōšt ud abarīg-iz xwarišn ī sāxtag ī az wāzār ī jud-dēnān xriđ dāde-stān cē?*

*passox: xwarišn ī sāxtag ī jud-dēnān sāzēnd hixromandihā padiš be awizīrišnīh āyāb pad a-poxdagih ī sāxtand nē pādixšāy xwardan.*

Question: “What is the judgment in regard to buying bread and meat and other prepared foods from the market of other religions?”

Answer: “(If) food preparation is done by those of other religions due to having excrement on it or preparing it uncooked, it is unauthorized to eat.”<sup>4</sup>

Much like the Kashrut law in the Jewish tradition, the Zoroastrian tradition attempted to keep the community separated when it came to food preparation and consumption.<sup>5</sup> In fact food is thought to be a powerful symbol of identity and intimately intertwined with ideological realities.<sup>6</sup> This essay examines diet as a Zoroastrian Persian mode of identification and differentiation in the medieval period. This in turn provides a clearer view of one way Zoroastrian Iranians distinguished themselves from others, through comparative diet.

In certain instances we find food used as a mode of identification. We have the following famous example for Perso-Arab dietary relations in the seventh century CE. When the Prophet Muhammad conquered the city of Mecca he was told about “Persian cheese,” and was asked whether it was acceptable food. His answer demon-

<sup>3</sup>*Rivāyat-ī Hēmīt-ī Ašwahištān* 19. See Nezhat Safa-Isfahani, ed. and trans., *Rivāyat-ī Hēmīt-ī Ašwahištān: A Study in Zoroastrian Law* (Cambridge, MA, 1980), 141–8.

<sup>4</sup>*Rivāyat ī Āturfarnbag ud Farnbag-Srōš* 25.3. See Behramgore T. Anklesaria, ed. and trans., *The Pahlavi Rivāyat of Āturfarnbag and Farnbag-Srōš* (Bombay, 1969), 137–8.

<sup>5</sup>Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, 2002), 41–2. In relation to food and cooked and uncooked food one must mention Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman, 9th ed. (Chicago, 1983), 140–43, 160.

<sup>6</sup>Katheryn C. Twiss, “We Are What We Eat,” *The Archaeology of Food and Identity*, ed. Katheryn C. Twiss (Carbondale, IL, 2007), 2.

stated that the Arabs were much more at ease with foods produced by “others.” It is said that he replied: “Take a knife to it, invoke the name of God, and eat.”<sup>7</sup> This easy acceptance would not have been the case for Zoroastrian Iranians, and this essay attempts to describe and explain the use of food as a mode of identification, particularly by the Iranians against Arab Muslims.

Those familiar with the Persian epic literature, specifically the *Shāhnāmah* (Book of Kings) of Ferdowsī composed in the eleventh century, know that it contains the history of ancient Iran from the mythical past down to the Arab Muslim conquest in the seventh century CE. The text contains an encyclopedia of ancient Persian norms, etiquette, and social life. Consequently in the medieval period it was recited to the public by the *Shāhnāmah khān* (*Shāhnāmah* reciters) not only for enjoyment but also to teach the habits of their ancestors. This tradition has lived on to the modern period, where it is a source of entertainment in the tea houses and restaurants.

The beginning and especially the end of the great Persian epic is known and studied among the populace. As mentioned, the end of the epic contains the fall of the Sasanian Empire at the hand of the Muslims. Before the great battle between the Iranians and the Arab Muslims at Qadasiya in the seventh century CE, the epic states that a letter was written by the Persian general Rustam ī Farrozzādān to Sa’d b. Vaqqās, his adversary, who was attempting to invade Iran. At the end of the letter there is a statement by the Persian general, still recited today and known by heart by many nationalist Iranians, which is central to this study:

ز شیر شتر خوردن و سوسمار عرب را به جایی رسیدست کار  
که ملک عجمشان کند آرزو نفو باد بر چرخ گردان، نفو

From a diet of camel’s milk and lizards the Arabs have come so far as to aspire to the Persian realm, shame on the revolving universe, oh shame.<sup>8</sup>

It has now been shown definitively that this part of the epic was inserted by copyists later in the medieval period, and thus it was neither in the Sasanian royal chronicle *Xwadāy-nāmag* nor in the work of the composer of the epic, Ferdowsī.<sup>9</sup> The same type of anti-Arab verbiage is found in other parts of the *Shāhnāmah* which until recently were thought to have been written by Ferdowsī, where the Arabs are

<sup>7</sup>M. Cook, “Magian Cheese: An Archaic Problem in Islamic Law,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 47, no. 3 (1984): 449.

<sup>8</sup>See Abū al-Qāsim Firdawsī, *Shāhnāmah*, ed. Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh, 8 vols. (New York, 1987–2009), 8: 423. Another variant of these lines tells the Arabs “to aspire to the royal throne, is there no shame in your eyes?” (Abū al-Qāsim Firdawsī, *The Epic of the Kings: Shāh-nāma, the National Epic of Persia*, trans. Reuben Levy [London, 1966], 415).

<sup>9</sup>M. Omidsalar, “Darbare-ye ze shir-e shotor khordan o susmār,” *Iranshenasi*, 13, no. 3, (1383/2004): 774.

accused of eating snakes and lizards.<sup>10</sup> A.-F. Khatibi has now shown convincingly that they are also further insertions by copyists in this text.<sup>11</sup> It is not so important whether Ferdowsi composed these lines as that in the early Islamic period there are references to Arab dietary habits as such by Persians. In fact, later medieval authors did not miss a chance to preview the nomadic Arab diet as opposed to the Persian diet. In *Tārīkh-i Bal'amī* we also come across the issue of the Arab diet as a sign of lowliness, this time placed in the mouth of the last Sasanian king Yazdgerd III (632–51 CE). Our Arab commander, Sa'd ibn abi Vaqqās, sends a letter with eleven elite Arab men to the court of the Persian king to ask him to become Muslim or fight to the death. Yazdgerd responds to this threat in this manner:

یزدگرد گفت این چندین خلق را که اندر جهان اند بدیدم از ترک و دیلم و سقلاب و  
هند و سند و هر چه اندر جهان خلق است، بدبخت تر از شما نیست  
که شما همه موش خورید و مار، و از بیچارگی جامه شما پشم شتر  
... و دب

Yazdgerd said: "These people whom I have seen in the world, among the Turk, Daylamite and Slavs and Indian and Sind and whomever persons living in the world, a more downtrodden people does not exist, because all of you eat are mice and snake because of destitute, your clothes are from the wool of camel ..."<sup>12</sup>

Four centuries later the famous Persian traveler, Naser-e Khusro in his travels from Ta'if to Mecca, gives us a personal narrative in regard to the Arab diet:

چون همراهان ما سوسماری می دیدند، می کشتند و می خوردند و هر کجا عرب  
بود شیر شتر می نوشیدند. من نه سوسمار توانستم خوردن نه شیر شتر

When our companions (Arabs) saw a lizard they would kill and eat it and wherever there was an Arab, they would milk camels. I neither can eat lizard, nor camel's milk.<sup>13</sup>

In fact one finds in other Persian sources a constant contrast between the Persian and Arab diet, either as a polemic or as a simple report on the living conditions of the two people. One such report is Asadī Tūsi's statement that the Persian diet is chicken, lamb, and stew and that of the Arab snake, locust, mice, and lizard.<sup>14</sup>

The diet of the Arab nomad is mentioned by medieval Persian poets and writers and was used later in the late Qajar period as part of the nationalistic propaganda against the Arabs until well into the twentieth century. The scholars and literati of

<sup>10</sup>Firdawsī, *Shāhnāmah*, 8: 292–4.

<sup>11</sup>See A.-F. Khatibi, "Beythā-ye Arab-setīzi dar *Shahnameh*," *Darbāre-ye Shahnameh* (Tehran, 1385/2006), 96–110.

<sup>12</sup>See Abū 'Alī Muhammad Bal'amī, *Tārīkh-nāme-ye Tabarī*, ed. Mohammad Roshan, 4 vols. (Tehran, 1380/2001), 3: 445.

<sup>13</sup>See Naser-e Khusro, *Safar-nāme-ye Naser-e Khusro*, ed. M. Dabīr-Sīyāghī (Tehran, 1356/1977), 143.

<sup>14</sup>For all these references see Khatibi, "Beythā-ye Arab-setīzi," 104–5.

the Qajar and then the Pahlavi era made “Arab” and “locust-eating” synonymous and impressed this on the minds of the people,<sup>15</sup> composing such proverbs as: “The Arab of the desert eats locusts, while the dogs of Isfahan drink ice-cold water.”<sup>16</sup>

The *Shāhnāme* passage mentioned at the beginning of the article is, however, instructive in another manner as well, with regard to modes of identification based on diet which allowed the Persians to set themselves socially apart from the Arabs. Thus, in his letter, the general Rustam is attempting to demean the Arab Muslims by pointing out that their meager diet indicates their unworthiness to make any claim on the Persian throne. On another level, this statement may indicate an earlier knowledge of the diet of the Arab nomads, and of nomadic practices in the Arabian Peninsula, probably because Arabs had served in the Persian army during the Sasanian period in late antiquity. Still, the passage more probably is a later interpolation faithfully inserted in the *Shāhnāme* of Ferdowsī, as a “nationalist” *dehgān* (landed gentry) clinging to the ancient Iranian customs.<sup>17</sup>

Of course there were variations in diet even among the nomadic Arabs depending on where they were living. A sophisticated Arab city-dweller’s dietary intake was a combination of Arab, Roman, Mesopotamian, and Persian foods. Those who were poorer and who lived in the harsher environment of the desert ate what they could find.<sup>18</sup> It is the diet of these people that Rustam describes and assigns as the diet of the Arabs in general.

It is interesting to note in Rustam’s remarks that the Persians view the consumption of camel’s milk and lizard as a mark of low civilization and culture. Thus, here, diet becomes a means by which one civilization can distinguish itself from another and show its own cultural superiority over the other. We should remember that it is rare to see army commanders and generals referring to the dietary practices of their enemies as a means of demeaning them prior to battles. Needless to say the Arabs soundly defeated the Persians at the battle of Qadasiya and Rustam lost his life. But Persian cuisine persisted as an influential and distinguished food tradition of the Islamic world in the medieval period.

The contents of the eleventh-century *Shāhnāme* reach back to the late antique period (sixth century CE), drawing upon the Sasanian royal chronicle, the *Xwadāy-nāmag* (Book of lords).<sup>19</sup> The problem is that we have to distinguish the late

<sup>15</sup>Joya Blondel Saad, *The Image of Arabs in Modern Persian Literature* (Lanham, MD, 1996), 6.

<sup>16</sup>We do have evidence of more humble dishes from the Arabian Peninsula such as dates kneaded with locusts (Arabic *ghathīma*), see Charles Perry’s foreword to Lilia Zaouali, *Medieval Cuisine of the Islamic World: A Concise History with 174 Recipes*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Berkeley, 2007), x.

<sup>17</sup>On the doubtfulness of a battle between Rustam and Sa’d as reported in the *Shāhnāme* see Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh, “The Struggle between Rostam, the Son of Farrokzād, and Sa’d, the Son of Vaqqās (Epic and History),” *Nāme-ye Irān-e Bāstān: The International Journal of Ancient Iranian Studies*, 7 (2004): 3–8.

<sup>18</sup>B. Rosenberger, “Arab Cuisine and Its Contribution to European Cultures,” *Food: A Culinary History from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Albert Sonnenfeld, trans. Clarissa Botsford et al. (New York, 1999), 209.

<sup>19</sup>On the *Xwadāy-nāmag* see A. Shapur Shahbazi, “On the *Xwadāy-nāmag*,” *Iranica Varia: Papers in Honor of Professor Ehsan Yarshater* (Leiden, 1990), 208–29.

antique material from medieval (post-Sasanian/Islamic) material, and in order to do so we need confirmation from other sources. The main corpus of evidence and comparison is the collection of Zoroastrian religious texts, which tell us why the Arabs are seen in a negative light through their dietary practices.

For this we should look at the two dietary items that are discussed in General Rustam's letter. At face value, a lizard may be considered an animal whose meat is unsavory, certainly only fit for those who dwell in the desert. But we need to look deeper to find out the significance of this emphasis by our Persian author. Before doing so, we should look at another Zoroastrian text that defines the diet of Indians, Arabs, and the Berbers which gives further insight into the views of the Persians with regard to their neighbors.

The Zoroastrian *Jāmāsp-nāmag* (Book of Jāmāsp) is a dialogue between Zoroaster's patron King Wištāsp and his councilor Jāmāsp, who has been endowed with the knowledge of things to come.<sup>20</sup> In chapter 7, Wištāsp asks Jāmāsp about the customs of the Indians, the Chinese, the Arabs, and the Berbers, and in two cases the diet of two of these peoples are mentioned. This is the excerpt of the answer by Jāmāsp:

*guftāš jāmāspa pādāš ku haṇduuqā šaḥer buzarakī hašt. sarda hast garm hast tar hašta xuška hašt. kār darxta hasta ku dašt saxta hašt. vahāza hašta ku šaṇ zevišni az baranja hašt ku aja sār i gāv hašt ke aja tuxmaēš ā x<sup>v</sup> arənt. ajašq kəš dā t rōšni vaš hašt.*

Jāmāsp the astrologer said to him: "The country of India is a great one. It is cold and hot, wet and dry. It has wood and trees because there is a great desert. They are without ambition because their living is upon rice, upon milk of cattle, which feed upon seeds. Their manners and customs are much enlightened."<sup>21</sup>

One may suggest that this positive view of the Indians as enlightened was at least partly because of their diet. The next obvious question here is, what makes the Indian diet good? Before hazarding a guess as to what part of the Indian diet is good, we should see how the sagacious Indians are juxtaposed with the Arabs and the Berbers in this text. Jāmāsp provides a longer list of Arab foods:

<sup>20</sup>The knowledge about the future in the Iranian world is gained in various ways which go back to the Indo-Iranian period, see David Stophlet Flattery and Martin Schwartz, *Haoma and Harmaline, the Botanical Identity of the Indo-Iranian Sacred Hallucinogen "Soma" and Its Legacy in Religion, Languages and Middle Eastern Folklore* (Berkeley, CA, 1989). One such drink which aids vision is the *mang i wištāsp* "Hemp of Wištāsp," which contained hashish and wine. Also see Fereyduṅ Vahman, ed. and trans., *Ardā Wirāz Nāmag: The Iranian "Divina Commedia"* (London, 1986), 193.

<sup>21</sup>Only the Pāzand text carries this part, while the Middle Persian and Persian texts omit the chapter. See Jivanji Jamshedji Modi, ed. and trans., *Jāmāspi: Pablavi, Pāzend and Persian Texts ...* (Bombay, 1903), 76 (text), 120 (translation), and more recently, G. Messina, ed. and trans. *Libro apocalittico persiano: Ayātkār i Žāmāspik* (Rome, 1939), 51 (text), 101 (translation).



*tāzīgāni u barbargāni šāber garm u x' uška. vahāzān nāšt bar āv du t, ajišq x' arašni šir x' araštār mūš u mār u gurbā rōvāš u kaftār āvāni aš īnašni qzdīš.*

The countries of Arabia and Barbaristan are hot and dry. They are not without ambition. Their food is fruit, water, worms and tigers, noxious creatures (*xrafstars*), mice, snake and cat, fox and hyena and other such (animals).<sup>22</sup>

By comparing these two passages we find that the wise Indians consume rice and milk, while the Arabs and the Berber eat a series of very different foods such as fruits, worms, tigers, mice, snake, cat, fox, and hyena. In order to understand the reason why the Indians are “wise” (good) while the Arabs and Berbers are portrayed in a negative light, we need to look at the Zoroastrian dietary laws.

In Zoroastrianism, people and animals are classified into two major divisions: those belonging to Ohrmazd and those belonging to Ahreman. Ohrmazd is the beneficent creator from whom all good things come and, who by his very nature cannot create evil. On the other hand, Ahreman is the evil spirit who by his very nature cannot do anything but mis-create and destroy what Ohrmazd creates. Thus, the group of animals belonging to Ohrmazd is beneficent and the group belonging Ahreman is the opposite.<sup>23</sup> From the list of Ohrmazdian animals, those that may be eaten are detailed in the Zoroastrian texts, and a parallel list of Ahremanian creatures which should not be eaten is given. Among the list of Ahremanian *xrafstar* (noxious creatures) are the following: several kinds of *kirm* (worm), *karbunag* (lizard), *mōr* (ant), *magas* (fly), *mayg* (locust), *paxšag* (gnat), *kayk* (flea), *parragīg* (winged creature), and *wazay* (frog).<sup>24</sup> According to Zoroastrian law the eating of creeping animals such as worms and snakes is prohibited, as is eating tiger, mice, cat, fox, and hyena.<sup>25</sup> This list matches closely what Jāmāsp supplies as the dietary regimen of the Arabs and Berbers.

We can see that all the animals mentioned in the “Book of Jāmāsp” as being eaten by Arabs and Berbers belong to the Ahremanian realm and thus their consumption is forbidden. It is in this connection that the term *xrafstar* in the “Book of Jāmāsp” becomes clear. *Xrafstar* refers to noxious creatures whose consumption, according to the Zoroastrian law, is forbidden, but there is another connection that needs to be made between the consumption of *xrafstars* and Arabs. According to another Zoroastrian text (*Bundahišn* 4.15), Ahreman in his assault on the good creation polluted the earth by mis-creating the following *xrafstars* on earth: the snake, scorpion, frog, ant locust, fly, and mouse. This list obviously includes a number of the animals which are

<sup>22</sup>See Modi, *Jāmāspi*, 7 (text), 120 (translation); Messina, *Libro apocalittico*, 52 (text), 102 (translation).

<sup>23</sup>Hans-Peter Schmidt, “Ancient Iranian Animal Classification,” *Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik*, nos. 5–6 (1980): 209. See also M. Moazami, “Donyā-ye heyvānāt dar Irān-e bāstān,” *Iran Nameh*, no. 22 (1378/1999): 253–60.

<sup>24</sup>Schmidt, “Ancient Iranian Animal Classification,” 228–9; Philippe Gignoux, “Dietary Laws in Pre-Islamic and Post-Sasanian Iran,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 17 (1994): 23.

<sup>25</sup>Gignoux, “Dietary Laws,” 29.

part of the Arab diet as alleged in our texts. If we consider the *Annales* school and its idea that the food which man eats becomes assimilated into his being and thus becomes himself,<sup>26</sup> we can see that by eating *xrafstars*, the Arabs have become impure, because they have filled themselves with noxious animals.<sup>27</sup>

In the Zoroastrian tradition it is considered a good deed to kill *xrafstars* and Zoroastrian priests sometimes carry a cane called *xrafstarzan* (*xrafstar*-striker) which is used for this purpose. Herodotus, already in the fifth century BCE, mentions that the Magi (Zoroastrian priests) have such a habit:

οἱ δὲ δὴ Μάγοι αὐτοχειρὶ ἅπαντα πλὴν κυνὸς καὶ ἀνθρώπου κτείνουσι, καὶ ἀγώνισμα μέγα τοῦτο ποιεῦνται, κτείνοντες ὁμοίως μύρμηκας τε καὶ ὄφεις καὶ τὰλλα ἐρπετὰ καὶ πετεινά.

but the Magi not only kill anything, except dogs and men, with their own hands but make a special point of doing so; ants, snakes, crawling animals, birds—no matter what, they kill them indiscriminately.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, it is no wonder that not only the *Shāhnāme*, but also the Zoroastrian texts which predate the Persian epic, consider the Arabs as enemies since they have a bad diet. Besides the political realities, where the Arab incursions in the Iranian realm are seen as “ambitious,” one can cite the famous adage, “you are what you eat,” with respect to the Iranian view of Arabs in the medieval period.

We should also note that the majority of the animals identified as noxious creatures are found associated with the nomadic/pastoral setting. Here we see the juxtaposition of the nomadic diet (Arab) with the urban diet (Iranian). Leaving the dietary prohibitions aside, a Persian would not have consumed such *xrafstars*, since they were not readily available in the cities where the diet of bread, spiced meat, and wine was favored.<sup>29</sup> All three items are marks of relative sophistication, and the effort needed to make each of these foods or drinks is associated with city living.

<sup>26</sup>J. Soler, “The Semiotics of Food in the Bible,” in Forster and Ranum, *Food and Drink in History*, 126.

<sup>27</sup>It is interesting that the *Shāhnāme* villain Zahhāk is considered to be Arab and at the moment that the Persian hero Ferydūn is to strike him with his mace, the angels instruct him not to do so. The Zoroastrian texts state that by killing him, noxious creatures will creep out of his body and pollute the earth. Consequently he is chained and bound at Mt. Damāvand till resurrection, see Touraj Daryae, “Kāve the Black-Smith: An Indo-Iranian Fashioner?,” *Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik*, 22 (2001): 9–21.

<sup>28</sup>Herodotus, *The Histories*, 1.140. See Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Aubrey de Séincourt (New York, 1996). For older translation with Greek text, see Herodotus, *The History of Herodotus*, trans. George Rawlinson, ed. Manuel Komroff (New York, 1944), 54. For the Greek text see Perseus at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0125%3Abook%3D1%3Achapter%3D140%3Asection%3D3> (accessed June 26, 2011). Of course by πετεινά it should mean a fly or such creature (Middle Persian *magas*).

<sup>29</sup>From the papyrus evidence from the Persian occupation of Egypt between 619 and 628/29 CE, *nān* (bread), *gōšt* (meat), and *may* (wine) are the three most common foods mentioned by the Persians, see Dieter Weber, ed., *Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum*, Pt. 3, *Pahlavi Inscriptions: Texts 1. Ostraca, Papyri und Pergamente. Textband 1* (London, 1992).



As opposed to the Arabs and the Berbers, the Indians, who eat rice rather than noxious creatures, reflect a positive sedentary/agricultural lifestyle. Furthermore, drinking milk is considered beneficial in the Zoroastrian tradition. This is clearly demonstrated in a Middle Persian text, the *Dādestān ī Mēnōg ī Xrad* (Teachings of the Spirit of Wisdom), where it is stated that:

*pursīd dānāg ō mēnōg ī xrad kū: az xwarišn ī mardōmān xwarēnd ud watarag ī mardōmān paymōzēnd kadām arzōmandtar ud weh? mēnōg ī xrad passox kard kū: az xwarišn ī mardōmān xwarēnd šīr ī gōspandān weh dād ēstēd cē mardōm ud cahārpāy kē az mādar be zāyēnd tā ān ī ka-šān xwarišn tuwān xwardan ēg-išān rōyišn ud parwarišn az šīr ud pad šīr weh šāyēnd ziwīstan ud agar mardōm ka az šīr ī mādar abāz kunēnd, be ō šīr ī gōspandān hammōzišn kunēnd ēg-išān nān pad kār andar nē abāyēd cē paydāg kū mardōm ī pad arzah ud sawah ud fradadafš ud widadafš ud wōrūbaršt ud wōrūjaršt hēnd xwarišn pēm ī gōspandān ud gāwān any xwarišn nē xwarēnd ud ōy ī pēm-xwarišn mardōm tan-drusttar ud zōrōmandtar ud zāyišn-iz ī frazandān abē-wizēndtar bawēd.*

The sage asked the Spirit of Wisdom that: “From among the foods that people eat and the clothes they wear which is worthier and good?” The Spirit of Wisdom answered that: “Among the foods that people eat, the milk of sheep is created better since people and quadrupeds who are born from (their) mother, till that time when they have the ability to eat food, then their growth and nourishment is from milk and through milk they will be able to live and if people who wean away from (their) mother’s milk (and) learn to go to sheep’s milk, then for them bread will not be of consequence, because it is manifest that: People who are in clime of Arzah and Sawah and Fradadafš and Widadafš and Wōrūbaršt and Wōrūjaršt, consume the milk of sheep and the cows; they do not consume other foods, and these people who consume milk are healthier and stronger and also the birth of their children is safer.”<sup>30</sup>

We should remind ourselves that the Middle Persian word for sheep, *gōspand*, stands generally for cattle, but especially for sheep and goats, as opposed to larger animals (Av. *gaospanta*, which really means “beneficent” or “holy cow”). We should again remind ourselves of the last line of the abovementioned passage about the benefits of milk: “people who consume milk are healthier and stronger and also the

<sup>30</sup> *Dādestān ī Mēnōg ī Xrad* 16.1–12. See Aḥmad Tafazzoli, ed. and trans., *Mīnū-ye kharad*, 2nd ed. (Tehran, 1364/1985), 31; Edward William West, ed. and trans., *The Book of the Mainyo-i-Khard or the Spirit of Wisdom ...* (Amsterdam, 1871, repr., 1979), 149. For the transcription of the *Dādestān ī Mēnōg ī Xrad* see also David Neil MacKenzie in TITUS, at <http://titus.uni-frankfurt.de/texte/etcs/iran/miran/mpers/mx/mx.htm> (accessed June 26, 2011). The most recent edition and translation of the text, to which I do not have access, is in Olga Mikhailovna Chunakova, ed. and trans., *Zoroastriyskie teksty* (Moscow, 1997), 29–121.

birth of their children is safer.” However the type of milk is also important. That from sheep and cows is beneficent, while camel’s milk is a sign of lowliness.<sup>31</sup>

One can suggest that the Iranians saw the dietary habits with which they did not agree as a sign of or a reason for lowliness of other civilizations. If we accept that there is a link between a people’s dietary habits and their perception of the world and the neighboring peoples in it,<sup>32</sup> we can see that the Iranians of the medieval period, even after converting to Islam, saw food as one of the factors that made them superior to the Arabs prior to the conquest.

The Arab diet as described by Rustam ī Farrozzād reflected all that was not accepted by the Zoroastrian tradition. The defiling of the Zoroastrian dietary laws, and the eating of foods that were not civilized, made the Arabs unworthy of their aspirations to conquer the Sasanian Empire. This was, of course, the Persian view. The Arabs believed that they had a mandate from God to spread their newly founded religion and, as a hardy group of fighters, on the backs of the very same camels whose milk they drank, were able to put an end to the Sasanian Empire.

We can end by discussing the other clash between the Iranians and the Arabs in the ninth century, one which has to do with Iranians’ eating customs and the Shu‘ūbiyya movement. In the early Islamic period, many of the works which existed in Middle Persian were translated into Arabic, giving Muslims access to a plethora of wisdom literature and practical manuals. In the Arabic sources there are a few references to *bayt al-ḥikma* (house of wisdom, i.e. library) which, according to Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī, was the Sasanian term for library,<sup>33</sup> which may be rendered in Middle Persian as (*h*) *andarz-xānag*. During the Abbāsīd period this library is mentioned as being a place where some of its employees worked to translate works from Middle Persian into Arabic. During the reign of Ma’mūn the director of this library was a Persian by the name of Sahl ibn-Hārūn who was knowledgeable regarding Middle Persian and who was part of the Shu‘ūbiyya movement.

The Shu‘ūbiyya movement was essentially a power struggle between Iranian and Arab scholars and secretaries who challenged each other and who used arguments of superior genealogy and race in their conflict. The members of the Shu‘ūbiyya also made use of Zoroastrian Middle Persian books called *Ā’yīn-nāmes* < Middle Persian *Ēwēn-nāmag*, which can be translated as “Book of manners,” as tools for their cause. These books related that every action has a certain rule which one must follow or a manner in which one must proceed.

The best example dealing with food and diet is by the Persian poet Baššār ibn Burd (d. 783) who wrote (in Arabic):

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<sup>31</sup>The camel itself is a beneficent animal, but it appears that the drinking of its milk is a symbol of nomadic living.

<sup>32</sup>Soler, “The Semiotics of Food,” 126.

<sup>33</sup>D. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture, The Graeco-Arabic Movement in Baghdad and Early ‘Abbāsīd Society (2nd–4th/8th–10th Centuries)* (New York, 1998), 54.

Never did he (Persian) sing  
camel songs behind a scabby beast,  
nor pierce the bitter colocynth out of sheer hunger ...,  
nor dig a lizard out of the ground to eat ...<sup>34</sup>

Even in the cosmopolitan world of Baghdad, food was still a mode of distinction among Iranians and Arabs. While Persian food and manners of banqueting were adopted by the Caliphs,<sup>35</sup> the Persians did not let the Arabs forget their past eating habits. In a sense, after fourteen centuries dietary preferences still carry moral significance in the Near East where all claim their own foods as good, and assign bad ones to others.

### *Wine in Zoroastrianism and the Iranian World: Moderation and Differentiation*

In Middle Persian and Persian Zoroastrian texts and documents we encounter a large amount of information about wine and wine consumption. These texts belong to both pre-Islamic and post-Islamic periods and so the Islamic prohibition of wine consumption, it seems, was not diligently followed. While there are references and evidence of wine drinking and its importance in the historical period, from the Achaemenid period (Greek sources and material culture), through the Arsacid times (Nisa documents) to the Sasanians,<sup>36</sup> the Sasanians provide the most evidence. From daily consumption to kingly feasts to artistic representations, feasting and wine became established in the Sasanian period. The didactic texts in Middle Persian and Persian all suggest that while drinking wine is good for humans, drinking moderately is the key.<sup>37</sup> In fact those who drink immoderately are non-Zoroastrians and this is a mode of differentiation in these texts between other religious communities and the Zoroastrians in late antique Iran. Thus, Christians and Jews may drink immoderately, but Zoroastrians drink moderately and the Muslims do not drink at all! Then wine drinking also becomes a tool for judging others and a mode of differentiation in the Zoroastrian tradition.

In the Sasanian and post-Sasanian art and literature the theme of feasting with wine is abundantly documented.<sup>38</sup> A Middle Persian text from the Sasanian period entitled *Husraw ī Kawādān ud Rēdag-ē* (Husraw son of Kawād and a page) mentions the best foods and drinks that are fit for a king. This text is really a royal menu which is rarely

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<sup>34</sup>Roger Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature* (Cambridge, 2000), 37.

<sup>35</sup>Charles Perry's foreword to Zaouali, *Medieval Cuisine of the Islamic World*, ix.

<sup>36</sup>Igor Mikhailovic Diakonoff and Vladimir Andronovich Livshits, *Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum*, Pt. 2, *Inscriptions of the Seleucid and Parthian Periods and of Eastern Iran and Central Asia*, vol. 2, *Parthian Economic Documents from Nisa*, ed. David Neil MacKenzie, Andrei N. Bader and Nicholas Sims-Williams (London, 1977–2001).

<sup>37</sup>For a collection of these sources on wine see, Bahmanji Nusservanji Dhabhar, "Use of Wine in Zoroastrian Rituals," Bahmanji Nusservanji Dhabhar, *Essays on Iranian Subjects* (Bombay, 1955), 181–98.

<sup>38</sup>A.S. Melikian-Chirvani, "The Iranian *bazm* in Early Persian Sources," *Banquets d'Orient*, ed. Rika Gyselen (Bures-sur-Yvette, 1992), 95–102.

noticed by food historians. The text was composed at the court of the King of Kings, Khusro I, in the sixth century CE. By this time the various kinds of wines were distinguished, by their color and filtering technique. In this passage from the text the king asks what are the best wines and the page answers:

*(haštōm framāyēd) pūrsīd kū: may-ē kadām weh ud xwaštar? gōwēd rēdag kū: anōšag bauwēd! ēn and may hamāg nēk ud xwaš may kanīg ka nēk wirāyēnd ud may ī harīwag ud may ī marw-rōdīg ud may ī bustīg bādag ī halwānīg bē hamwār abāg may ī asūrīg, bādag ī wāzrangīg ēc may pahikār nēst. šāhān-šāh passandīd ud u-š pad rāst dāšt.*

(Eighth) he (king Khusro) asked that: “Of wines which is good and more pleasant?” The page said: “May you be immortal! These wines are all good and pleasant: clarified wine that is prepared well, and the wine of the Herat and the wine of Marwrud and the wine of Bust, the wine of Hulwan, but with the wine of Assyria, (and) the wine of Bazrang, no wine can compete.” The king of kings approved and held it to be true.<sup>39</sup>

Also based on the papyri, parchment and leather Middle Persian documents we know that there were various kinds of wines, including *may ī spēd* (white wine) and *may ī suxr* (red wine). These wines, of course, could have different qualities, such as *may ī wirāstag* (clarified wine) or *bādag ī ābgēn* (crystal wine), which were served in a *dōlag* or *tong*.<sup>40</sup> For information on the daily usage and consumption of wine we can look at the following short papyrus, as part of a letter written between Persian officers in the seventh century CE which mentions part of rations in the following manner:

YWM ʾštʾt HS y spyt 3 lkynkʾ  
 HS y gwahr 18 lkynkʾ gwspand 1  
 ...  
*rōz ī aštād may ī spēd 3 lagēnag*  
*may ī gohr 18 lagēnag gōspand 1 ...*

Day of Aštād, 3 containers of white wine  
 18 containers of stock wine, 1 sheep ...<sup>41</sup>

But the theological and detailed information on how and why one drinks wine is supplied in the Middle Persian Zoroastrian texts. One of the most detailed treatments of this issue is found in the *Dādestān ī Mēnōg ī Xrad* which dates from the late Sasa-

<sup>39</sup>*Husraw ī Kawādān ud Rēdag-ē* 55–9. See TITUS at <http://titus.uni-frankfurt.de/texte/etcs/iran/miran/mpers/jamasp/jamas.htm> (accessed June 26, 2011).

<sup>40</sup>Philippe Gignoux, “Matériaux pour une histoire du vin dans l’Iran ancien,” *Matériaux pour l’histoire économique du monde iranien*, ed. Rika Gyselen and Maria Szuppe (Paris, 1999), 43.

<sup>41</sup>See Weber, *Ostraca, Papyri und Pergamente*, 55 (Papyrus 8809).

nian period. Here a discussion about the benefits of wine consumption provides us with the Iranian and Zoroastrian view on what wine is and does to humans:

*may rāy paydāg kū gōhr ī nek ud wad pad may ō paydāgīh šāyēd madan ud wehīh ī mard andar xešm ud xrad ī mard andar abārōnīh-hangēz waran cē kē xešm awištābēd u-š xwēš tan wirāstan tuwān pad wehīh ud kē waran awištābēd u-š xwēš tan wirāstan tuwān pad xrad ud kē may awištābēd u-š xwēš tan wirāstan tuwān pad gōhr wizōstan nē abāyēd. cē ōy ī nek-gōhr mard ka may xwarēd ēdōn homānāg ciyōn jāmag-ēw ī zarrēn ud asēmēn ī and cand wēš abrozēnd pāktar ud rōšntar bawēd ud menišn ud gōwišn ud kunišn frārōntar dārēd ud andar zan ud frazand ud hamablān ud dōstān carbtar ud širēntar bawēd ud pad harw kār ud kirbag tux-šāgtar bawēd.*

*ud ōy ī wad-gōhr mard ka may xwarēd xwēš tan az paymān frēh menēd ud dārēd ud abāg hamablān nibard barēd ud cērīh nimāyēd ud afsōs ud riyahrīh kunēd ud weh mardōm tar kunēd ud zan ud frazand ud mizdwar ud bandag ud paristār ī xwēš bēšēd ud xwaran ī wehān wišōbēd ud āštīh be barēd ud anāštīh andar āwarēd.*

*bē harw kas pad paymān xwardan ī may ōšyār abāyēd būd cē az paymān xwardan ī may ēn and nekīh awiš rasēd cē xwarišn gugārēd ud ātaxš abrozēd ud ōš ud wīr ud tōm ud xōn abzāyēd ud bēš spōzēd ud gōnag abrozēd ud tis ī framušť ayād kunēd ud wehīh pad menišn gāh girēd ud wēnišn ī cašm ud ašnawišn ī gōš ud guftārīh ī uzwān abzāyēd ud kār ī kardan ud rāyēnīdan abāyēd rawāgtar bawēd ud pad bālēn-gāh xwaš xufsēd ud sabuk āxēzēd u-š ān bahrag rāy husrawīh ō tan ud ahlāyīh ō ruwān ud passand-iz ī wehān abar rasēd.*

*ud kē may frēh az paymān xwarēd ēn and āhōg padiš paydāg bawēd cē-š xrad ud ōš ud wīr ud tōm ud xōn kāhēd ud jagar wināhēd ud wēmārīh handōzēd ud gōnag wardēnēd ud zōr ud pattūgīh kāhēd ud namāz ud stāyišn ī yazadān framušť bawēd ud wēnišn ī cašm ud ašnawišn ī gōš ud guftārīh ī uzwān kem bawēd ud hordād ud amurdād bēšēd ud būšāsp-kāmagīh warzēd u-š ān ī guftan ud kardan abāyēd akard mānēd ud pad dušwārīh xufsēd ud axwašīhā āxēzēd ud ān bahrag rāy xwēš tan ud zan ud frazand ud dōst ud xwēšāwand bēšēd ud dušrām ud must-abarmānd ud dušmen šād ud yazadān aziš nē hušnūd u-š dusrawīh ō tan ud druwandīh-iz ō ruwān rasēd.*

About wine it is manifest that one's good and bad nature may become visible, and the goodness of man during anger and the wisdom of man during aroused sinful lust, because whoever oppresses anger he can restore his body to goodness and who is able to oppress lust, he can restore his body through wisdom and whoever that wine hastens lust and can hold himself, in his nature investigation is not necessary. Since a man of good nature who drinks wine in this manner will be like in a golden and silver garment that will be more polished, it will become purer and brighter, and his disposition and words and manners will be more honest, and he will be more gentle and sweeter towards wife and child and peers and friends, and will be more diligent in all affairs and good deeds.

And that man of bad nature when he drinks wine, his body will consider himself further from moderation and consideration and will fight with his peers and will show bravery and will mock and scorn and will cross the people and torment his own wife and child and hireling and slave and maidservant, and disturb the banquet of the beneficent ones, and will carry away peace and bring strife.

But anyone who drinks wine must be conscious to drink in moderation, since through moderate drinking of wine this much goodness will come to him, because food will be digested and kindle fire (of the body), and increase intelligence and the mind and seed and blood, and reject torment and kindle the complexion, and this that is forgotten will be remembered and goodness will take place in thought and it will increase the sight of the eye and hearing of the ears and speech of the tongue, and doing work and managing will proceed faster, and in bed (he) will sleep nicely and wake up easy, and because of that account he will receive good repute of the body and the righteousness of the soul and will be liked by the beneficent ones.

And whoever drinks wine in more than moderation, this many fault will be manifest by him, for his wisdom and intelligence and memory and seed and blood decreases, and damages the liver and amasses illness and alter the complexion and decrease strength and endurance and (he) will forget prayer and praise of the gods and the eyesight and hearing of the ears and speech of the tongue will decrease, and Hordad (Perfection) and Amurdad (Immortality) will be harmed, the desire for sleep will become strong and his words and deeds will be left undone and he will sleep with difficulty and wake up unpleasantly and will harm and (make) unhappy on that account himself, and wife and child and friend and family and make happy the aggressor and enemy, and the gods will not be happy from him, and his body will become dishonored and his soul unrighteous.<sup>42</sup>

Needless to say that with the coming of Islam, wine drinking continued and is reported in various local histories, Arabic and Persian poetry, as well as in the "Mirror for princes" genre in the medieval period.<sup>43</sup> The imagery of the Zoroastrian pouring wine in the post-Sasanian Persian poetry and literature is a theme that continued,<sup>44</sup> and became part of the Islamic literature. One may surmise that the people whom the Zoroastrians call *ag-dēns* (those of Evil Religion) in the Islamic period are Muslims consuming wine, hence a different set of moral values and mores were attached to wine drinking in each community. While Muslim law prohibited wine consumption, they continued to drink, but their values and reasoning were different from those of the Zoroastrians, who opted for moderation.

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<sup>42</sup>*Dādestān ī Mēnōg ī Xrad* 16.20–64. See Tafazzoli, *Mīnū-ye kharad*, 33; West, *The Book of the Mainyo-i-Khard*, 150.

<sup>43</sup>For a collection of these sources see Ehsan Yarshater, "The Theme of Wine-Drinking and the Concept of the Beloved in Early Persian Poetry," *Studia Islamica*, 13 (1960): 433–53.

<sup>44</sup>A. S. Melikian-Chirvani, "The Wine-Bull and the Magian Master," *Recurrent Patterns in Iranian Religions: From Mazdaism to Sufism. Proceedings of the Round Table Held in Bamberg (30th September–4th October 1991)*, ed. Philippe Gignoux (Paris, 1992), 101.