

Aredvi

The River and the Boon Goddess

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Introduction:

The Âbân Yasht, literally ‘Waters Veneration’, is a collection of hymns in praise of Aredvî Sûrâ Anâhitâ. It is one of the oldest, longest, and most interesting yashts in the Avesta.

Âbân is the plural of Persian *âb* ‘water’. The term *yasht* means ‘venerated/veneration’ in Pahlavi. The Avestan form of this word, *yashta* from *yaz-* ‘to venerate, revere’, has not survived. Originally meaning any prayer, today it refers to “the Yashts”, a specific collection of multiple hymns of varying sizes in praise of a single, favorite deity, a sure sign of the Indo-Iranian henotheism so evident in the Rig Veda. The hymns are linked to one another by one specific stanza of repetitive salutation or recommendation, so much so that the entire chain appears to consist of one long hymn of varying, and occasionally out of context, subjects concerning one specific deity.

The Yashts fall in four groups. (1) Those that have their origin in pre-Zarathushtrian times. These are more epic in character and are highly poetic. (2) Those that belong to the post-Zarathushtrian period and are based, more or less, on the pre-Zarathushtrian patterns. (3) Those that exclusively belong to the post-Zarathushtrian period and have hardly anything in common with the other two. These are prosaic and are mostly addressed to Ahura Mazda and certain abstract divine faculties personified for the purpose. They recommend prescribed spells to be recited to drive away evil beings. (4) Miscellaneous subjects of “Perception” standing for the Good Conscience religion, Commemoration Lists of the Pioneers of Good Conscience, and Eastern Iran Mountains and the Kayanian Glory.

The pre-Zarathushtrian yashts, as they stand today, were modified to suit and ‘blend’ well with the evolving form of post Gathic Zoroastrianism. The language, particularly the style, reveals the difference between the original and the edited and added pieces. The Aban Yasht is one of these.

Originally, the Yashts were listed in *Dâtik*,¹ the legislative and administrative part of the Sassanian collection of the Avesta because they are more materialistic in character than the Gathic part (*Gâhânik*), the fundamentally religious part of the scriptures. Furthermore, the epic yashts were, it appears, favorite songs sung by warriors, another reason they were classified as administrative material.

The Names and Meanings:

The Aban Yasht, mostly in a very epical in style, has its roots deep within the pre-Zarathushtrian Aryan cult, which had, among many other gods and goddesses, male and female water deities. It presents **Aredvî Sûrâ Anâhitâ**, a specific river and a specific goddess.

¹ Here the book was called Bagân-yasn ‘the yasnas to the gods’ for more on the Sassanid canon, see [here](#). – CG

Grammatically, the first word *Aredvî* is the name and the two following are the epithets. Again, since grammatically “water” is feminine in gender, the name and the two epithets are also feminine.²

Aredvî, if derived from the Indo-Iranian root *rud-/rudh-*, would mean ‘roaring’, and if from *ared-/rdh-* would mean ‘speeding’, both appropriate roots for a river speeding with many roaring waterfalls. *Sûrâ* means ‘brave, bold, valiant’ and *an + â + hitâ* = *an* prefix of negation + *â* prefix of motion and emphasis + *hitâ* bound, stagnant = ‘unbound, not-stagnant’, and therefore ‘undefiled’ and ‘fresh’. In simple words it is the River *Aredvî*, ‘the bold, the fresh’, a befitting name, and fame, for a gushing freshwater river. Stagnant water was, because of pollution, reasonably considered impure and defiled. Running fresh water was, therefore, *anâhitâ*—definitely undefiled.

The secondary meaning of *anâhitâ* as ‘undefiled’ has lately been stretched to stand for ‘chaste and immaculate’. This has been done under the influence of the “virgin birth” and the “Immaculate Conception” tales, first by Christian translators and now being emphasized by a few “Mithraists”.

Let me make clear a point for good. *Anâhitâ*, with its emphatic ‘â’ only means “(definitely) **undefiled**” in the extant Avesta. It has no connection whatsoever with virginity and chastity. In the Indo-Iranian lore getting married and bearing children is a great merit and not the loss of “virginity” for the normal and natural reproduction. A life of celibacy and virginity has not been prescribed in the Avesta. Marriage and children are emphasized. The words *âhitâ/âsitâ* and *hitâ/sitâ* have never been used to point to an unchaste or married woman. The two sister Indo-Iranian languages have *kanyâ* for virgin. We have a variant *kainin* in Avesta, used twice in the Aban Yasht—stanzas 64 and 87—once for *Aredvî* and the other for young girls wanting to have good husbands. These are the only words which mean and have been used for ‘virgin’.

Anâhitâ has never been used in the extant Avesta, including the Aban Yasht, as the **NAME** of any deity. It is an epithet, generally the second, of **Aredvî** only. The Pahlavi rendering does not give *Anâhid* for the epithet but translates it with *avinast* ‘uncorrupted, undefiled’. It reads: *Ardivisâr i avinast* (Yasna 65:1, 65:4), and *Ardivisâr i avinast i ahlav i ahlâyih rad* ‘Ardivisâr, the undefiled, the righteous, the leader (Avestan **ratu**) of righteousness (Vispered 1:5).’

The Pahlavi *Anâhid* alone as a proper name stands for the star Venus and so does *Nâhid* in modern Persian. It has no connection with water.

That makes the point quite clear: *Anâhitâ* is neither a goddess nor a particular “virgin” woman in the extant Avesta, Pahlavi, and the Persian literatures. It is just an epithet and has been used to define *Aredvî* better.

It may be noted that with the exception of a few, the Yashts and Neyâyeshes are given the “first and real” names of their relevant deities: *Ardivisâr Bânu Yasht*, *Ardivisâr Bânu Neyâyesh*, *Âtash Neyâyesh*, *Bahrâm Yasht*, *Khorshid Yasht*, *Khorshid Neyâyesh*, *Mehr Yasht*, *Mehr Neyâyesh*, *Mâh Yasht*, *Mâh Neyâyesh*, and *Tir Yasht*. *Ardivisâr Bânu Yasht* and *Neyâyesh* are popularly known as *Âbân Yasht* and *Neyâyesh*. No Yasht or *Neyâyesh* exists in the name

² This is reflected in the long vowels at the end of each word, one of the feminine determiners in Avestan. – CG

Anâhid/Nâhid simply because this is not the real name of the river or the deity, and the star Venus has no Yasht or Neyâyesh in its honor.

Aredvî has been described as *Âpa* ‘water’ (Yasna 65:1–5; Vispered 1:5; Yasht 1:21; Vendidad 7:16). Aredvî apâ anâhitâ (Aredvî water, the undefiled) is among many waters/streams created by Mazda (Âbân Neyâyesh:1).

The Yasht, the Neyâyesh, and the description in the Yasna 65 confirm her as the Aredvî River, obviously deified in certain passages as the river goddess only. There are other deities, both female and male in grammatical genders, which are connected with waters. Tishtrya (Tîr), male, is the rain deity and has a full Yasht in his honor to tell his feats of fighting the Dæva of drought and of flooding rivers. Apam-*napât* (literally ‘the water-offspring’), male, an undefined Avestan/Vedic deity, ‘divides the waters amongst the countries in the material world’. Ahurâni (literary ‘lady’), the name shows, presides as a “female divinity” over certain waters. She has Yasna 68 to venerate her and ‘all other waters upon the earth, whether standing, or running, or waters of the well, or spring-waters which perennially flow, or the drippings of the rains, or the irrigations of canals,’ and the Vouru-kasha Sea, in which, although not mentioned, Aredvî is said to pour. Aredvî is absent in this Yasna only because she has her own, Yasna 65. Again Rashnu (Truth animated), male, strangely “lives in the stars that bear the seed of waters.” Aredvî is not mentioned (Rashn Yasht, stanza 29).

Likewise, Aredvî is absent in the Mehr Yasht, dedicated to Mithra, and Mithra is absent in the Aban Yasht. This is in spite of the fact that one is water/river and the other is associated with pastures. In fact, in his Yasht, “Mithra of wide pastures” independently makes ‘the waters to flow, makes the waters run and the plants to grow’ (Stanza 61). When on the warpath, Sraosha (Gathic Intuition animated), Rashnu, the Fravashis (ancestral spirits), ‘waters and plants drive along his chariot’ (Stanza 100).

Perhaps, the Aredvî Sûrâ Anâhitâ River was not watering the region where Mithra had his wide pastures. Or there were many rivers and rivulets and Aredvî was one of the waters and the composer/s of the Yasht did not see the necessity to mention any by its name. Aredvî and Mithra are not mentioned together in the late Yasna and Vispered sections where many of the deities are stereotypically venerated by name. The two stand apart in different stanzas. No connection whatsoever! The same holds true about her in the Tir Yasht, dedicated to the rain deity Tishtrya. None of these has any connection with Aredvî. Henotheistic hymns seldom mix homogenous deities.

The ÂBÂN Yasht:

The Yasht has 30 Sections and 132 stanzas. Sections consist of two to 10 stanzas, mostly 4 stanzas. A closer study divides it into three parts: (a) the River, (b) the Goddess and (c) an appendix:

(a) The Aredvî River:

“The water Ardvi Sûrâ Anâhitâ, with a volume sounding from afar, which is alone equal in its bulk to all the waters which flow forth upon earth, which flows down with mighty volume from Mount Hukairyâ to the Vouru-kasha Sea. All the shores of the Vouru-kasha are boiling over, all the middle of it is boiling over when Aredvî, the brave, the undefiled runs down into it, when she plunges foaming into them; she, whose are a thousand

tributaries, and a thousand streams, and each as it flows in, or rushes out, is as long as a man can ride for 40 days on a good horse.

And of all these waters of mine that flow in the seven climes, this river flows always the same in summer and in winter. She, of my waters, purifies the seed of men, the wombs of housewives and the milk of housewives.

I, who am Ahura Mazda, brought it out with power (?) so that the house, the community, the district, and the country is protected, nourished, guarded, preserved, and sheltered.”
(Aban) Yasht 5.3–6

“She has 1000 lakes and 1000 tributaries. Each lake and each tributary is as long as a galloping horse would take its rider for 40 days. Each tributary has a well-built house with 100 bright windows, 1,000 well-cut pillars, and 10,000 strong supports. A clean, perfumed bed lies in the palace hall.

Aredvî, the brave, the undefiled falls from a height of 1000 men.”
Yt 5.101–102

“Ahura Mazda has created four male horses for her—the wind, rain, cloud and sleet. For me, it rains, snows, hails and sleets on her.

I venerate the all-glory golden Mount Hukairya from which for me Aredvî, the brave, the undefiled falls down a height of 1000 men.”
Yt.120–121

In short, Aredvî is a mighty river, the largest on the earth. It drops down into a waterfall of almost 5,555 feet from Mount Hukairya, 33 times higher than the Niagara Falls! It flows even in summer and winter. A thousand lakes are formed by it in the long course. It has a thousand tributaries. Each lake or tributary is about 300 miles. The rich have built large houses with many windows, stone pillars, and supports on the banks of its tributaries. They have luxurious furniture. The great river waters the lands for miles and miles and then splashes into the “broad-shore” sea.

Several rivers of the Central Asia could be Aredvî. It could be the Oxus, modern Amu Darya. It rises from the Pamirs and today flows into Lake Ural. But once, it poured into the Caspian Sea. It could be the Harakhvati (Sanskrit Sarasvati) meaning “abounding in lakes” another appropriate name for the river forming ‘1000 lakes’. The Achaemenian *Harahuvati* (Arachosia) province was situated between *Zranka* (Drangiana), modern Sistan in Iran, and *Gandara* (Gandhara), modern Punjab in Pakistan. This means it was in the southern part of Afghanistan and northern part of Baluchistan, at present divided between Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. This has made some scholars to think that the river is modern Arghandab, in Afghanistan, which begins north of Kabul and ends almost close to the Pakistani border.

Harahuvati/Sarasvati divided the Indo-Iranians into two camps—the Avestan and the Vedic. In the Rigveda, Sarasvati is a celebrated river and also a “beautiful, fair” river Goddess. To the Vedic people who moved deeper and deeper into the Indian sub-continent, Sarasvati became a faint recollection, and the name was transferred to a small river, close to the great Yamuna. Later, she became the goddess of ‘Speech’. Or, Aredvî/Harahuvati could be the Indus, flowing from the Himalayas to the sea. Both Aredvî and Sarasvati are said to be coming down the sky. It either indicates the “sky-high” mountain from which it poured down or the clouds that watered her.

The odds are in favor of the Amu Darya, a river where the Indo-Iranians lived together before moving southward to split into two. There is a possibility that the upper roaring part of the river was called Aredvî and the lower lake full as Harakhvaiti. The Avestan people, moving in almost the same terrain, retained the memory better and later applied her names to other prominent rivers along which they settled in due course. And, for the early inland Aryan settlers, the Caspian was Vouru-kasha, quite the “broad-shore” sea.

Aredvî is called the healer; promoter of herd, home, country and the world; purifier of the male seed and the female womb; facilitator of childbirth, and the increaser of milk in breasts. It simply reveals the belief the Avestan people had about the vital part played by water in their life.

(b) The Boon-Bestowing Charioteer Goddess:

There is a total of 23 sections in this part, 2 to 20 (mostly relating to pre-Zarathushtrians) and 24 to 27 (relating to Zarathushtra, his contemporaries and the following generation). This part relates in a stereotype style the events in which Aredvî Sura Anahita, a goddess, is begged for boons. A chain of 23 dignitaries, all male—Ahura Mazda, Zarathushtra and kings and heroes of pre-and-post-Zarathushtrian Iran—each in his relevant age and place, approach her with libation and huge animal sacrificial rituals and a request to vanquish their foes, accomplish a supernatural feat or win a favor. Those whom she likes, she grants the boons they beg for but those she despises, she refuses in spite of the bloody sacrifices made by them in her honor. She is the favorite deity of both—the ones she likes and the ones she dislikes! It shows that all of them shared a common belief in her proficient power. Both belonged to the same creed. It may be noted that none of the boons have anything to do with water or its bounties. She is not approached as the river/water deity at all. Here is how she is approached:

The following is an example of five boons, four granted and one rejected:

1. She was venerated by the Creator Ahura Mazda in Airyana Vaejah, by the good river Dâitya, with Haoma juice, milk, baresman twigs, wisdom of the tongue, provoking thoughts, words, deeds, libations, and rightly-spoken words.

He begged her: ‘Grant me this boon, O good, most beneficent Aredvî Sûrâ Anâhitâ so that I may bring the son of Pourushaspa, the Righteous Zarathushtra, to think according to the Religion, speak according to the Religion and to act according to the Religion.’
‘Aredvî Sûrâ Anâhitâ granted him the boon during the time he was busy with the libations, offering, veneration, and begging that the boon be granted.’ (Stanzas 17-19)

2. She was venerated by Righteous Zarathushtra in the Airyana Vaejah, by the good river Dâitya; with Haoma juice, milk and baresman twigs, wisdom of the tongue, provoking thoughts, words, deeds, libations, and with the rightly-spoken words.

He begged her: ‘Grant me this boon, O good, most beneficent Aredvî Sûrâ Anâhitâ so that I may bring the son of Aurvataspa, the valiant Kavi Vistâspa, to think according to the Religion, speak according to the Religion and to act according to the Religion... Aredvî Sûrâ Anâhitâ granted him that boon during the time he was busy with the libations, offering, veneration, and begging that the boon be granted.’

(Stanzas 104–106)

3. She was venerated by Yima Khshaeta,³ the good shepherd, on top of Mount Hukairya with one hundred horses, one thousand bulls, and ten thousand sheep.

He begged her: ‘Grant me this boon, O good, most beneficent Aredvî Sûrâ Anâhitâ, that I may become the sovereign lord of all lands, Daevas, men, sorcerers, fairies, priests and the princes; and that I may take from the Daevas both riches and welfare, both prosperity and herds, both weal and fame... Aredvî Sûrâ Anâhitâ granted him that boon during the time he was busy with the libations, offering, veneration, and begging that the boon be granted.’

(Stanzas 25–27)

4. She was venerated by Azhi Dahâka, the three-mouth, in the land of Bawri, with one hundred horses, one thousand bulls, and ten thousand sheep.

He begged her: ‘Grant me this boon, O good, most beneficent Aredvî Sûrâ Anâhitâ, that I may make all the seven regions of the earth empty of mankind... Aredvî Sûrâ Anâhitâ did not grant him the boon.’

(Stanzas 29–31)

5. She was venerated by the valiant warrior Tusa on the back of his horse. He begged her swiftness for his teams, health for his own body, and that he might watch with full success those who hated him, smite down his foes, and destroy at one stroke his adversaries, his enemies, and those who hated him.

He begged of her a boon, saying: ‘Grant me this, O good, most beneficent Ardvi Sûrâ Anâhitâ, that I may overcome the gallant sons of Vaêsaka, by the castle Khshathro-saoka, that stands high up on the lofty, holy Kangha; that I may smite of the Turanian people in their fifties, their hundreds, their hundreds and their thousands, their thousands and their tens of thousands, their tens of thousands and their myriads of myriads... Ardvi Sûrâ Anâhitâ granted him that boon as he was with the libations, offering, veneration, and begging that the boon be granted.’

(Stanzas 53–55)

The three types of cattle offered for sacrifice count to a total of 1300 horses, 13,000 bulls, and 130,000 sheep. Ahura Mazda and Zarathushtra offered only libations. No animals. Those up in the air, on horseback, or in other similar positions were spared the offerings before they begged for boons. Whether they did it after they got their boons is not made clear.

Here is how the deity is portrayed:

³ Jamshid

‘Aredvî Sûrâ Anâhitâ stands for herself
 Appearing in shape of a virgin,
 tall, upright, well-shaped and beautiful;
 her lovely fair arms resemble the forelegs of a mare;
 she wears a crown of gold
 with hundred stars, octagon in shape, a shining circle,
 with ribbons flowing and flying.
 She has square-shaped golden earrings.
 Her lovely neck is adorned by a gold necklace.
 Her breasts, made more prominent by her tight belt,
 has glittering with ornaments.
 She wears a costly gold-embroidered gown with many folds.
 She adorns a fur coat made of the skins of thirty female beavers,
 who have borne four young ones and live in water.
 Such beavers have the skin that, if treated well at the right time,
 shines like gold and silver woven together.
 Thus attired, she rides a chariot with reins in her hands.
 Her chariot is drawn by four white horses of the same breed.
 They are the wind, the rain, the cloud, and the hail.’
 (Stanzas 126–129)

(c) The Appendix:

It is divided in three parts:

1. The repetitive command:

The command that Zarathushtra should venerate Aredvî Sûrâ Anâhitâ, given in stanza 2 of section 1, is repeated at the beginning of every section, making it said for 30 times and the stereotyped observance of it with “audible” veneration with Haoma juice, milk and baresman twig offerings is repeated at the end of each section. The command and its observance are repeated both while relating the offerings made by Ahura Mazda, pre-Zarathushtrians, Zarathushtra, and the contemporaries.

This strange instance, and other similar ones in the epical Yashts, clearly show the great extent of efforts made by the Âthravan priests in command to bring back in their elaborate rituals, especially the names of the pre-Zarathushtrian deities, whom Zarathushtra does not give even a casual mention in his Sublime Songs (although the Songs are punctuated throughout with the names of Mazda and the abstract Primal Principles of Life). He has enough room to mention the sky, earth, sun, moon, wind, cloud, waters, and trees as part of the universal nature, created by Mazda, but he does not personify or deify any of them. They are what science tells and not what one may fancy.

2. Asking for Veneration:

Several stanzas are devoted in which Aredvî asks that she should be approached with proper libations and veneration. In addition to these, rulers and warriors are told to pray for power, Âthravan priests for knowledge and success, young women for husbands, and pregnant women

for easy delivery. She says ‘O Spitama, Ahura Mazda appointed you as the **Ratu** (Leader) of the material world and appointed me as the guardian of all the righteous creation. It is through my splendor and glory that flocks and herds and two-legged men walk upon the earth. I maintain all good things made by Mazda, the products of Asha just as a shepherd keeps his flock.’ (Stanzas 85–90) This should make her the mistress of all and deprive many a deity of his/her domain, particularly Mithra of the wide pastures. But so are all henotheistic praises in many lores, especially the Indo-Iranian ones.

3. Barring Persons from Participation:

In addition to **WOMEN** and the person “who does not chant the Gathas”, she gives a list of persons with known and ‘unknown’ diseases and physical deformations, from crooked teeth to hunchback, who are all barred from participating in her libations (Stanzas 92–93).

This makes one wonder why a female deity is so much devoted to male heroes and bars her own kind. But one can guess that it is not she but the composer of the “Boon-Begging” part who, although a devotee to a female deity, appears to be a male chauvinist.

It may be repeated that Zarathushtra does not mention any of the gods and goddesses of the Aryan cult in his sublime songs, not even casually, and this includes the deity Aredvî. In fact, he rejects all other deities and recognizes only Ahura Mazda, the Wise God (Gathas: Songs 7.5, 9.11 & 10.11; compare Fravarane 10 [Yasna 12.6]). Nevertheless, the Yashts and other parts of the Avesta have preserved their pre-Zarathushtrian characteristics and the post-Zarathushtrian transformations when they were reincorporated into Zoroastrianism.

Conclusion

This perusal has shown that the collection known as the “Âbân Yasht”, has two distinct parts: **A river by the name of Aredvî with the epithets of sūrâ ‘brave’ and anâhitâ ‘undefiled’, and a goddess of the same name that bestows boons who beg her with simple libation and/or huge animal sacrifice.** The two have hardly anything in common, except the name. It is very difficult to answer whether it is a co-incident or not. The description of the river is a beautiful example of poetic imagination, a very good example of the Iranian descriptive literary heritage. The story of the boons by the charioteer beauty also shows how kings and heroes sacrificed to beg for boons before undertaking an expedition. Aredvî is not the sole deity begged for boons. We have a few more and the story is repeated almost in the same stereotype words. Only the names of the deities are substituted. Another deity approached with similar animal sacrifices is Drvaspâ (Mare-health) a female deity who is defined as the guardian of small and large cattle and adults and children in only one stanza; the other 31 stanza are devoted to her boons granted to those begging with the same number of animal offerings (Yasht 9). And yet another female deity approached for boons by the same kings and heroes is Ashi, the Gathic term for ‘reward’, personified in her Yasht 17. It is a post-Gathic composition; therefore, she is offered only simple libations and no animal sacrifice. In Yasht 15, Vayu, the male Wind deity, is approached by Ahura Mazda, kings, and heroes for boons which are granted without any offerings except the “praise” while begging.

Although monotonous, the epic yashts speak of the easily memorized popular songs. Again, a good example of the Iranian heritage.

Then we have the clear signs that some person/s successfully synchronized the two separate entities into a long poem and added Ahura Mazda, Zarathushtra, and other late personalities into the stereotyped begging for boons. The repetitive insistence that Zarathushtra should also venerate her here and again similar commands and recommendations in case of other deities and rituals, reveal how certain persons were working hard to institutionalize the Good Conscience Religion of Zarathushtra into an elaborate ritualistic system. And looking at the post-Gathic Avestan literature, we see that they succeeded. But there are signs that show that the pristine pure Gathic movement lasted even after the fall of the Sassanians. That, however, requires a separate essay to prove it.
