

ČAHĀR ZAHAGĀN IN MIDDLE PERSIAN LITERATURE

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One of the main features of Sasanian era was the philosophical movement through which Iranian thinkers became familiar with new ideas. Xusrow The First ordered some philosophical texts, such as Aristotle's Book of Logic, to be translated from Greek into Pahlavi. They also introduced some texts from India and translated them from Sanskrit into Pahlavi. Through the process of translation, many Pahlavi philosophical terms were coined. They are scattered among the Pahlavi texts such as Dēnkard, Bundahišn, Wizīdagihā ī Zādsparam and so on. The aim of this paper then is to introduce one of the well-known terms called čahār zahagān or four elements. In addition to other meanings mentioned in the article the term čahār zahagān denotes to the four elements of soil, wind, water and fire by which the whole world is constructed. This idea was borrowed by Iranian translators presumably from Greek and Roman philosophers. During the Islamic period the term čahār zahagān has a more broad meaning. From their point of view the Greater World or gēhān ī wuzurg was comparable to the human body or gēhān ī kōdak.

Keywords: philosophical terms; four elements; Čahār zahagān; Sasanid era; Middle Persian

1. INTRODUCTION

It seems that the movement of philosophy which took place in the Sassanid era resulted in the construction and deployment of a range of philosophical terminologies which were used in compiling and translating texts. The aim of this short article is to discuss one of these terms, as Čahār zahagān or “four elements”.

2. THE ROLE OF DĒNKARD AND THE DOCTRINE OF THE FOUR ELEMENTS

There is no doubt that at this stage, Iranians had a specific approach to philosophical texts and thanks to the philosophy of soul in some Middle Persian texts, including the fourth book *Dēnkard*, this is clearly described.

DkM 412.17: *šāpuhr ī šāhān šāh ardašīrān nibēgihā-z ī az dēn bē abar bizeškīh ud stargōwišnīh wizōyišn ud zamān gyāg ud gōhr dahišn bawišn wināhišn jadag-wihīrīh ud gōwāgīh ud abārīg kīrrōgīh ud abzār andar hindūagān hrōm abārīg-iz zamīgīha pargandag būd abāz ō ham āward ud abāg abestāg abāz handāxt. Har ān ī drust paččēn ō ganj ī šabīgān dād.*

«Šāpuhr, the king of kings, son of Artaxšahr reassembled books of the Dēn about medicine, astronomy, motion, time, space, substance, creation, genesis, corruption, alteration, eloquence, and other arts and skills that go into India, Rome and other lands and he compared them with the Avesta and everything which was right, he made a copy for Šabīgān treasure».¹

By the same token, the philosophical texts of India and Rome were compiled and translated.

¹ Cf. Bailey 1971, 81, 86.

Again the report of *Dēnkard* about this is as follows:

DkM 429.13: *Pad harōm pīlāsōfā ud pad hindūgān dānāg ud pad abārīg dānāg šnāsag ān abērtar stāyihīd kē gōwišn ud nēzōmānīh az-išān padāgīhist frazānagān ī ērān-šahr pasandīd estād.*

«Among the philosophers of Rome the sages of India and the sages of other (countries) the Knowing ones praise most highly those whose logic and skills were clear. The wise ones of Erānšahr».

The doctrine of the four elements was important among philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome. They knew that the world consisted of four elements: earth, wind, water and fire.² In the Sassanid era, for such idiomatic philosophical equivalents they employed the Pahlavi terminology. The word *Zahagān* was used for “elements”. Apparently, the meaning of this word was “more born” which was used in Middle Persian texts as well as New Persian dictionaries. For example the word “*Zahīdan*” was used in Dictionary of Rashidi, Anjoman ārā, Ānandrāj, and Nāzem-ol Atebbā; the phrase meaning “born and breathe” was used in the dictionary of Moein, “*Zihīdan*” meaning “to regenerate, to bring forth” was used in Burhān-ī Qāte (in the margin). *Zēhidan*: “to fall, to flow, to drip”. *Žūhīdan*: “drip” (analogous with the phrase “*zih zadan*”). It is likely that the etymology of this word is as follows: the prefix *uz-* meaning “down” and the root *ah-*⁽²⁾ which means “to shed”. In some Middle Persian texts, this term has been used clearly with the same meaning. Examples of this application are as follows.

A. Denkart in Chapter 123 of the third book:

DkM 121.3: *u-š dēsag ī fradom būdag ī pad dādār ud paymānkārīh az bawišn u-š dēnīg nām bawišn-rawišnīh u-š nāmčīšt čahār zahagān ī hēnd wād ātaxš āb gil.*

«The form of the first material existence of creator (was) moderation of existence and its religious name is setting in motion of existence, and in detail, it is (made of) the four elements, which are: wind, fire, water, and mud (=earth)».

Then, in another part, there is the same point of reference:

DkM 124.18: *pad dādār āfurišn rasīdag ō bawišn garm-xwēd, bawišn-rawišnīh zahagān ī ast wād, ātaxš, āb <ud> gil az bawišn-rawišnīh bawišn-astišnīh.*

«Through the creation of the creator, one reaches to the existence of warmth, and moisture, and the setting in motion of existence, the (four) elements, which include: wind, fire, water and mud, and from the setting in motion of existence, the genesis of universe».

Chapter 157 of the third book of *Dēnkard* is devoted to medical knowledge, in which the human body is likened to the outside world and the world as the four elements of fire, water, soil and wind combined. The human body is of four elements which are the human bile and yellow bile, blood and phlegm. Similarly when in the four pillars of corruption, one of the world will lead to damage, lack of balance and disturb, unbalance and disorder in four humors (*axlāt*) will cause human health confusion.³ The third book of *Dēnkard* reports the same case:

² Gignoux 2001, 50.

³ Cf. Gignoux 2001; for more detailed information on the Medicine in ancient Iran see Saburi Helestanti 1385.

DkM 158.22: *nigēzīg az zaraduxštrōtom dastwarīh ud dahibed hu-framānīh nigāh pādan ī zahagān ī tanān bun az winastagīh u-š ēwāzīgīh ēk ēk mardōm tan-bizeškīh ī az drustbedān hammōg pādan ī-šān rastagān az winastagīh bawēd.*

«According to the teachings of the guiding of the Zoroasterom and the good command of the *dahibed*, care must be taken towards the body elements from destruction, namely (care) of the origin of the body from corruption and of that it is unique medical doctrine which is for everyone and according to the teachings of “*drustbedān*” (physicians) is eyeing their temperament from corruption».

DkM 170.4: *tan-biziškīh kunišn abar cahār zāhagān ī gēhān pad dādan ī az winastagīh u-š frazāmišn par ristagān ī tan frēh-būd ud abē-būd az-iš be burden pad paymān winnārdan tan-drustīh.*

«The action of medical doctrine is about the four elements of the world, about keeping it from corruption. Its termination is the end of excess and waste in the human body and making it balanced and organized».

The terminology “*čahār zahagān*” meaning “the four elements” is frequently used in the fifth book of *Dēnkard*. This goes to show that keeping the four elements from pollution and dirt has been troubling the minds of Iranians, throughout times, for example:

Denkard:V.28a: *ud az ān čiyōn nasā pēšīhā abāz ō ātaxš ud wād ud būm ud gil ī pāk ud kāriḡīh pad nōg-zahagīh ī zahagān ud wē- frayādīh ī dāmān ēwēnīhā madan pad gugārišn ud sōzišn ī andar tan ī sagān ud wāyān abērtar šāyēd....*

24.28a: «And it is most deserving that before Nasā (=corpse) reaches the fire, wind, the earth, and the clean mud, it would be activated as a new element, and as a result, in accordance with religion, it is more helping and interesting to the creatures, (and for this purpose) it gets burned and digested in the bodies of dogs and birds...».⁴

3. B. BUNDAHIŠN

Apparently, the Mazdean cosmology in the second chapter of the *Bundahišn* which has the title: “*abar dām-dahišnīh ī gētīgīhā*”, records the origin of the first creatures as “*asar-rōšnīh*” or “boundless light”. It is known that the four elements have emerged from the (“*asar-rōšnīh*”):

GB. 17.1: *....ohrmazd dām ō gētīg brēhīnīd: az asar-rōšnīh ātaxš, az ātaxš wād, az wād āb, az āb zamīg ud harwisp astōmandīh gētīg frāz brēhēnīd.*

«Ohrmazd created the creatures in the material world from endless light, fire; and from fire wind; from wind water, and from water earth; and thus made all the material beings».⁵

⁴ Cf. Amouzgar - Tafazzoli 2000.

⁵ Cf. Bahar 1991-1992, 39; Pakzad ed. 2005, 26.

However elsewhere in this book it is explicitly stated that:

GB. 149.5: *astōmandīh az čahār zahagān: āb ud zamīg ud wād ud ātaxš.*
 «Material existence is made from four elements: water, earth, wind and fire».⁶

4. C. WIZĪDAGĪHĀ Ī ZĀDSPRAM

Chapter VII of the book “*Selections of Zādspram*” is about five tempers of āsrōnān (religious leaders) and makes reference to ten admonitions that all other advice in religion is related to them. The fourth temperament is:

27.4: *čahārom yazišn, čiyōn yazišn ī ohrmazd mādayān pad hamāg wehīh dādārīh, xwadāyīh šnāxtan menīdan, padīš dēn astawān būdan ud kustīg, nišān ī-š dēn rāy, bastag dāštān, yazišn ī rošnān niyāišnōmandīhā, yazišn ī zahagān ī ast ātaxš, āb, zamīg, ud wād, kē kālbodōmand ud dāmān az-iš passāzīhist pāk, yōjdahrēnīd az nasā ud daštān ud hixr ud abārīg wināhišn dāštān ī tā čīhrān az-iš passāzīhānd drust-čīhrtar ud hu-bōyītar ud pāktar ud kam-āhōgtar bawēnd.*
 «Fourth *Yazišn*: is to praise Ohrmazd and all goodness, creativity, and to know God (and) to think about his religion, and practicing his religion. It is to show that you’re a follower of this religion by wearing the *kustīg* (the famous belt). It is to praise the term of four elements: fire, water, earth and wind, and physical beings and creature made of it, pure and holy of *Nasā* (=corpse), and menstruation and other pollution and stench. In the hope that all natures made from these, are more right, more pure, more fragrant and without any faults».⁷

Moreover, it must be noted that in the Sassanid era, sometimes colloquial philosophical terms which were drawn from Greek texts were used identically. Apparently, the fragmented word “stwwkkwn” in the book of Dēnkard is the exact equivalent of the Greek term “stoicheion” which itself was another form of the word “astoqos” which has found its way into Arabic.

The meaning of quadruplet elements was broadened in the concept of Islamic philosophers. Iranian philosophers also used the new terminology. Extensive interpretations and texts related to the four elements in the Persian literature and philosophy show the significance and the importance of this philosophical concept.

Some of these terms are:

Čār ākhar: “Idiom used for the four elements which are the earth, wind, water and fire”;

Čār āxšīj: meaning the four elements. The word *āxšīj* is used for element;⁸

Čār arkān: four elements.

Other terms used in the Persian literature and Philosophy are as follows:

Čār onsor, Čār aždahā, Čār ostād, Čār ajsād, Čār asbāb, Čār asl, Čār bālešt, Čār basīt, Čār band, Čār bix, Čār tā, Čār tār, Čār tāre, Čār tarkīb, Čār jōhar, Čār xalīfē, Čār dari, Čār dast, Čār onsor, Čār ayāl, Čār foras, Čār gōhar, and hundreds of other words.⁹

⁶ Cf. Bahar 1991-1992, 100; Pakzad ed. 2005, 265.

⁷ Cf. Gignoux - Tafazzoli 2000, 88.

⁸ See Dehkhoda 1970.

⁹ See Dehkhoda 1970.

5. CONCLUSIONS

According to the evidence cited above we can conclude that:

1. in the Sassanid era, Iranian made philosophical equivalents appropriate to their needs;
2. the Iranian world view about the four elements was influenced by Greek and Roman philosophy, as it can be seen in the book of *Dēnkard*;
3. according to Iranian thinking, the greater world (*Jehān i akbar*) *gēhān ī wuzurg*, was created by the four elements water, earth, fire and wind combined. This can in terms be comparable with the smaller world (*Jehān i asqar*) *gēhān ī kōdak*.

Thus, the human temperaments are also made up of the four elements of human bile, yellow bile, phlegm and blood. This view about the world was extended more in the Islamic era.

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