

The Flesh and Bones of Ancient Iran

Vanessa Voss

University of Houston



e-Sasanika
Graduate paper 9
2013

“Tat vîspem frînâmahî tat vîspem fraêshyâmahî tat vîspem nemah'yâmahî avi
imãm tanûm ýãm mashyânãm”

“All this do we achieve; all this do we order; all these prayers do we utter, for the
benefit of the bodies of mortals.” -- *Vendidad*, 20.5¹

The human body is a curious item: it is that which is most intimate as well as a foreign and confounding thing. We inhabit the body, as it is a vehicle for our being; we are the body. We are unable to exist outside of it. But we are not our body alone. While every corporeal organism that comes into existence is itself a new vehicle, there is a variety of historical concepts of the body preceding it: the concepts of an ideal Form, as a place of social construction and control, as a place between one's soul and nature. Plato and Aristotle wrote about the nature of flesh, and the ancient natural philosophers Hippocrates and Galen wrote specifically on the human body. They all looked to the grand schemata of the universe in their attempts to make sense of the human body, such as their looking to the perfection of the spherical sky to explain the spherical shape of the human head. Some scholars have argued that the Greeks were influenced by the Egyptians and Mesopotamians.² But less research has been done on the history of science and the body in ancient Iran. In this paper, I intend to give a brief outline of the concept of the soul and body in the Zoroastrian tradition. I intend to show that a conception similar to the Greek conception of the body and soul are present within the Zoroastrian framework, though uniquely molded to suit the Zoroastrian beliefs. In this work, I will be using Middle Persian texts such as the *Greater Bundahishn*, *Zadspram*, and selections from the *Denkard*, and the Avestan *Videvdad*.³ I also will be relying on Gignoux's *Man and Cosmos in Ancient Iran*, as it is an invaluable source on the subject, while also referring to Attic Greek sources.

To begin the discussion of the conception of corporeal existence in historic Zoroastrian literature, it is right to discuss the nature of the soul, for the soul is intimately related to the

¹ *Vendidad*, <http://www.avesta.org/vendidad/vd.htm#chapt20> accessed August 21, 2012.

² If early 20th century Indian historians can be believed, Hindustan as well. For discussion on the influence of Ionian and Egyptian science and religion on Greek science, see Lloyd's *Early Greek Science: Thales to Aristotle* (1974).

³ When a Middle Persian text is available (transliterated or actual script), I will be using it as a guide, whereas I rely on translations for Avestan language sources.

body, and through the body, to the natural world as well. There are varying reports from different time periods and texts that categorize these forces in different ways. There is no set system given in a particular text that all subsequent texts demarcate as the true schemata of the soul. The structures and hierarchies of the Zoroastrian soul change with time. Here I will attempt to share the varying forces and parts of the soul as given in historic Zoroastrian literature.

In Sassanian Iran, the soul was described of as a collection of forces, subsumed under the highest form (*dēsag*) of existence given in *Denkard* III.⁴ A force is something immaterial in a human that can be either immortal or mortal, and the soul thusly has some mortal and some immortal parts. The *daēnā* is placed on the top above all other forces, over all the lower forms of the soul. It is a psychopomp, one of the *yazata*, in the *Videvdad*.⁵ This *daēnā* is outside of man yet also a part of him (a theme which runs throughout the literature). The parts of the soul in the body are essentially three, though varying versions of the three do appear in different texts. Firstly, similar in some ways to the *daēnā*, is the *frawahr*, which is the eternal and pre-existent soul above man, also referred to as the breath-soul. The *frawahr* is outside of man but interacts with him on a bodily level to some extent. Then, there is the *ruwān/urvān*, which can be explained as an animating principle or anima, something also divine. These three sections of the soul are immortal: the *daēnā*, the *frawahr* and the *ruwān*. In some cases, *bōy* is given as a force, but it perhaps entered the literature at a later date. *Bōy*, which is consciousness, is not necessarily a part of the soul, but a force within the body.⁶ In this three-tiered system (the *daēnā*, the *frawahr*, and the *ruwān*), in some ways similar to Plato's chariot metaphor in the *Phaedrus*, there is a force that presides over them like a charioteer, and this is the force *axw/axwxwadāy*.⁷ *Axw* is a pure divine ruling force, thus the use of the term *xwadāy* is sometimes used with the term *axw*.⁸ In the *Denkard*, pure *axw* is "the specific essence of man" and in life, the *axw* is mixed with the bodily forces, and when it is liberated from the body by death, becomes pure.⁹

⁴ *Dēnkard* III, Ch. 123. Trans. Ratanshah E. Kohiyar, ed. Peshotun Dastoor, Behramjee Sanjana, (1876, 60.80) <http://www.avesta.org/denkard/dk3s.html>. last accessed July 15th, 2012

⁵ Given by Gignoux as 19.28-30. Gignoux, Paul. *Man and Cosmos in Ancient Iran* (Roma: Istituto Italiano Per L'Africa E L'Oreinte, 2001), 13.

⁶ "Elements i. in Zoroastrianism," accessed July 12, 2012, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/elements>

⁷ A bodily force, meaning here not a part of an eternal soul but something which animates the body.

⁸ It is still unclear to me if this *axw* is the descendant of the Vedic *asu*, which relates to the world beyond the physical world, the being of that world or the Avestan term *ahu*, meaning something similar to *asu*, though *asu* can attach to material items too, such as the term *ahu-astvat*, meaning bone-existence (material existence), which is also used with *axw*, as in bony *axw*, meaning material existence of man.

⁹ *Dēnkard* III, Chapter 178, 5-6, as given in Gignoux, Paul. *Man and Cosmos in Ancient Iran* (Roma: Istituto Italiano Per L'Africa E L'Oreinte, 2001).

In Gignoux's work, he recounts other schemata describing the forces in the body, which work along the eternal soul parts of man, given in various religious texts from Sassanian Iran.¹⁰ *Tān*, which means body, is connected intimately to *jān*, which is the animating principle; then, next in the chain is *ruwān/urvān*, which in another paradigm absorbs the role of the *bōy* (consciousness or perception). This *ruwān* is in the body but is not rooted in the body as intimately as the *jān*. The *jān* is more close to *tān*. Further above (or further removed) from the body are what are called the *menogian* aspects of the totality of the human soul. This *menogian* part is also the *ēwēnag* part of man, which means Formal in a more Platonic sense, for it is an Ideal *menogian* type which is beyond the flesh (unlike the term *dēsag*, which is the material form of the substance of the body). *Frawahr* ranks above *ēwēnag*, as it is closer to the Divine, but both of course are ranked as *menogian*.

In selections from 9th century Middle Persian work, *Zadspram*, the description of the soul is expanded, adding complexity to the picture of the soul.¹¹ There is the *tānig*, which is the section of the soul which belongs to the bodily aspect of existence. Then there is the *jānig*, which is the part of the soul which is the anima, which is related to the Divine. Then, on the highest level, is the *ruwānīg*, which is all of that which belongs to the divine, eternal soul, equal to that which we have already discussed previously. What is interesting for the project here is that the *tānig* is composed of three elements itself: bodily, watery, and windy. The *jānig* is the anima, the *bōy*, and *frawahr*. And lastly, *ruwānīg* is comprised of the soul inside the body, the soul outside the body and the soul that is lord of the spiritual entities (*axw/axwxwadāy*). This seems conflicting with the fact that the *jānig* is itself concerned with the spirit in the body (*jān*) and *jānig* seems to be the section which contains the soul which would be categorized at the soul outside the body (*frawahr* and the other *menogian* parts of the soul).

It is unclear to me at this time which theory of the soul was the more popular or the most orthodox version of the concept of the soul. But keeping in mind all these various versions and permutations of the soul, forces and their categorizations, we can now ask: how does the soul in its various levels and forms interact with the body? To understand how the Divine and material body interact and relate with one another, it is best now to elaborate on the concept of the body based in the microcosm-macrocosm description given in the historical texts.

The body paradigm of ancient Iran, as it was in ancient Greece and India, is that of a microcosm-macrocosm construction. The human body was couched in terms of being a mirror to the cosmos. Bruce Lincoln describes the micro-macro world view (often following from a micro-macro cosmogony) being applied to those who subscribe to a world view that "state not that 'X is like Y', but rather that 'X was made from Y'... the two are understood as *alloforms*, alternative shapes of one another...flesh and earth are viewed as alternative moments in a continuous process, whereby one continually is transmuted into the other."¹² The universe is

¹⁰Gignoux, Paul. *Man and Cosmos in Ancient Iran*. The first chapter (11-20) gives an overview of the complex notion of the soul in various Zoroastrian texts. I have tried to simplify these various views in this paper, though this is a tough task.

¹¹As translated by Bailly and reported by Gignoux, Paul. *Man and Cosmos in Ancient Iran*.

¹² Bruce Lincoln. *Myth, Cosmos and Society* (Cambridge: Harvard , 1986), 5.

made in the same way that man is made. In Vedic cosmogony, Puruṣa is the form of the human Self that, from his body parts, created the universe, whereas in most other Indo-European cosmologies, the human form is made after the universe, both in temporal terms and image as well. This version holds true for human creation in Zoroastrianism as well—the human creation and hierarchies within it are based on the structure of the cosmos, and are made from the same material of the divine and material world. The body was matched to the soul and the soul as well to the cosmos.

In Chapter 28 of the *Greater Bundahišn*, the text states, “*pad dīn guyed ku: tan-ī martōmān andāza-ī gētig*” meaning, “it is said in the religion that the body of mankind is within the material world,” and the passage ends stating that men come into being from the same water that the creation has come from.¹³ This section of the *Greater Bundahišn* puts forth a construction of man which connects at various levels with the spiritual world and the material world, such as the blood in the body being like the water in the sea, or the bones being like the mountain (though often, as Lincoln points out, bones are the stones of the earth in most Indo-European cosmogonies). The word *chun* is used, meaning like, similar too, but the sense being given is that nature-man-universe-divine are all together being, coming into being, as a connected thing. The soul (*ruwan/ruvan*) is like Ohrmazd, at the top of the head, and the right hand and the liver from which the ocean of blood is moved throughout the body, is in the west; the casting off of the wicked at death is like the evacuating of the bowels.

The cosmic morality and the bodily morality are the same. The *Denkard* states that “[t]here are other growths of sin in the body also, just like other div-ik growths that are in the world.”¹⁴ The spiritual, the bodily and the pure *getig* world are all functioning in the same ways and tied into each other. A similar picture of the morality shared in the man-cosmos/micro-macro relation is given further in the *Dēnkard* III: “the senses of sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch, these windows connected with which are placed outside the body; and the nerves in the dwelling are the proper carriers of his messages to the owner of the dwelling-house....managing...with wisdom, through the good use of their powers;...but if he be a misuser of his powers, of evil understanding, and an injurer, then, owing to that, his kingdom is at once subverted, and he remains despised and possessed of evil reward, in the ever-harassing hell.”¹⁵

The idea that man was a reflection of the divine/the universe was held by those neighboring areas of the ancient world. In Greek literature, one can find the theme of man and the cosmos as twin beings in Plato’s *Timaeus*, which also gives a description of a tripartite soul and the idea of the perfection of the sphere (which by being the higher soul is located on our ‘heavenly shaped’ head). *The Republic* engages in a macro-mircocosm thought experiment when speaking of the just man and the just city. In Plato’s *Philebus*, the elements which compose the

¹³ Behramgore Tehmuras Anklesaria, transl. ed., *Zand-Ākāsīh: Iranian or Greater Bundahišn* (Bombay, 1956), 28.1-2.

¹⁴ *Zand-Ākāsīh: Iranian or Greater Bundahišn*, 28.13.

¹⁵ *Dēnkard*, trans. Ratanshah E. Kohiyar, ed. Peshotun Dastoor Behramjee Sanjana, (1876, 60.80) last accessed July 15th, 2012 <http://www.avesta.org/denkard/dk3s.html>.

universe are the more pure versions of the four elements which compose man. But Plato's view of creation is far removed from any Zoroastrian creation stories, in which the material world is not a poor facsimile of a divine Reality, but a trap laid for Ahriman (which maintains some Light and goodness); a place where one can fight against Evil. Aristotle shares the belief in the perfection of the sphere, and also applies it to the head, which is the seat of reason and the soul, and thus, the lower parts of the body are more 'earthly'. The soul, though in many ways a different construction than Plato's concept, has three tiers as well (nutritive, sensitive, rational). But unlike Plato, he gives the form of man more credit, saying he has the bodily shape he has because of his divine spark and intelligence. Aristotle writes,

"For man alone is the only animal that stands upright and this is because his nature and essence are divine. The activity of that which is most divine is to think and to be intelligent; but this is not easy when there is a great deal of the upper body weighing it down...."¹⁶

The reason Aristotle gives for mankind having hands is to free his mind as well, to employ rational thinking through the manipulation of the material world by the hands.

Aristotle also links the soul and the body closer together, possibly because his more positive view of the human form. He also held the belief that the body is a body due to its Form (which is its soul). The soul was the "actuality of the body" yet the soul cannot exist without the body. Aristotle puts the soul as the actuality in which the body strives towards.¹⁷ In the way that the body is an essential tool in the moral fight against Ahriman in the Zoroastrian faith, the body is the only way in which Form of the body (the soul) can really exist. Without the body, the soul fades away in Aristotle's view, which of course is not the view shared in the Zoroastrian texts, in which there is a part of the soul that lasts (the *frahwahr*, *ruwān*). Gignoux also states that many other writers in the ancient Mesopotamian world shared these concepts of the body and divinity. He references the Vedic tale of the destruction of the First Man, Puruṣa, in which the body of the First Man becomes the Universe.¹⁸ Though it is narratively backwards to the man-as-mirror cosmologies, it is a perfect example of the micro-macro (or *alloform*) allegory, in which the physical world (and its hierarchies) as well as the moral and social world come into being.

As we have stated, the soul is connected into this hierarchy of body at various levels, the parts of the soul being more 'bodily' at different levels. Even in this seemingly dualistic theory of the body and soul, there are many levels within each, and one must assume an intermediary, like

¹⁶Aristotle. *Parts of Animals*, trans. Philip J. van der Eijk, *Medicine and Philosophy in Classical Antiquity: Doctors and Philosophers on Nature, Soul, Health and Disease* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 221.

¹⁷ Aristotle. *On the Soul, Parva Naturalia, On Breath*, trans. W. S. Hett (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957) 80, 81. I also wish to point out here that in both Plato's *Timaeus* and in Aristotle's *On the Generation of Animals*, the bone, the marrow, is from seminal fluid and seminal fluid is also linked to the head, which of course, is the seat of the soul, the link of man to divinity.

¹⁸Gignoux, Paul. *Man and Cosmos in Ancient Iran* (Roma: Istituto Italiano Per L'Africa E L'Oriente, 2001), 56-63.

some sort like an angel between the Heaven and Earth, is communicating between *getig* and *menog*. The body and soul in Zoroastrian historical belief holds the body and soul are in communication. The *Dēnkard* states “[a]s, owing to admixture, disease is engendered in the body, so, owing to sin, illness, the pain of death and misery happen to the soul,” in which bodily illness injures the soul.¹⁹ The “health” of the soul also affects the health of the body, for the *Dēnkard* also states, “[i]f you force out falsehood from (your) body, your body will be improved and your soul delivered (from hell.)”²⁰ In this way, the health of the body and soul are one: to be ritually pure, to be moral and tell no lies, is also to be of healthy body.

*“drustīh do ēwēnag ēk abar ruwān drustīh pad hu-paymān xub ham-ḵuxtagīg
winnārdagīh ī gyān nērōgān ud ēk abar tan drustīh pad drust sāmānīhā ēstišin ī
tan ristagān wirāyšin niyāzīh ī gyān-iz az petyārag gumēzišin ī o zōrān*

Good health is twofold. One is about the health of the soul (*ruwān*) through a balanced and well conjoined organization of the forces of the soul (*gyān*). The other is about the health of the body through the healthy limited permanence of the elements of the body. The soul (*gyān*) needs to be arranged because of the mixing of the Adversary with the powers...”²¹

The body cannot be healthy without the soul being in health, and vice versa. One must therefore assume levels of communication between the bodily and spiritual here, since both are needed to be in health, to truly be an overall, healthy person.

Now we can discuss more clearly the material and corporeal aspects of the body in ancient Iran. The human body was believed in the past to be made up of four humors. It can be argued that these theories originated in Indian Aruvedic system, which has three elements (*doshas*) in its system: *vata* (wind, feet-umbilicus, motive power), *pitta* (hot, bitter, bile, umbilicus-heart) and *kafa* (phlegm, white, cool, sweet, heart-vertex).²² More commonly believed to be the case, humorism came from the Mesopotamian region and was systematized by the Greeks, especially by Hippocrates (460-370 BC) and then later by Galen in the 1st century AD. The four humors were blood/sanguine (warm, moist), yellow bile/choleric (warm, dry), black bile/melancholic (cold, dry) and phlegm/phlegmatic (cold, moist). Each of these four humors had an organ of the body associated with it: the liver with the blood, the spleen with the yellow bile, the gall bladder with the black bile, and the lungs with the phlegm. And in keeping with the theory that man is a reflection of the universe, that he is the microcosm in the macrocosm, the humors had links to the natural world and the heavenly spheres (the stars and planets). The season and natural phenomenon associated with the blood was the air and the spring; the yellow bile was associated with fire and the summer; the black bile was associated with the earth and autumn; and lastly, the phlegm was associated with the water and winter. On a cosmic level, the humors

¹⁹ *Dēnkard*, trans. Ratanshah E. Kohiyar, ed. Peshotun Dastoor Behramjee Sanjana, (1876, 45) last accessed July 15th, 2012 <http://www.avesta.org/denkard/dk3s.html>.

²⁰ *Dēnkard*, last accessed July 15th, 2012 <http://www.avesta.org/denkard/dk3s.html>.

²¹ Gignoux, 27.

²² Sinh Jee, Bhagvat. *A Short History of Aryan Medicine* (New Delhi: Daya Publishing, 1896), 85.

were related to the constellations as well, though we will not expand on this at the present time.²³

The four humors have a hierarchy (everything does). The *Greater Bundahišn* states that “[j]ust as Ohrmazd...and Ahriman...are at strife with each other in the world,” there are “two winds within the body: one, the wind of life, which is the soul (*ruwān*), whose seat is in the pith of the head, whose essence is warm and moist, and motion towards the navel (*nafa*); the other, the wind of sin (*bazah*), whose essence is cold and dry, whose seat is in the anus (*kūn*) and motion towards the gall-bladder (*zardah*).”²⁴ Forces of evil are cold and dry, the good are warm and moist. While balance of the humors is essential for overall bodily health (which is required for the upkeep of spiritual health), some humors are perceived as lesser, more evil. This leads one to the question: *what does balance of good and evil humors (or good and evil elements) mean in a world-view which seeks to banish Evil?*

Perhaps the answer lies in the view that mankind is part of what is called the bony *axw*, stuck between the pure *axw* and pure *getig*, and thus a complete riddance of evil from the flesh is impossible.²⁵ The human flesh by definition will always have some pollution from evil. Recall again the belief that the pith of the head is the seat of the soul, and that this particular soul is a part of the divine, likened to Ohrmazd. The head is placed closer to the sky, closer to the divine. The other body parts, while also related to divine beings, are not as highly ranked. It is assumed since hands can do good acts (not just bad), there is no issue in placing divinity in them. Humans have a spark of divinity in them anyway. But yet other bodily parts, such as the anus, are lower and further from the divine and close to the evil aspects of the body. As long as one is in their bony form, evil will be an essential part of it. “What constructs the elements of the body for the organization of its health is ‘nature’ and what unites the powers of the soul for fruitful activity is ‘essence’” which mean *axw*.²⁶ The key is balancing the humors, good and bad.

The primal substance of the material world is called *tōhmag-en-tōhmag* (the seed of seeds). These primal seeds are defined as being hot-moist. These seeds bring about Being, then the Movement of Being (perhaps likened to an Unmoved Mover). The four elements are ultimately formed from these hot-moist seeds, but also the hot-moist seeds form the *frawahr*.²⁷ Thus, it is clear that the *frawahr* is a hot-moist element by nature. Air (*wād*) is also a hot-moist element,

²³ *Zadspram*, Ch. 30. For an easy-to-use chart, see Gignoux.

²⁴ *Zand-Ākāsīh: Iranian or Greater Bundahišn*, 28.12.

²⁵ The divine is that which is pure *axw*, the animals are lacking in *axw* altogether, and humans are a mixing of the *menogan axw* and *getigan*. Animals can be assumed to be fully *getig* (though it leaves one to wonder if the animals that humans hold dear (ex. dogs) and those that are *khrafstar* (ex. frogs are really fully *getig* creatures, yet they have these moral markings and subject to evil *yazad* attacks).

²⁶ *Dēnkard* III, ed. Mandan, transl. de Menasce. 1958, 168.18-20, quoted by Gignoux, 28.

²⁷ It is interesting to note that semen resides in the brain at the top of the head, at the highest place spiritually of the human body. It runs down through the veins of the back and is accompanied on its journey out of the body by the *gyan*. It enters the womb with the *gyan*, and *gyan* ‘appears’ in the fourth month of pregnancy.

and thus it makes sense that the soul is linked to the air. It is not just human breathing and its link to living that makes the soul an “airy” thing.

It seems confusion arises though when one considers that the hot-moist seed have ultimately created everything. If the earth (clay, *gil*) is cold and dry, and cold and dry is lower on the material and spiritual hierarchy, does it mean that the earth is less important spiritually? How has the hot-moist seed, with its link to divinity, become something which is like clay, cold and dry? More research must be done concerning the conception of physical change and causation in the Zoroastrian beliefs to answer this question. Also, the earth has the same properties of the lowest parts of the human body. Why must one worry about pollution of the earth with cut hair, which comes from the upper body, the perfect divine sphere, that seat of the soul, from which hot-moist seed of man, originates? There is much research still to be done in regard to the concept of the *body*, the soul and good and evil in relation to the humoristic views on the parts of the body and the soul. How all these seemingly contradictory pieces fit together will be explored as my research continues.

Bibliography

Anklesaria, Behramgore Tehmuras, transl. ed., *Zand-Ākāsīh: Iranian or Greater Bundahišn* (Bombay, 1956)

Aristotle. *Parts of Animals*, trans. Philip J. van der Eijk, *Medicine and Philosophy in Classical Antiquity: Doctors and Philosophers on Nature, Soul, Health and Disease* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

_____. *On the Soul, Parva Naturalia, On Breath*, trans. W. S. Hett (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957)

Avesta: Vendidad, Fargard 1-3 (Avestan). "AVESTA: VENDIDAD, Fargard 1-3 (Avestan). Web. 21 Aug. 2012. <http://www.avesta.org/vendidad/vd.htm>

"Denkard, Acts of Religion." *DENKARD, Book 3 (tr. Sanjana)*. Web. 15 July 2012. <http://www.avesta.org/denkard/dk3s.html>

"Encyclopædia Iranica." RSS. N.p., n.d. Web. 12 July 2012. <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/elements>

Gignoux, Paul. *Man and Cosmos in Ancient Iran* (Roma: Istituto Italiano PerL'Africa E L'Oreinte, 2001)

Lincoln, Bruce. *Myth, Cosmos and Society* (Cambridge: Harvard , 1986)

Sinh Jee, Bhagvat. *A Short History of Aryan Medicine* (New Delhi: Daya Publishing, 1896)