

KNOW YOUR RELIGION

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Birds, Animals and Symbols in Zoroastrianism

Mah Ruh : The *mah ruz* are half moon stands made of brass or copper and are used during the Yasna ceremony. The metal *barsom* rods are placed on the curved cradle of the horn like half moons. It was said that Zoroastrian kings ate food only after the *barsom* twigs were laid on the *mah ruh* and prayers recited. The *mah ruh* represents the spirit of the moon on which is preserved the seed of the bull.

Gurz : This bull-headed mace was used by Fareidun, Athyawan and Rustom the warrior to fight and defeat evil. A child training to be a priest, receives a *gurz* as a ceremonial gift, when he becomes a *navar*. The *gurz* is a symbol of priestly authority and has to be used by a priest to protect the sacred fire, when the need arises.

Rooster : The rooster is a special bird in Zoroastrianism. The white rooster is said to be the companion of the Yazata, Srosh. The crowing of a rooster is said, to herald dawn and banish the forces of evil at night. According to legend, when the evil King Zohak was captured and tied with chains under Mount Demavand, Zohak, the demon king, licked at the chains all through the night to weaken them, but the crowing of the rooster early in the morning woke up the people and they once again re-fettered the demon-king before he was able to escape.

The rooster according to the *Vendidad*, foresees the rising of the sun. Even the Yazata, Behram carries with him a rooster when he brings victory to a person. According to the *Bundahishn*, the Zoroastrian Story of Creation, the rooster was created by Ahura Mazda to oppose the demons. The dog is a co-worker of the rooster and they both help the Yazata, Srosh, to protect the world from evil influences.

Remember it is forbidden to eat a rooster as it is a bird of Srosh. When a rooster or a dog dies, Parsis often wrap the dead rooster or dog in a sudreh and then bury the creature.

Dog : The dog is the most sacred of all creatures. It is said that kicking a pregnant bitch can send the soul straight to Hell. The dog is also a companion of the Yazata Srosh, and its bark is meant to frighten evil. It is said that upon the 4th

morning, after death, the soul arrives at the Bridge of the Separator. At the point of spiritual judgement, all the dogs one has kept as pets, as well as other dogs that one has fed food to during one's lifetime, come to welcome the soul and give it comfort as it makes its journey either to the House of Song (Heaven) or as it falls into the abyss of darkness (Hell) depending upon the life it has led in the physical world. During each watch after a person has died, and until the corpse is consigned to the Tower of Silence, a special dog, said to have 4 eyes (i.e. with two white markings above its eyes), is brought in, to cast its gaze upon the corpse, in order to contain the fiend of putrefaction, known as "*nasus*".

Snake : A snake is seen as a companion of Ahriman. Snakes and serpents are seen as creatures which bring harm to human beings and therefore should be kept at a distance. In fact, the Zoroastrians of Yazd have specially dedicated a day to kill reptiles and insects which harm the crops and therefore the well-being of mankind. On the day dedicated to this, Zoroastrians come out in large numbers to kill insects and reptiles.

In the Zoroastrian Story of Creation, Ahriman enters the world in the form of a snake/serpent and tries to destroy and pollute the 7 creations of Ahura Mazda which are the skies, waters, earth, plants, animals, man and fire.

Divo : An oil lamp should burn continuously in the home of a practicing Zoroastrian, as it protects the home and is said to banish the forces of darkness and evil. The glass must not have any water but must be filled entirely with oil. This is because oil and water cannot mix. If there is water in the glass as well, when the oil finishes, the flame crackles as it touches the water and finally it douses the flame. This is seen as the fire protesting and complaining at being extinguished.

Khvareneh: The winged symbol of the *Khvareneh* without the torso or the human head represents "increasing glory" and is associated with the royal or divine glory of Iranian kings.

The *Khvareneh* also symbolizes the God-given talent in man and is said to bring good fortune and prosperity. In the divine world it bestows spiritual excellence.

Soldiers : The soldiers seen on the stone walls of Persepolis are largely of two kinds. The one with the upright, ridged, headgear is seen as a Persian warrior from the province of Fars, while the soldier with the round, felt-headgear, depicts a Median from the North-West of Iran.

Cyrus the Great (550 – 531 BCE) who founded the Achaemenian Empire was the first king to unite the Persians and the Medes. The stone carvings of the soldiers

and noblemen at Persepolis, are a symbol of national unity and represents the merging of Media with Persia in the Achaemenian Empire.

Winged Bulls : Winged bulls are found at the Gateway of All Nations, built by Xerxes (486 – 465 BCE) at Persepolis. These bulls are said to be the guardians of the Gates of Heaven. The wings represent the spiritual world and the human head represents the psychological world. The body of the bull represents the physical world. Thus the winged bull is the guardian of the spiritual, psychological and physical worlds. These religious icons today decorate the entrances of Parsi Fire Temples buildings in different parts of the Zoroastrian world.

King Darius the Great (522 – 486 BCE) fighting the Griffon: The winged griffon was a mythological creature and was said to have demonic qualities. Thus the scene on the walls of Persepolis, depicting King Darius stabbing the griffon, represents the King's power and victory over evil.

Fravashi/Farohar/Fravahar: The *fravashi* (*farohar*) is the essence of God or the guardian spirit of man, which is wholly good and incorruptible, and therefore it cannot be judged at the 'bridge of the separator'. When a person dies, it is said to return to Ahura Mazda. The Fravardin yasht (Y. XIII), an important prayer, is dedicated to the *fravashis*. It is said, that the *fravashis* of the dead require prayers from the living, to order to strengthen them and give them greater comfort. The *fravashis* are said to help Ahura Mazda in the welfare of the universe and are said to keep the world in motion.

For Ahura Mazda declared, that it was with their splendour and glory that He set in order the seven good creations, which are the skies, water, earth, plants, animal, man and fire.

According to the Fravardin Yasht (V. 17) the *fravashis* of the great teachers of the faith, whether already dead or not yet born are the strongest, followed by the *fravashis* of the living, which are stronger than those of the dead.

The *fravashis* are said to possess rapid movement, as well as they help to fulfill wishes. They are the givers of good health and fortune. They fly to the aid of those who invoke them at the time of birth, marriage and victory. It is through them that the world is kept in motion (Y. 13 – 14/26).

The Horse : Since ancient times the horse has played an important role in the lives of the Iranian people. Chariot races have been mentioned in the Gathas, the walls of Persepolis show the importance of horses in Achaemenian Iran and innumerable artefacts display the skill of a King hunting while riding a horse.

Alexander the accursed considered the famous Median Horse as the most royal gift.

The Parthians (248 BCE – 224 CE) were so dexterous on the horse that they could shoot an arrow at the enemy while retreating on horse back, giving rise to the phrase “a Parthian Shot”.

All the young Persian boys were taught to ride horses at an early age. In fact, Herodotus in the 5th century BCE remarks, that a Zoroastrian was taught to ride a horse, shoot an arrow and speak the Truth from the age of six years.

King Vishtaspa’s famous horse was Asp i-Siah and Rustom Pehlwan of the Shahnameh fame named his favourite horse Raksh. While Shiavaksh the Iranian Prince who underwent the fire ordeal to establish the truth, when falsely accused by his stepmother, named his favourite horse Behzad.

Among the Yazatas, Mithra (Mehr Yazad) draws a chariot across the sky with four white horses with golden ears and having golden front hooves, and hind hooves of silver; Ardevi Sur Anahita (Ava Yazad) is also represented in the yasht as driving a chariot drawn by four horses which represent the wind, rain, cloud and sleet.

In the yasht it is said the Yazata Behram appears as a beautiful white horse with yellow ears and a golden caparison carrying the yazata of courage Aman on its back.

In the Vishtasp Yasht it is stated, that a horse can find its way back to its home, if the rider is lost. So important was the horse in ancient times, that both Zarathushtra’s father Pourushaspa and his patron King Vishtaspa’s names have been derived from the word ‘aspa’ which means “horse: in the Avestan language. Pourushaspa means “possessing gray horses” and Vishtaspa means “he who has trained horses”.

The eye-sight of a horse is so sharp according to the Behram Yasht (V. 12.30) that in the darkest night, overcast with clouds the horse can recognize a hair fallen on the ground and knows whether it is from the head or the tail.

The Simurg: The simurg appears in Iranian mythology as a mythical bird with a gigantic wing span. The great simurg bird it is said, took care of the baby Zal when he was abandoned by his father Sam and left to die on the mountain side, because Zal was as an albino and his white hair frightened the King. The feathers of the Simurg is said to have healing powers. According to the Shahnameh, the simurg gave Zal two feathers from her plume and asked Zal to

burn, then if he ever needed her help. According to legend when Zal's wife Rudabeh lay dying in child birth, Zal summoned the great simurgh, by burning the feathers. The simurg arrived in the time to cure Rudabeh and help in the safe delivery of the baby Rustom; who became Rustom Pehlwan – Rustom the Warrior.

At the time of the Creation of the World, the great simurg bird is said to have sat on the Tree of All Seeds and flapped its huge wings to help spread the seeds in all directions of the world for trees, plants and flowers to grow.

The Eagle: The eagle is a revered bird and is associated with bringing victory. Its sudden appearance denotes victory. In the Behram Yasht (V. 19) the Yazata Behram comes to one's help in the shape of a swift flying Eagle if prayed to.

The Water Dog: *Sagi-abi* or the *udra* also called the water-dog was a sacred animal as it destroyed rats and other vermin which ate the grain stored by farmers. Thus it was consider a sin to kill a water-dog as this creature was seen as being "Ahuric-created" and therefore its job was to destroy the *daevis* creations which brought harm to man.

Owl : In the Avestan texts, the feathers of an owl are seen to have protective qualities and were worn as a kind of talisman or amulet. Soldiers and men leaving on a long journey were asked to rub its feathers on the body for protection. It was believed that no enemy could harm such person who carried the feathers of an owl.

According to the Behram Yasht the owl brings victory and glory. According to the Shahnameh, both King Fareidun Athyawan and King Kaus carried on them the feathers of an owl for protection.

In Zoroastrianism, the owl is seen as a lucky bird that brings with it good fortune. The owl was also favoured by Zoroastrian farmers as it can see at night and therefore is able to kill rats, vermin and other noxious creatures which destroy the crop.

Fish : In the Persian Rivayats, when Ahura Mazda created the Hom tree he placed the tree in the middle of the ocean. He then created the karfish for protecting the tree. The karfish it is believed, swam round the Hom tree keeping it safe and protected from noxious creatures. According to legen, the crown of King Jamsheed, was swallowed by the karfish which kept the crown safe from the forces of evil, until the rightful King of Iran ascended the throne.

The fish is a symbol of protection, good luck and prosperity in Zoroastrianism. Therefore Parsis always serve fish on auspicious occasions and the *Sagan nu ses*

has a metal fish made of silver. The four day Zoroastrian marriage ritual also begins with the "*dahi maachi ni reet*" where raw fish is given along with a bowl of sweet curd to the respective families.

The bridal dress (shalwar kameez) worn by the Zoroastrian women of Yazd has the symbol of fish embroidered on the legs of the shalwar as a mark of prosperity and good fortune for the new bride.