Geopolitical Elements of Political Legitimacy in the Bisitun Inscription

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Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to discuss the impact of geopolitics on the elements of political legitimacy in ancient Iran as manifested in the Iranian ancient inscription of Bisitun. The main document used for the present research is the translation of the Bisitun inscription in the city of Hamedan (ancient Hegmataneh), western Iran, which was carved in 517 BC on the rocks of the mountains of Hegmataneh, the seat of power of the Achaemenids. The translation of the inscription has been analyzed through descriptive-analytical method to find out the element of political legitimacy in ancient Iran and then to analyze the impact of geopolitics on these elements.

Keywords: Legitimacy, Geopolitics, Ancient Iran, Bisitun Inscription, Ancestry, Ahuramazda, kingdom, Achaemenid.

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1. Introduction

Research about ancient Iran, particularly the era of Achaemenid, creates a paradoxical sense in the researcher, for on the one hand one comes across the glory of what had been a valuable civilizational asset in more than two millennia ago and a great empire that ruled over a major chunk of the world for several centuries with a treasury of art, architecture, literature, industry, commerce, development, peace, security, religion, justice..., but on the other hand, one comes across the collapse of those glories and splendour. At the same time still there is not a clear understanding of all these great assets. Research by the inhabitants of this great civilization about its different aspects may be a kind of an attempt to retrieve their historical-cultural identity. However, most of the studies about ancient Iran have been carried out by foreign scholars, which is definitely appreciable. Over the past few years however some studies have been conducted by the Iranians which are not enough and do not cover all aspects of that golden age of the Iranian culture and civilization.

Governments throughout history besides using force or coercion have needed to justify their own rule through different means. In other words, the continuation of their rule is not possible through use of naked force. Hence they have always tried to find some ways to project their rule as legitimate and righteous or to legitimize their rule. The Achaemenids, who dominated vast, diverse territories, did not confine themselves to mere obedience of their citizens – either out of reason, opportunism or respect – rather they tried to invoke faith of their citizens (subjects) in their legitimacy. In other words, they tried to transform mere obedience to faith in the rightfulness which they represented, that is, they tried to legitimize their rule (Nikgohar, 1989: 240). The central questions of the present paper are: What were the main elements of political legitimacy of the Achaemenid political system as mentioned in the Bisitun inscription? To what extent these elements were defined under the influence of the geopolitical compulsions?

Attempts have been made in the present paper to discuss the elements of political legitimacy in the Bisitun inscription, inscribed on the rocks of the mountains of city of Hamedan in western Iran; and to find out the impact of geopolitics on the definition of these elements.

2. Political Legitimacy

The German sociologist Max Weber linked legitimacy to the willingness to

comply with a system of rule (`legitimacy orders') or to obey commands (`imperative control'). An administrative staff, for instance, may obey commands because of custom, affectual ties, or material incentives. He argued, however, that compliance or obedience also typically requires a belief in the legitimacy of the system of rule or command. Every `system of authority,' he argued, `attempts to establish and to cultivate the belief in its `legitimacy' (Weber 1947: 325). Compliance or obedience based on custom or expediency are unlikely, according to Weber, to be stable.

Weber identifies three types of `pure' legitimate authority: rational-legal authority rests `on a belief in the ``legality" of patterns of normative rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands'; traditional authority rests `on an established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of the status of those excercising authority under them'; and charismatic authority rests `on devotion to the specific and exceptional sanctity, heroism, or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him' (Weber 1947: 328). At other points in his analysis, Weber also describes a value-rational legitimacy, which holds `by virtue of a rational belief in its absolute value' (Weber 1947: 130). Barker argues that value rationality ought to be included as a fourth type of legitimacy (Barker 1990: 49).

According to Seymour Martin Lipset legitimacy is `the capacity of the system to engender and maintain the belief that the existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for the society.' He makes a distinction between legitimacy and effectiveness. Effectiveness, to Lipset, `means actual performance, the extent to which the system satisfies the basic functions of government as most of the population and such powerful groups within it as big business or the armed forces see them' (Lipset 1963: 64).

To Suchman, "Legitimacy is a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995: 574).

The Weberian concept of traditional authority has been accepted for the purpose of the present study. The main document used for the present research is the translation of the Bisitun ancient inscription. The garnered data has been analyzed through descriptive-analytical method.

3. Sources of Understanding of Ancient Iran

There are four categories of sources for the understanding of ancient history of Iran (Rajabi, 2007: 17). This source mentions only three categories.) These sources are different with regard to their authenticity, volume and way of expression. The said sources are:

- Inscriptions of the kings;
- Relatively detailed writings of the Greek and Roman writers, historians, geographers and the hints given in the Torah;
- Clay tablets, seals, and writings carved on the vessels, and metal relics;
- Other historical relics and monuments such as buildings, embossed motifs, images, warfare instruments (weapons), vessels and utensils as well as ornaments;
- The geopolitics of the ancient Iranian kingdom.

Out of the said sources, attempts have been made in the present paper to rely on the texts of the Bisitun inscription as the main source of research to elucidate the concept of legitimacy in ancient Iran. In the next step attempts have been made in the present paper to find out the impact of the geopolitical contour of the kingdom on the definition of these elements.

Paying attention to the ancient history and geography (or geopolitics) of Iran is significant for several reasons:

- The vastness and expanse of this ancient civilization, whose remnants underline its greatness;
- Spread of language and attention to writing in ancient Iranian civilization manifested in the form of surviving inscriptions or clay and golden tablets. The Bisitun inscription, the monuments of Hamedan, Susa, Pasargad, Persepolis, Van, Egyptian Suez… are but some of the instances underlining the significance attached to script and writing in ancient Iran;
- Diversity of the ethnic, linguistic, cultural…nations living under the umbrella of the empire.

4. The Concept of rulership

The royal political leaders in Iran normally started their rulership through organizing the tribes. The Achaemenid and Medes as well as other Iranian dynasties that came to power after them, often emerged as shepherd federations, typically nomadic and agricultural federations.

The concept of rulership in Iran is not only seen in indigenous concepts but also in combination with the universal concepts of rulership such as Khaqan/ khan (chieftain), king, king of the kings, shadow of God, etc. These concepts were not only used for the leaders within the royal territory but also for the leaders of the federations as well. In fact the very federative nature of the empire demonstrates the diversity of the peoples living under the Achaemenid Empire. This federative nature stemmed from the geopolitical features of the empire which in turned could leave their impacts on the identification of the elements of legitimacy in ancient Iran.

5. Simultaneous Rulership

The confederation of small kingdoms in the central Zagros in eighth century BC launched their competition with the Assyrians from where the Medes and then the Achaemenids emerged (Alibabai, 2008: 52).

The concept of empire during the Achaemenid included the regions and confederations each of which had their independent bureaucracy, army and identity and of course all of them were within the broader administrative and military system of the kingdom. Moreover, there was a king of the kings at the top of the empire and smaller kings in some of the regions or federations. The issue of governance demonstrates itself in ancient Iran in its political culture, relationship between the ruler and the ruled as well as in the relationship between governmental institutions within the framework of their common values, culture and economy. The issue of representation as well as the legitimacy of the ruler or his multiple legitimacy have been discussed under the title of simultaneous rulership by some writers(Alibabai: 46). Simultaneous Rulersip has been mentioned by Crossley (1992) which refers to the simultaneous rule of God and the king. This concept was also used in the ideas of the thinkers who have advocated the idea of Iranian city-state. The well known Iranian scholar of fourth century hegira Ibn Maskuyeh Razi (312-420 hegira), states: "Bear in mind that state and religion are two brothers, the sustenance of each of which is not possible without the other" (Imami, 1990). The Letter of Tansar, a 6th century Iranian document, is a declaration of the unity of Zoroastrian church and Iranian state, "for church and state were born of the one womb, joined together and never to be sundered" (Minovi, 1975: 53; Adhami, 2003: 223-230). Also Aruzi Samarqandi, a well known Iranian poet and writer of the 6th century hegira and author of the Four Discourses, writes: "Religion and

state are inseparable" (Moin,1955). All Iranian rulers in ancient Iran tried to legitimize their rule through linking it to the previous dynasties and by claiming to be the rightful inheritors of a rulership tradition. On the other hand, the legitimacy of the ruler did not stem merely from his representation of the ruled rather it stemmed from his relationship with the rulership tradition and the past history and at the top of them the blessing of Ahuramazda (God).

The hierarchy of this rulership included: God, ruler, and subjects. In this kind of rulership, the king played the role of an intermediary between God and his subjects. As a result, God and the king (simultaneous rulership) dominated the people, while the king ruled over an ethnically and geographically diverse but intertwined society. On the basis of this assumption, the king (ruler) considered himself a representative of the people and hence tried to institutionalize his rule, his dynasty and his close relatives. The ruler was part of the rulership (that is historical institutions and identities such as the satrap dwellers of the Achaemenid period). Hence the king, because of enjoying religious, political, administrative, military and cultural positions, was the representative and manifestation of these groups. These groups existed as some signs of the king's power and used to be inscribed on the trilingual inscriptions. In Crossley's viewpoint, this is a fundamental index or symbol of simultaneous rulership (Crossley, 1992: 1468). The ruler was the intermediary of those groups in the past, present and future. There were certain symbols and ideas that were considered by the subjects as signs of universal attributes which went beyond a specific group.

6. The Bisitun or Behistun Inscription and Its Significance

The main inscription used for the purpose of this study is the Bisitun inscription in the city of Hamedan (ancient Hegmataneh, which was the capital of the Medes, the first kings of Iran).

Inscribed in 517 BC on the order of Darius I of Achaemenid Dynasty (521-485 BC), it was carved on a mountain rock of 20 to 8 meters, on the side of an ancient road. It is the oldest known Iranian text, the world's longest inscription and is the most important inscription of the Bisitun region. The word Bisitun means glorious, but it was called Baghestaneh (a Medes Persian word) during the Achaemenids which means the sacred place of gods, while in the ensuing periods it was called Behestan and Bisitun

(Alibabai, 2008). It was written in three languages: Ancient Persian (cuneiform), Babylonian and Ilamid (Akkadi dialect). Perhaps the reason for its tri-linguality in the first place was the spread of the empire's territories and inclusion of ethic communities with different languages. It also seems that if part of an inscription was eroded in the course of history, other parts in other languages but with the same content would impart its original messages to the descendants.

The Bisitun inscription has five columns; the first column has 19 paragraphs, the second 16, the third 15, the fourth 20, and the fifth 6. The ancient Persian text has 76 paragraphs, while its Babylonian and Ilamid texts have only 69 paragraphs. Overall the inscription has 1119 lines.

It is true that the Bisitun inscription is in the first place a significant lingual text and is a good source for the linguists, but, as we will see below, this inscription has other valuable applications: it is a historical, religious, cultural, financial, administrative…document. This inscription besides being a lingual and historical text is also a political and social text because of the following reasons:

It is historically important, for it describes the most important developments of the early stages of formation of Darius kingdom, the way of subjugation of the opponents, and consolidation and integration of the Achaemenid Empire. Darius even may be called the first Iranian historian because of this inscription. It is also an artefact. The style of inscription, carving of the motifs and images (Darius and his companions, the winged ball – the Iranian ancient emblem and sign of the sun and God (Ahuramazda), the captured rebels) all in all underline a fine art. Far-e Vahar (the symbol of Ahuramazda) is in front of Darius. He holds a ring in his left hand and has raised his right hand just like the king himself. The ring is the symbol of divine Farrah (light) and the move itself is a sign of well wishing. A star is seen in a circle on the cylindrical cap of Far-e Vahar which is also seen on the crown of Darius. The image of Ahuramazada at the top of the inscription shows that He monitors all the affairs of the kingdom (Mohammadi & Jami, 2006: 133). Perhaps Darius tries to show his divinity (Ahurai nature) through this sign. The king and his officers wear a long Persian dress and three-lace shoes. But the headgears of the officers are different in their design from the crown of the king. Far-e Vahar, the king and his two officers wear wristlets. All these images and motifs have been carved very delicately, demonstrating the precision of the designers and meticulousness of the carvers.

In many respects, particularly regarding the divine nature of rulership, the Darius inscription is similar to the Hammurabi Code. In both of them, God is source of legislation and the kings rule in behalf of God (Javan, 2002: 218.).

This inscription is somehow a genealogy of the royal dynasties. It is a kind of ideological measure for legitimizing the authority of the ruling dynasties. It is a kind of advise book containing important messages for the people of its time and the future generations The Bisitun Inscription contains considerable ethical phrases. The king speaks of justice and interprets it. He censures lying as an evil, considers riot, rebellion and social disorder as evil practices; he speaks of social equality, prevention of class oppression; he supports ethical-humane virtues….

7. Elements of Legitimacy in the Bisitun Inscription

On the basis of an analysis of the text of Bisitun inscription, the elements of legitimacy in ancient Iranian empires, particularly the Achaemenid, may be classified into four categories: Ancestry, divine rights (Xvarenah), God's grace and righteousness.

7.1. Ancestry

Ancestry was a significant element of legitimacy in ancient Iran. Darius I, 522-486 BC, in the famous Bisitun Inscription (about 517 BC) refers to his own ancestry, a dynasty of the Achaemenid Persian tribe, in order to legitimize his own rule. The great-grand father of the Achaemenid was Teispes who was the grandfather of Cyrus, the Great, the founder of the Achaemenid Dynasty, and great-grand father of Darius. Being a Persian was a source of honour and legitimacy for the Achaemenid. All the Achaemenid kings called themselves Persian.

Ancestry is so important that Darius, in the Bisitun inscription before describing the history of subjugation of rebels and consolidation of his kingdom, refers to his ancestry in the first four lines of the First Column of Bisitun Inscription. In the first line he announces to be the king of Persia, that is, he lays emphasis on his nationality:

"I am Darius [Dâryavuš], the great king, king of kings, the king of Persia [Pârsa], the king of countries, the son of Hystaspes, the grandson of Arsames, the Achaemenid" (Bisitun Inscription, Column 1, line 1).

To Darius (and to all those who lived under his rule) ancestry was an important element of legitimization. He does not confine himself to few

ancestors, but traces back his ancestors to Achaemenes, from whom the founder of the Achaemenid dynasty borrowed the name:

"King Darius says: My father is Hystaspes [Vištâspa]; the father of Hystaspes was Arsames [Aršâma]; the father of Arsames was Ariaramnes [Ariyâramna]; the father of Ariaramnes was Teispes [Cišpiš]; the father of Teispes was Achaemenes [Haxâmaniš]." (Bisitun Inscription, Column 1, line 2).

In the next step, Darius traces back his ancestry to Achamenes to prove that he was coming from a "noble" royal family:

"King Darius says: That is why we are called Achaemenids; from antiquity we have been noble; from antiquity has our dynasty been royal" (Bisitun Inscription, Column 1, line 3).

Proud of his ancestry, he emphasizes that eight of his dynasty were kings:

"King Darius says: Eight of my dynasty were kings before me; I am the ninth. Nine in succession we have been kings" (Bisitun Inscription, Column 1, line 4).

As Mentioned in the first column of the Bisitun Inscription, Darius mentions ancestry and lineage as an element of righteousness or legitimacy of his rule.

7.2. Divine Right (Xvarenah)

In the Darius inscription the concept of monarchy is related to rulership over a kingdom that has been granted by God (Ahuramazda). Besides Ahuramaza, it was only the Achaemenid king who was entitled to rule. The Achaemenid king was the king of kings (Kasayatiya Kasayatianom) and other kings who brought tribute unto him, pledged allegiance to him and defended him and his kingdom. The concept of king is meaningful in a tradition in which sovereignty of the king comes from God, which exclusively belonged to the king of kings. Darius also used another title for himself, that is, king of peoples and countries (Kasayatia Dahyunam). This title belonged to a person whose kingdom consisted of several nations and territories. During the last years of his life, Darius ruled over thirty nations and territories. All these titles are used to underline the legitimacy of the king which he gained by the grace of God and inheritance from his ancestors. The legitimacy of the king was a reflection of his status as representative of Ahuramazda on the earth. The insistence on the principle "by the grace of Ahuramazda" lays emphasis on this worldly rulership and the fact that the ruler is a representative of a holy existence.

In this system, legitimacy is based on the principle of Xvarenah

(stemming from an Avestan word, huar, meaning shinning) or Farrah, which means divine light in Persian language. Farrah is a divine light and once it shines on a person's heart, he becomes superior to his counterparts. It is the shinning of this light which makes a person a king; a just and successful king. It is the power of this light that grants spiritual perfection to the recipient, who is raised by God to guide the people (Pour-Davood, 1964). At the same time it should be borne in mind that justice has been defined in the Iranian ancient texts. Justice has been defined in Vendidad, an ancient Mazdaic [Avestan language name for a divinity exalted] text as such: "The justice of Mazda, the opponent of demons…is such that prevails the heavens and earth." (Vendidad 5, B. 25)

Hence, the concept of Farrah is the metaphysical and philosophical dimension of government and status of the king, which is in fact a legitimizing factor. When someone is perceived to have the divine light, it means that he enjoys such attributes as monarchy, piety, sagacity, nobility and spiritual prominence.

But Farrah is given to a person who belongs to a noble family and is skilful. The simultaneous rulership may be summed up in the followings: king (king of the kings) is the representative of Ahuramazda on the earth. Ahuramazda is the creator of heaven and earth, Who has created all good things: "good people, good horses". Ahuramazda has given power and ability to His representative (the Shah) on the earth. The king continuously enjoys the support and grace of Ahuramazda. The king is accountable to Ahuramazda. The victory of the king is the victory of good over evil. Rending service to the king is rending service to Ahuramazda. The Iranian kings could expect the continuation of their rule only if they acted according to will of God:

"King Darius says: This is what I have done. By the grace of Ahuramazda have I always acted" (Bisitun inscription, column 4, line 52).

7.3. God's Favour

In almost all inscriptions of Western Iran, including the Bisitun, the ancient Iranian kings connect their names to God's Name (Ahuramazda in Zoroastrianism). They claim that they owe their success to God's favour and grace. Hence a kind of simultaneous (King-God) rulership is formed. In the fifth line of the first column of the Bisitun inscription Darius announces that God has granted the kingdom to him:

"King Darius says: By the grace of Ahuramazda (Zoroastrian God) am I king; Ahuramazda has granted me the kingdom" (Bisitun Inscription, Column 1, line 5).

Darius considers himself a representative of Ahuramazda. Hence he states that the kingdom was granted to him by God and in suppressing the enemies too he was been blessed by Ahuramazda. In line 8 of the same column, Darius states that even in subjugating other countries he was blessed by Ahuramazda:

"King Darius says: These are the countries which are subject unto me, and by the grace of Ahuramazda I became king of them…" (Bisitun Inscription, Column 1, line 8).

In the inscriptions remaining from the Achaemenid kings from Ariaramnes to Ardashir III, Ahuramazda is the Greatest of all the gods and God of all gods, while all the kings believed that they owed their kingdom and success to His grace.

In the Arsames (a son of Ariaramnes) inscription, Ahuramazda is described as the Great God (Baga Vazarka in Avestan language) and Greatest of all the gods (Mithista Baganam in Avestan language):

"Ahuramazda made me the king of Persia, He granted unto me this kingdom of Persian, having good people and horses, I became the king of this kingdom because He willed. Ahuramazda preserves me and my dynasty; and He granted this kingdom to me."

The word Ahuramazda (God) has been repeated 70 times in the Bisitun inscription while the phrase "by the grace of Ahuramazda" has been repeated 34 times. Darius and other Achaemenid kings called themselves worshippers of Ahuramazda, maintaining that worshipping of Ahuramazda was a source of blessing and salvation in the two worlds:

"King Darius says: Whoso shall worship Ahuramazda, divine blessing will be upon him, both while living and when dead" (Bisitun Inscription, Column 5, line 73).

7.4. Righteousness

Righteousness is a very important element of legitimacy of the kings of Iranian ancient kingdoms. The Achaemenid inscriptions and texts frequently refer to the righteousness of the king as an ethical virtue. The Bisitun inscription mentions that one of the characteristics of a just king is righteousness and opposition to liars:

"King Darius says: On this account Ahuramazda brought me help, and all

the other gods, all that there are, because I was not wicked, nor was I a liar, nor was I a despot, neither I nor any of my family. I have ruled according to righteousness. Neither to the weak nor to the powerful did I do wrong. Whosoever helped my house, him I favoured; he who was hostile, him I destroyed." (Bisitun Inscription, Column 4, line 63)

In order to leave an advise for the successors, Darius asks the ensuing kings to oppose lying:

"King Darius says: You who may be king hereafter, whosoever shall be a liar or a rebel, or shall not be friendly, punish him..!" (Bisitun Inscription, Column 4, line 55)

Darius believes that punishment of liars would protect his kingdom. In the continuation of the same line he explains the reason for opposing liars: "...if thus you shall think, 'may my country be secure!'" (Bisitun Inscription, Column 4, line 55)

He further censures lying, for he argues that lying is the base of all evils and even leads to rebellion:

"King Darius says: As to these provinces which revolted, lies made them revolt, so that they deceived the people. Then Ahuramazda delivered them into my hand; and I did unto them according to my will." (Bisitun Inscription, Column 4, line 54) In many other columns lying has been censured and righteousness admired.

The abovementioned elements in the Iranian inscriptions indicate that the Iranian kings tried to establish a simultaneous rulership (Crossley, 1992) based on humane-ethical principles in which king in one way or another considered himself a representative of God.

8. Geopolitics and Political Legitimacy

A cursory look at the elements of political legitimacy as described in the Bisitun Inscription indicates that at least half of the elements of legitimacy had been chosen under geopolitical compulsions. To begin with, ancestry was a significant element of legitimacy in ancient Iran. Darius I, 522-486 BC, in the famous Bisitun Inscription (about 517 BC) refers to his own ancestry, a dynasty of the Achaemenid Persian tribe, in order to legitimize his own rule. The very tribal nature of the kingdom may be considered a geopolitical imperative calling for ancestry as an element of legitimacy. In fact Darius, in the Bisitun inscription, before describing the history of subjugation of rebels and consolidation of his kingdom, refers to his ancestry in the first four lines of the First Column of Bisitun Inscription.

This is a clear impact of geopolitics on the definition of concept of political legitimacy.

Another element of legitimacy in ancient Iran was the principle of Xvarenah (stemming from an Avestan word, huar, meaning shinning) or Farrah, which means divine light in Persian language. The Achaemenid king was the king of kings (Kasayatiya Kasayatianom) and other kings who brought tribute unto him, pledged allegiance to him and defended him and his kingdom. The concept of king is meaningful in a tradition in which sovereignty of the king comes from God, which exclusively belonged to the king of kings. Darius also used another title for himself, that is, king of peoples and countries (Kasayatia Dahyunam). This title belonged to a person whose kingdom consisted of several nations and territories. In fact, the diversity of the peoples, nations and territories under the Achaemenid rule called for a legitimacy which was based on the principle of "unity in diversity". Here too the impact of geopolitics is quite clear. Hence, indeed, it was the geographical nature or the geopolitics of the kingdom that determined some of the crucial elements of legitimacy.

9. Conclusion

Based on the above analysis of the text of Bisitun inscription in western Iran, the Iranian Achaemenid king Darius I relied on four elements to legitimize his rulership: ancestry, Xvarenah or the diving light, Ahuramazda's (God's) favour and righteousness. Two out of these four elements were chosen under geopolitical imperatives and compulsions – interaction of geopolitics and rulership. According to this inscription, the king was proud of his ancestors as previous kings, while emphasizing on the divine light and favour of God as one of the main reasons for ascending the throne, defeating the enemies and conquering new lands. He also mentioned lying as a source of other evils, including rebellion and riot. He left a couple of advises for his successors, recommending them not to lie, but to fight liars, and to remain faithful to their religion to be able to protect the kingdom. He in fact tried to lay the foundation of his kingdom on humane-ethical principles. Indeed, the kingdom of the Iranian king Darius was a kind of simultaneous rulership, in the definition of whose legitimacy, geopolitics played a very important role.

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− Vendidad 5, B. 25. Vendidad refers to Zoroastrian sacred texts. The word is a contraction of the Avestan language Vî-Daêvô-Dāta, "Given Against the Demons", and as the name suggests, the Vendidad is an enumeration of various manifestations of evil spirits, and ways to confound them. According to the divisions of the Avesta as described in the Denkard, a 9th century text, the Vendidad includes all of the 19th nask, which is then the only nask that has survived in its entirety.

− Weber, M (1947), The Theory of social and economic organization, Free Press, New York.