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*xšnaoθrahe ahurahe mazdā*

Detail from above the entrance of Tehran's fire temple, 1286š/1917–18. Photo by © Shervin Farridnejad

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**Part I**  
**Articles**

## Take care of the *xrafstars*! A note on Nēr. 7.5

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THE *Nērangestān*, the “Collection of Ritual Directions”, is a bilingual Avestan-Pahlavi non-liturgical text. It belongs to the Iranian Zoroastrian scholarly tradition, and deals with ritual matters and problems which a fully initiated Zoroastrian priest could face while performing rituals.<sup>1</sup> The Young Avestan text of *Nērangestān* is accompanied by a Pahlavi translation, glosses and long detailed commentaries and renditions – i.e. the *Zand*.

Among other subjects<sup>2</sup>, chapter seven of the *Nērangestān* addresses the practice, well-known in Zoroastrian literature, of killing *xrafstars* as an act of merit.<sup>3</sup> The *xrafstars* (av. *xrafstra-*) “vermin, noxious creatures”<sup>4</sup> are not only described as having a demonic appearance and being harmful, but also as “dreadfully dark creations”<sup>5</sup> of Ahriman, obstructing the way of “good creation” of Ohrmazd. As a consequence, killing of *xrafstars* became a prominent and meritorious act in Zoroastrianism, which could be performed as a religious act of contrition to make amends for different sins.<sup>6</sup> The conspicuousness of the custom of killing *xrafstars* came to the point that outsiders had addressed it both in antiquity – e.g. Herodotus (Histories 1.140)<sup>7</sup> – as well as in modern times – in the travel accounts of European travellers of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> cen-

turies.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, a special instrument for killing the *xrafstars*, called *xrafstra-gan-* “*xrafstar*-killer” (Vd. 14.8; 18.2) is mentioned as part of the priestly *regalia* in Zoroastrian texts. It is so far clear that the custom of killing *xrafstars* was an important religious deed for Zoroastrians, which could also be performed in the name of the a client by Zoroastrian priests. In such cases, the priest apparently could be prepared to fulfil the commission of killing *xrafstars*, for example, as an atonement for a sinner or to sell them on demand. The paradoxical matter that arises is the question of leaving *xrafstars* alive, and feeding them, until the need for their killing would be expressed or a commission was ordered. A similar affair is the case which is behind the passage under discussion, namely Nēr. 7.5. The problematic case can be summarized as follows: Is a priest permitted/is it permissible to feed, or more specifically, to take care of *xrafstars*, which he has gathered in advance, in order to be prepared for a potential mandate or anticipated demand or for selling them? The discussed passage, Nēr. 7.5.<sup>9</sup>, reads as follows:

*mard ka abēr tuwānīg yazišn pad mizd pādixšāy kardan; harw 2-ēn kirbag ōh bawēd. pad drahm-ēw be dahēd harw 2-ēn radihā. kehīhā kirbag ōh bawēd.*

If a priest is very able, it is permissible for him to perform an act of worship for a reward; thus both parties acquire merit. If he gives it (i.e. the act of worship) for a *dirham*, both act in an authorised manner. If (he does it) for less, then there is still merit.

*ast ke ēdōn gōwēd, hād ōy ke ōh kard, ā-š pad any zamān bawēd ka-š jud az mizd tuwān hēh kardan, ā-z kunēh. mard ka abēr tuwānīg xrafstar ī grift pad wahāg frōxtan pādixšāy; harw 2-ēn 2 kirbag ōh bawēd, ōh griftan rāy*

<sup>1</sup>For the survey of the texts of *Nērangestān* and *Hērbedestān* cf. KOTWAL/KREYENBROEK 1995: 13–24, but also EMMERICK/MACUCH 65–67; GELDNER 1904; WEST 1904; BOYCE 1968: 33–38.

<sup>2</sup>For a short summary of this chapter cf. KOTWAL/KREYENBROEK 1995: 16.

<sup>3</sup>The GrBd. 22. *abar čiyōnīh ī xraftarān* is dedicated to their description, nature and the way one is supposed to deal with them; cf. ANKLESARIA 1956, 182;188; PAKZAD SORAKI 2005, 255–262.

<sup>4</sup>AirWb 538; for further bibliographical notes regarding its etymology cf. BAILEY 1970, 25ff; MOAZAMI 2005: 302; for a cultural and historical investigation regarding *xrafstars* cf. POURDAVOUD 1326Š/1947: 178–201; DE JONG 1997: 338–342; FARRIDNEJAD 2015.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. GrBd 22.6: *u-šān dwārišnih ud paydāgih ud wizand-kunišnih pad šab ham gōhrīh abāg tārigīh rāy ud pad uzmāyīšn ī bim ud wizend ud zanišn ud az wizendkārīh ī dāmān nē estēnd.* “Their appearance and scating motion and the injuries they cause at night are due to their nature, having the same substance as darkness, and they do not retain from injuring the creatures by going through fear, injury, and striking”.

<sup>6</sup>Boyce 1975: 90–91; 298–300.

<sup>7</sup>Other accounts could be found in Plutarch’s, *De Iside et Osiride* 46; *De Invidia et Odio* 3.537B; *Quaestiones Convivales* 4.5.2.670D as well as in Pseudo-Aristotle’s *De Mirabilibus Auscultationibus* 27.832a cf. DE JONG 340, 342.

<sup>8</sup>For references to the killing of *xraftars* in the texts of antique writers cf. DE JONG 1997: 338–342; for the custom practised by modern Zoroastrians cf. BOYCE 1977: 202; for references to travel accounts of European travellers cf. FIRBY 1988: 27, 36, 52, 66, 70–71, 73, 75, 169.

<sup>9</sup>Text and translation after KOTWAL/KREYENBROEK Nēr. 52–55, with slight alteration. For an older, to some extent outdated translation of the passage cf. BULSARA 1915: 82–83.

*ud ōh ōzadan rāy. ōzadan kirbag kard estēd, grifitan ne kard estēd ān-ez xwār-tar ne bawēd.*

There is one who says thus: “(as to) one who has acted in this way, it is possible that he (the priest) might have been able to do it without a reward at another time; then he would (have to) do that also”. If a man (i.e. priest) is very able, he may sell vermin which he has caught for a price; both parties thus acquire twofold merit: both for catching (vermin) and for killing it. If one has performed the meritorious act of killing (vermin), (but he) has not done the catching, even so that (person’s merit) is no less.

*ka drahm-ēw pēš be dahēd, ō harw 2-ēn ōh bawēd. xrafstar pad meh-dādestān pādixšāy dāštan, xwarišn be pad margīh ud raxtagīh tā ne pādixšāy dādan. ēn ka dahēd ēn čiyōn xāk-ēw ud gil-ēw, ka-š kas be stānēd, apparag ne bawēd, be zyān wizārišn.*

If someone gives him a *dirham* in advance, it is the same in both cases. If (it is done) for a reason of overriding importance, it is permissible to keep vermin, (but indeed) it is not permissible to feed (vermin), except in a case of ‘death and disease’. When one does give it something, such as bits of soil and clay, if someone removes this he is not a robber, but (it is a case of) ‘removing harm’.

The answer to the question is not as rigorous as it might be expected. The commentator tries to share both theological and strategic interests. On one hand, it is clear that permitting the feeding of *xrafstars* would be impossible, as the destruction of life must be avoided. On the other hand, the difficult effort of capturing the *xrafstars* must be worthwhile for the priests. The key to bringing both matters under one roof is the attempt of a leniency in a remarkable case of stringency, expressed in the phrase *(be) pad margīh ud raxtagīh* “(except) in a case of ‘death and disease’”.

### Pahl. *margīh ud raxtagīh*

There are some slight variations regarding the second word, written mostly *lyštkyh*.<sup>10</sup> The reading *raxtagīh* “sickness; disease” is advocated by Tavadia in his edition of the *šāyest-nē-šāyest* (ŠnŠ. Cf. Hērb 2.9; 3.6) and is followed by Williams in his edition of the *Pahlavi Rivāyat* accompanying the *Dādestān ī Dēnīg* (PRivDd. 42.11)<sup>11</sup> as well as Kotwal and Kreyenbroek in their edition of the Hērb. 2.9; 3.6; 19.8-9 and Nēr., which is cited above. Shaki uses the same reading, but translates it as

“exhaustion”.<sup>12</sup> Both Skjærvø and Mirfakhraie, however, suggest the reading *rištagīh* respectively *rēštagīh* with the alternation of Skjærvø’s translation as “damage”, following Tavadia.<sup>13</sup>

The compound pair of *margīh ud raxtagīh* is a very common term in Zoroastrian literature, used to describe an emergency case or distressed person. As mentioned before, it renders a typical leniency regarding those cases, in which a stringency of the law would make it feasible or less manageable. Incorporating an exception in the rule, by adding *bē pad margīh ud raxtagīh*, could be understood as permission to act against the predefined rule, if any other (better) choice or remedy was available. Considering the death of *xrafstars* as a loss or barrier for a later religious priestly service, the commentator gives the priests the opportunity to do a deed which is contradictory at first glance. In this way, the death and destruction of the noxious creatures, which is the ultimate goal, is considered the reason for taking care of them, even if with “bits of soil and clay”!

### Abbreviations

Hērb. *Hērbadestān* = KOTWAL/KREYENBROEK 1992  
 Nēr. *Nērangestān* = KOTWAL/KREYENBROEK 1995  
 ŠnŠ *Šāyest-nē-šāyest* = TAVADIA 1930  
 PRivDd. *Pahlavi Rivāyat* accompanying the *Dādestān ī Dēnīg* = WILLIAMS 1990  
 PahlVd. *Pahlavi Vīdēvdād*  
 AirWb *Altiranisches Wörterbuch* = BARTHOLOMAE 1961  
 GrBd. *Great-Bundahišn*; text edition = PAKZAD SORAKI 2005

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<sup>12</sup>SHAKI 1991.

<sup>13</sup>For Skjærvø’s opinion cf. KIEL 2013: 331, n. 34. For Mirfakhraie’s reading cf. MIRFAKHRAIE 1390š/2011: 126.

<sup>10</sup>A variant *r’htkyh* is also attested in PahlVd.5.4.

<sup>11</sup>C.f. WILLIAMS 1990, I: 158–159.



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