

# Restoring the Chapter Count of the Original Avesta

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**Abstract:** This article accurately reconstructs the original chapter count of each Avestan Nask of the original Sassanid Canon, and, more importantly, reconstructs the intricate system by which the Avesta had a corresponding chapter for the 1016 lines of the Gathas. Each book is also given a brief explanation of its contents and nature. As an aside, evidence is given of a Parthian predecessor of the Avestan script (fn. 6) and of a now lost Avestan historical account dating Zaratustra to ~1300 B.C. (Appendix).

## Introduction

In these days most Zoroastrians, as well as those interested in the religion, understand the Avesta as a moderately sized set of religious rituals which encapsulate the Gathas and a few other theologically interesting works. The Avesta is thus seen as a liturgical manual that, while containing a few interesting insights on theology, mythology, and practice, is otherwise only concerned with the current, ongoing ritual. Subsequently, the expository material that one finds in nearly every other religious tradition is supposed to have existed alongside the rituals as oral knowledge until it was finally written down towards the end of the Sassanid Period of Iran (224-651 AD) in a small corpus commonly referred to as Pahlavi literature. Furthermore, it is often explained that this Pahlavi literature, while explaining many things the Avesta seemingly does not, reflects the dualistic theology of the Sassanids and does little to elucidate earlier interpretations of the religion.

This understanding, which in my experience has been the hypostasis of Zoroastrian meta-hermeneutics in the modern age, both among the learned and the scholar, is determined false on thorough reexamination. Standing in stark contrast are two separate Zoroastrian summaries of the Avesta that detail a remarkably large and diverse corpus, containing works on history, mythology, philosophy, law, and theology. Such genres are not drawn out by modern interpretation but are explained in great detail or in terse, general summaries, depending on the source. Moreover, the Pahlavi literature should probably be best understood as the attempts of an oppressed and dispossessed priesthood in the early Islamic times to salvage the remnants of a much larger religious corpus,<sup>1</sup> and many of these works are directly or indirectly derived from contemporary translations of now missing Avestan books.<sup>2</sup>

As an in-depth summary of the contents and details of the original Avesta and its relation to Pahlavi literature will mainly be covered elsewhere, this article will specifically focus on restoring the true chapter count of the Avesta, as the matter is sufficiently complex and full of mathematics. It is based on a few key sources which summarize the Avesta, which even at the time of our sources was missing sections. More importantly, as is apparent from the sources, the original Avesta, in its whole and in each subdivision, was rigorously edited to numerologically correspond to the Gathas and the Ahunawar Prayer, and each book necessarily had a

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, in Šāyest Nē Šāyest 1.3-4 (as well as throughout and in the Pahlavi Nērangestān) six great Sassanid commentators of the Avesta are mentioned: Gogoshasp, Ataro-Ohrmazd, Soshyans, Ataro-frobag Nosai, Medokmah, and Afarg, who seemed to have either produced commentaries of the whole Avesta, large parts of it, or just the legal section. Given this, and the size of the Avesta at roughly a million words (see fn. 3), this alone would have constituted a very sizable midrashic-esque corpus.

<sup>2</sup> Such as Dēnkard Book 7 to the Spand Nask and the Bundahišn to the Dāmdād, for both see below.

numerologically significant number, such as 22, 36, or 144, allowing it to both make numerologically correspondences in the greater Avesta and to stand on its own as a numerological system. (For numerologically correspondence in relation to Avestan material, see Vevaina, 2024, pg. 50-61, also Vevaina, 2024a in general).

## Sources

To start, there are two key sources for the Sassanid canon of the Avesta. The first is the Dēnkard, an 8-9th century A.D. encyclopedia on Zoroastrianism, consisting of nine volumes, usually referred to as books, which itself is missing the first two volumes and the beginning of the third. The work was initially written by a Zoroastrian scholar named Ādurfarnbag ī Farroxxādān, in Baghdad. However, some sort of tragedy befell him and his work, and the remaining work was recompiled into what we have by Ādurbād Ēmēdān, another Zoroastrian scholar, at the beginning of the 9th century (West, 1892, xxix-xxxix; Gignoux 1994). While many topics are covered throughout the Dēnkard, book 8 gives us a summary of each Nask ('book') of the Avesta, and book 9 contains very comprehensive summaries of three Avestan Nasks that themselves were commentaries on the Gathas. Interestingly, book 7 seems to be a piece-by-piece summary of an individual, now missing Avestan book on the legend of Zaratustra in a similar style as Dēnkard 9.

Regarding the Dēnkard, it should be noted that while the writer was deeply familiar with most of the Avesta, it seemingly no longer existed in its entirety. This is most evident in the fact that they are missing the whole Vaštag Nask as well as the Zand ('translation with commentary') of the Nadar Nask; although, one would not be remiss in assuming they were also missing sections of other books as well. It should also be noted that the writer seemingly had no functional knowledge of the Avestan language and was dependent on the middle Persian translations (the Zand), which is evident from the fact that he attempts no summary of the Nadar Nask, even though he had access to the Avestan text (see also West, 1892 xli).

The second source is a set of letters from the 14th-16th centuries AD called the Persian Rivāyats. The letters come from a time when the Zoroastrian priesthood in Iran was still the primary source of the religion, as opposed to the sharp decline of Zoroastrianism in the following centuries; so, the community in India, having lost much of the knowledge of the religion, requested information in the form of correspondence. Among many of the topics covered were short general overviews of each book of the Avesta which included the chapter count of each book. The Rivāyats often give broad, thematic summaries which augment the sometimes hyper specific and inconclusive summaries of the Dēnkard. As such, the Rivāyats can be very useful if not taken as definitive.

Finally, the last source is the Selections of Zādspram, the writings of one of the most important Zoroastrian priests of the 9th century AD. While he does not give us a summary of the whole Avesta, in chapter 25 he does give us a more detailed explanation of the overall numerological correspondence of the Avesta than we find in the Dēnkard. (For a translation of all three sources, see West 1892).

## Overview

We are told by both Dēnkard 8 and the selections of Zādspram, (West 1892, pg. 9 and 404) that the Avesta was organized according to the Ahunawar or the Yatha Ahu prayer, which, importantly, contains 21 words in 3 lines, with 7 words in each line. As such, there were three sections of the Avesta for the three lines of the prayer: the Gathic, being that which is related to

the Gathas; the Hadha-manthric, that which is alongside the manthras (Gathas), i.e. priestly science, philosophy, geography, theology etc.; and the Datic, which was primarily legal but also contained some mythical history. Each of these sections had 7 Nasks ('books') for a total of 21 Nasks, with each book having a corresponding word in the Yatha Ahu prayer.

Both these sources also tell us the point of this article: that there were 1000 fragards ('chapters') of the Avesta for the 1016 lines of the Gathas. This count of 1016 is gained by adding the line count of the Gathas, 896, to the 120 lines of the Yasna Haptanghaiti. This shouldn't be taken to mean that there wasn't a difference between the Gathas and the Haptanghaiti, but that the number 1016 had more theological significance in relation to the Gathas.

Beyond this, Zādspram (West 1892, pg. 401-405) also tells us that there were 278 categories for the 278 stanzas of the Gathas and 6666 ordinances for the 6666 words of the Gathas (again, both are reached by the addition of the Haptanghaiti). While this was most likely the case, it is impossible to reconstruct with our current knowledge. Zādspram himself only gives us examples of categories from the 4 large legal books, which, incidentally, are the only Avestan books which Dēnkard 8 distinctly notes categories/sections. At our current knowledge, figuring out the rest would be unachievable.

Regardless, it is strange that we are told there were just 1000 fragards for the 1016 lines of the Gathas, rather than 1016. As the Sassanid Avesta was probably canonized from a larger set of Avestan works, likely by a council of religious authorities under the authority of Tansar (see Boyce, 1968 pg. 5-6), it seems odd for them to have not found 16 more chapters, especially given how much care was taken to make it numerologically sound and correspondent (as I demonstrate below). Moreover, given that the Vendidad (here on, Vidaēvadāta) was compiled during the Parthian or Sassanid Dynasty (see Malandra 2000), and the Zands of Young Avestan tend to show a decent understanding of the language (e.g. the Pahlavi Vidaēvadāta's similarity to the Vidaēvadāta), they would have been capable in the very least of combining or dividing chapters to reach the corresponding number of 1016. This is reinforced by the fact that certain sections of the Vidaēvadāta were likely recycled from other Avestan material (cf. Grenet 2005, where I would add that chapter 1 of the Vidaēvadāta was likely borrowed from the latter half of the Dāmdād, and chapter 2 from the Spand, see Appendix).

A more probable explanation is that enough chapters were missing by the times of the Dēnkard and Selections of Zādspram for these authors to simply claim there were 1000 chapters, rather than 1016. This could be reinforced by the fact that in Persian literature, the number of 1000 is often used to refer to a large, uncountable number. Most importantly, as I will demonstrate below, one can sufficiently reach the number of 1016 with a completely coherent and numerologically sound system, while reaching the number of 1000 makes less sense with the numbers we are given and relies on selective changes only applied to whichever books help one reach 1000.

### **Counting the chapters**

We first must take account of what numbers we are given. The Rivāyats give us a chapter count for each book, while the Dēnkard only gives us numbers for a few books. In all circumstances in which they disagree, except the Nigadum, the Dēnkard is preferable. The chart is laid out below:

Gathic:

- Staōta Yesnya: R33
- Sūdgar: R, D22
- Waršt-mansr: R22, D23
- Bag: R21, D22
- Vaštag: R22
- Hadokht: R30, D133
- Spand: R60

Total: 315

Hadha-Manthric:

- Dāmdād: R32
- Nadar: R35
- Pazag: R22
- Ratuštāiti: R50 (13)
- Bariš: R60 (12)
- Kiškisrub: R60 (13)
- Vištāsp-sast: R60 (8)

Total: 319

Datic:

- Nigadum: D30(?), R54
- Duwasrud: D, R65
- Husparum: D, R64
- Sagadum: D, R52
- Vendidad/Vidaēvadāta: 22
- Čihrdād: R22
- Bagān-Yasn: R17

Total: 296

Total: 930

(Rivāyat total: 826 [642])

We see here that we have a total number of 930, alternately 70 and 86 short. Also, each section has roughly the same amount of chapters, ~300-319, although it will be shown that the size of each section cannot be  $\frac{1}{3}$  of 1000 or 1016. Let us now look at the chapter count of each book and restore them to the original number.

## Gathic (i.e. Spiritual)

**Staota Yesnya (Stud-yasn):**

This book was composed of the Gathas, the Yasna Haptanghaiti, the four core manthras, and a number of other small compositions. We are told that the chapter count of this book was 33 by the Rivāyats, while the Dēnkard is silent on the number. While the number of 22 is often used by Zoroastrian sources to reference the Gathas (along with the Haptanghaiti and the four core

prayers), the Staota Yesnya contained a few other old prayers and compositions, such as the Fravarane and the Fšušo Manthra. This number of 33 is also given to us in the Yasna ceremony, which is the liturgy that encapsulates the Staota Yesnya, as in Yasna 2.10, the ceremony is dedicated to the 33 ratus ('models') of Asha, which were first spoken forth by Zaraθuštra.

### **Sūdgar**

This book was part of a series in the Gathic section which elaborated on each hāiti of the Gathas as well as the Haptanghaiti and the four Manthras. This book in particular tied myths and legends to each section of the Gathas. We have a chapter by chapter summary in Dēnkard 9 which agrees with the Rivāyats' number of 22 fragards.<sup>3</sup> The number of 22 is the most common chapter count of Avestan books as it mirrors the number which represents the Gathas: 22. The name Sūdgar/Sūdkar probably means 'explicating/enacting the benefits (of the Gathas)' implying the author(s) saw these myths as the beneficial things which one could glean from the Gathas.

### **Waršt-mansr (Varəštō.Məθra)**

This is another book in the series which elaborated on the Gathas, where it added mythologized stories of Zaraθuštra's life, often loosely tied to the theme of each hāiti. The name in particular, from Avestan *varəštō.məθra*, is best understood as 'making real the Manthras (of Zaraθuštra)' (see Insler 1975, pg. 150, who takes OAv. *varšt-* to mean 'bring to realization', here I take to mean 'make real'). While the Rivāyats give the count of 22, the chapter by chapter Dēnkard summary shows there was another introductory chapter at the beginning titled Aēθrapaitiš ('educator', lit. 'master of pupils') for a total of 23 chapters. In conjunction with Dēnkard 9, the Pahlavi Rivāyats, not to be confused with the Persian Rivāyats, has two sections which pull on this book: 18d.3-22 on fragard 10 and 18f on fragard 14.

### **Bag (Bayam)**

This is another in the Gathas series; it detailed the greater meaning of each piece of the Gathas being recited, including the theological ramifications. Its first three chapters are found in Yasna 19-21, where we are given its Avestan name: *bayam [yašt]*, accusative of *bayā* '(Gathic) piece, section'. The name was possibly shortened from *bayam bayam* 'piece by piece' (cf. Yasna 30.2 *narēm narēm* 'man by man'). While the Rivāyats give us the number of 21, again, the chapter by chapter summary in the Dēnkard gives us 22 chapters.

### **Vaštāg**

As the Dēnkard was missing this book in its entirety, all we know about this book is from the brief summaries in the Rivāyats, which give us a number of 22. While it is hard to say for certain if this was part of the Gathas series, it being the final book in the Gathic section with 22 chapters makes it likely. There is no reason to doubt the numbering.

### **Hadoxt (Haḍa-Aoxta)**

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<sup>3</sup> Besides the Yasna and Staota Yesnya, the average size of an Avestan fragard tends to be 800-1200 words, which I have attained through a tentative wordcount analysis of all extant Avestan material containing 'full fragards' (e.g. Vidaēvadāta, Yashts, Hadoxt 1-2, Nērangestān, Bag Nask 1-3). I intend this to be covered conclusively in a future article estimating the size of the missing Avesta, which is tentatively at 87%.

This book was seemingly a large compilation of compositions posthumously attributed to Zaratustra and his companions, hence the name *Haḍa-aoxta* ‘what was said alongside (the Manthras of Zaratustra)’. Against Jean Kellens (2002), there is no reason to see this book as a complement to another liturgical text as the few surviving fragments (*Hadoxt* 1-2, *Sroš Yašt* *Hadoxt*.2-6/7; *Vištāsp Yasht* ?, *Šāyest Nē Šāyest* 15 as a *Zand* ?) are in the vein of general religious literature. Moreover, the Avestan word *aoxta* has the meaning of what was said or declared, not recited, as can be seen all throughout the Avesta, including its frequent use in the *Vištāsp Yasht* to refer to what Zaratustra had said to *Vištāspa*. Among the many topics covered, this book also contained a medical section, as indicated in *Šāyest Nē Šāyest* 13.10.

The *Dēnkard* states this book as existing in 133 sections (although it counts 134, see Kellens 2002), while the *Rivāyats* say 30. It is clear that the *Rivāyats* were missing large sections of this book. The number of 144 is most likely the original size, likely collated from a number of smaller or individual compositions, as this number is obviously numerologically significant. The size being the greatest of the *Nasks* and twice the number of the main liturgy (the *Yasna*), is likely why it was considered the spiritual leader (*ratu*) of the *Nasks* (see West 1892, pg. 404), alongside the religious and broadly encompassing nature of its content.

## Spand

This book was a legendary biography of Zaratustra and the history of the religion before and after him. Besides a short summary in *Dēnkard* 8 and interpretative sources like the *Selections of Zādspram*, our primary source for this *Nask* is *Dēnkard* 7 which is best interpreted as an in depth summary of its contents, similar to *Dēnkard* 9. (West 1897, pg ix-xviii, was of the opinion *Dēnkard* 7 was based off of this book to some extent; for reconstructed Avestan material, see Cereti, 2010). We are given the number of 60 by the *Rivāyats*. Although there could be reason to doubt this number as it is used for the last three books of the *Hadha-manthric*, the numbers work well both here and in that section.

Based on *Dēnkard* 7, we can see it started with a narrative of the mythical history leading up to Zaratustra (interestingly, *Dēnkard* 7.1.20/21-24 reads like a summary of *Vidaēvadāta* chapter 2, indicating that chapter may have been pulled from here). It then covered the life and legend of Zaratustra, followed by a history of the religion following him. This history sadly only survives in *Dēnkard* 7.7 which is muddled by an attempt, most likely of the *Zand*, to read Sassanid figures into an older narrative.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the book had a prophecy of the end of Zaratustra’s millennium and the three coming *Saoshyants* who would progressively perfect the world. This narrative that survives in *Denkard* 7.9-11 corresponds with *Pahlavi Rivāyat* 48, which seems to be pulling from the same base Avestan narrative (via the *Zand*).

Gathic count: 33, 22, 23, 22, 22, 144, 60

○ Total: 326

## Hadha-manthric

### Dāmdād

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<sup>4</sup> For *Dēnkard* 7 as a summary of the *Spand Nask* confused in the secondary compilation, as well as it containing a genuine historical account in 7.7, see Appendix.

This was a creation narrative which included accounts of biology and geography in its grander narrative of the creation of existence. The Rivāyats give the number of 32 fragards, which was most likely lost from 36. The Middle Persian Greater Bundahišn is likely a reinterpretation of this book (This is in my own interpretation, although West 1892, xxiv, was of a similar opinion).

Given this likelihood, Vidaēvadāta 1 (on the 16 ‘best’ lands created by Ahura Mazda), whose Pahlavi translation has been seen as the source for Bundahišn XXXI (see MacKenzie 1989), would make more sense as originally having been in the latter part of this grand creation account (which would have included biological and geographical accounts as a “survey of creation” as in the Bundahišn) that was borrowed into the Vidaēvadāta to help the latter reach 22 chapters. Similarly, Zamyād Yašt (19).1-7, which is akin to Bundahišn IX (MacKenzie 1989), was likely from this book as well; meaning, at some point post Muslim invasion, it was extracted and inexplicably placed before the also extracted Bagān-Yasn’s chapter on the xwarnah (farr) of ancient Iran, giving rise to the inapplicable name of Zamyād yašt ‘hymn to the Earth’.

As for the count of 36, if the Greater Bundahišn, which dates maybe a century or two after the Dēnkard (Anklesaria 1956, pg. xxxiv-v, lii-iv), was truly reinterpreting the Zand of the Dāmdād, the author may have made his work 36 chapters to match the Dāmdād’s fragard count or was otherwise just closely following the Zand. As several of the Bundahišn’s chapters are material contemporary to its writing, and many other chapters are less comprehensive than others, it could point to the fragmentary nature of the Zand and/or the whole Dāmdād Nask at the time of composition.

### **Nadar**

The Rivāyats give us the number of 35, which, like before, was probably 36 originally. We are told it is about the nature of the stars and how they affect man. Considering its similarity to the Dāmdād both in size and placement, it was likely a similar creation narrative but based on the celestial rather than physical realm, again including astronomical and astrological accounts in the overall narrative. Classical Greco-Roman references to “Zoroaster’s astronomy” may be to this book. Potentially, Pahlavi Rivāyat chapters 35 and 65 were drawn from here.

### **Pazag**

This book mainly covered priestly sciences, particularly the means of performing seasonal festivals; it also contained a full treatment of the Zoroastrian calendar. The Rivāyats give us the number of 22, but the number 23 works better for the overall math. The discrepancy is similar to the discrepancy on the Waršt-mansr, which are both the third books of their sections (although this could be coincidental). Dēnkard 8 doesn’t distinctly give a chapter count, but its summary of this book has 23 separate ‘sentences’ on this book where each sentence seems to be describing a different chapter. While my arguments are a bit tentative for the Pazag, it is very common for the Rivāyats to be a number short for the books with chapters around 22.

### **Ratuštāiti**

A book on everything that pertained to Ratus (spiritual leaders who also acted as judges). Besides a sizeable amount of material on judicial matters, it contained content on the nature of humans and animals and instructions for building cities, among other things. We are told by the Rivāyats that there were originally 50 chapters, but that only 13 survived the calamity of Alexander. This is most certainly a misattribution of the loss either due to the Arab invasion or

the slow loss due to the decline of the Zoroastrian Community. If we assume the loss to Alexander, we also have to assume the canonization of the 1016 fragards to Darius or another Achaemenid King, which is unlikely.

### **Bariš**

This book was a large philosophical treatise, perhaps on the nature of duality, as the Dēnkard gives a large, if unorganized and incomplete, list of the various paradigms it covers. The Rivāyats state that there were 60 chapters but 12 remained. The Rivāyats' summary of this book is likely based on the 12 chapters they had along with whatever fragmentary knowledge of the contents survived. Such logic should extend to the other 4 fragmentary Hadha-Manthric books.

### **Kiškisrub**

The exact nature of this book is obfuscated to me; it was probably theological/philosophical given its placement near the Ratuštāiti and Bariš. We are told there were 60 chapters but 13 remain.

### **Wištāsp-sast**

This book must have been very similar to the Spand but about the story of Kava Vīštāspa rather than Zaratuštra. Again, we are told there were 60 chapters, also identical to the Spand, but 8 remain. The Greco-Roman work called the Oracle of Hystapes (Vīštāspa in Greek) was potentially derived from the last sections of this book, which may have had a similar apocalyptic account to the last sections of the Spand (surviving via Dēnkard 7.8-11), given how the Spand and Vīštāsp-sast have the same chapter count and cover Zaratuštra and his patron respectively. In this way, the Zand ī Wahman Yasn and Pahlavi Rivāyat 36 could be drawing from this apocalyptic section of the Wištāsp-sast. Moreover, the Ayādgār ī Zarērān, 'Memorials of Zarēr', seems to be based off a section of this book.

Hadha-manthric count: 36, 36, 23, 50, 60, 60, 60

○ Total: 325

## **Datic (legal)**

### **Nigadum**

This is the first of 4 large law books in this section, like all the law books it was likely 65 originally but 54 by the time of the Rivāyats and Dēnkard, although the latter says 30. Dēnkard 8 says verbatim "The beginning of the law is the Nigadum of thirty fargards" while the Rivāyats say it had 54 sections. E.W. West (1892, pg. 35, fn. 3) attributes the discrepancy to the Rivāyats adding the 30 fragards mentioned in the Dēnkard to the 24 particulars mentioned later in section five: "In the fifth section are twenty-four particulars" (ibid. pg. 53). However, I doubt the Rivāyats were using the Dēnkard as a source here. More consequently, section 5, in which this is found, is inordinately longer than the preceding 4 sections and continues until the end of the summary of this book.

So, it seems more than likely that the original version of the Dēnkard had something along the lines of "the beginning of the law is the first thirty of the Nigadum" followed by "in the fifth



section five of the last 24 [sections/fragards] are particulars...” and when it was recompiled by the secondary author one of the two phrases was confused, causing the other to be changed (as I have no knowledge of Pahlavi, the issue could also be in translation). Either way, this ‘reconstructed’ phrasing is very common throughout the Dēnkard’s summaries of the 4 law books, for instance in the Duwasrud (ibid., pg. 74): “The first of eighteen sections of the Ganabā-sar-nijad [Duswarud] contains particulars about the thief,” and in the Husparum (ibid, pg. 92): “One section of the first thirty of the Husparum is the Aerpatistan, particulars about.” More examples can be found throughout.

### **Duwasrud/Ganabā-sar-nijad**

The Rivāyats say there were 65 fragards. The Dēnkard gives us this number in three separate counts: “The first of eighteen sections of the Ganabā-sar-nijad” (ibid. pg. 74), then “One section of the next twelve is the Pasush-haurvastan” (ibid. pg. 81), then finally “The first section of the last thirty-five is the Storistan” (ibid. pg. 84). This counts to 65.

### **Husparum**

The Rivāyats say 64, but 65 is the more likely number. The Dēnkard gives us the Rivāyat’s number in three counts. It first says, “One section of the first thirty of the Husparum” (ibid. pg. 92) followed by “one section of the next twenty contains particulars...” (ibid. pg. 105) then finally “six fragards of one section of the last fourteen contains particulars” (ibid. pg. 112). This reaches 64.

### **Sagadum**

The Dēnkard and Rivāyats give us the number of 52, with the Dēnkard having it in the phrasing “of the first thirty” (ibid. pg. 121) and “of the last twenty-two” (ibid. pg. 138). However, 65 is likely the original number. This would make sense for there to be 4 large law books all of the same size: 65 fragards, and we already have one book at 65 and another at 64. The other two books are missing 11 and 13 chapters, which is an amount similar to what’s missing from the Hadoxt in the Dēnkard.

### **Vidaēvadāta**

As the only book extant in its original form, we know this is 22 chapters. The chapter number of this book follows for the last three books of this section. See Malandra (2000) for the current 12th chapter being a substitute for a missing chapter in the Vidaēvadāta, although this does not affect our numbering.

### **Čihrdād**

This book was a mythical history of mankind and the various kings of ancient Iran, probably cast in long, epic poetry.<sup>5</sup> It was potentially the predecessor to the legendary section of the Shahnameh, although the details are debatable. The Rivāyats tell us the number of 22, which I don’t see any reason to doubt. Mainly because the Vidaēvadāta precedes it and the Bagān-Yasn (also being 22) follows it. It’s name in Avestan is to be reconstructed as *ciθrō.dāta* ‘the creation

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<sup>5</sup> Two Avestan quotations found in Pahlavi Vidaēvadāta 2.5, (Anklesaria 1946, pg. 18) regarding Yima and Kay Us are likely from this book (see Schwartz, forthcoming).

of spawn/lineage(s)' as it followed the lineage(s) of the rulers of ancient Iran, although this name belies the epic poetic narrative it likely contained.

It seems that when the Datic section was crafted they decided to include 3 twenty-two chaptered books, two of which were legendary and mythical, for a total of 66. To make the numbers work, they organized some various amounts of Avestan legal works into 4 books of 65 chapters, for a total of 260+66.

### **Bagān-Yasn**

While the Rivāyats say it had 17 fragards, this book exists in its extracted form as the Yashts of today. It is hard to know whether there were introductory or bridging fragards (or even missing material) in the original book, but it is not hard to count the Yashts, including the Hom and Srosh Yashts, and reach a number of 22. However, some of the smaller Yashts may have been part of larger fragards. Regardless of how much the modern day Yashts account for the total size of this book, its place in the listing, the common occurrence of this specific chapter count, and the overall number count favors the number of 22.

Datic count: 65, 65, 65, 65, 22, 22, 22

- Total: 326

## **Section numbering**

For the better part of 2024, I had tried multiple different ways to restore the chapter count to either 1000 or 1016. While I could often find a way to get to each number, none of them fit succinctly into an internally consistent and satisfying system, and it often relied on larger, less intuitive jumps in chapter count that weren't evenly applied to all books. What ultimately cracked the case, so to say, was realizing that by simple logical, numerological estimations on the original chapter size of each book (discounting the ones already at a "good" number), one would get 324-326 for each section of the Avesta. When I noticed this, I knew it wasn't coincidental and that it was a part of the overall system these ancient redactors had devised. And yet, with this evenly denominated section numbering, one only gets 977 chapters, and the question still remains of how to get to the proper number.

In total, we have 326 for the first and last section, with 325 in the middle. As I mentioned, this only gets us to the number of 977, which is 39 short of 1016 (23 short of 1000). However, this does not point to 39 chapters which haven't been accounted for, as if we add these 39 missing chapters to the 33 chapters of the Staota Yesnya, we get a number of 72. These 72 chapters are undoubtedly the 72 chapters of the Yasna, which encapsulates the 33 chapters of the Staota Yesnya into a ceremonial ritual. Moreover, the identity of these 39 chapters is most certainly the repetitive, liturgical material found in the modern Yasna ritual which officiates the ongoing ritual. Moreover, if we add these 39 chapters of the Yasna onto the 326 chapters of the Gathic section, we reach 365 chapters, one for each day of the year. This is especially poignant considering how fundamental the Gathas and the Gahanbars holidays were to the seasonal functioning of the year. Moreover, the Gathic being the largest section with the addition of the Yasna indicates the primacy of the Gathas in the Avesta as well as its reliance on the Yasna to reach its full realization.

The theological ramifications of this system will be discussed in the conclusion; for now, let us review the charts. What should be noted is that this system fundamentally relies on the number 39 being added to the Staota Yesnya.

G: 326/365, HM: 325, D: 326 = 977/1016

### **True fragard count:**

#### Gathic:

- Staōta Yesnya: 33/72
- Sūdgar: 22
- Waršt-mansr: 23
- Bag: 22
- Vaštag: 22
- Hadoxt: 144
- Spand: 60

Total: 365 (326 + 39)

#### Hadha-Manthric:

- Dāmdād: 36
- Nadar: 36
- Pazag: 23
- Ratuštāiti: 50
- Bariš: 60
- Kishkisrub: 60
- Vištāsp-sast: 60

Total: 325

#### Datic:

- Nigadum: 65
- Duwasrud: 65
- Husparum: 65
- Sagadum: 65
- Vidaēvadāta: 22
- Čihrdād: 22
- Bagān-Yasn: 22

Total: 326

Grand total: 365 + 325 + 326 = 1016

### **Review**

As we can see directly above, what is detailed is an intricate and numerologically consistent system. However, it is necessary to recount all changes and assumptions made and review the system. Firstly, changes were only made to 8 books (see the chart below) which means that

~62% of the numbers we are given were correct without any changes. Of these changes, 3 were just a single chapter (of which we can see precedence even between the Rivāyats and the Dēnkard); 2 books were between 3-5 chapters; and 3 were roughly a dozen. Moreover, all these changes were made to bring a random number to an even or more significant number.

Of the books changed, the Hadoxt was the only book changed in the Gathic section, which points to the importance given to the Gathic section, given that it was based on the Gathas themselves, the core of the Zoroastrian religion. It was changed from 133 (according to the Dēnkard) to 144 based on the significance of the number 144, both on its own merit as well as it being twice the even more significant number of 72, the size of the Yasna.

In the Hadha-Manthric section, only the first three books were changed by a very small amount: 4, 1, and 1. As the Dēnkard gives us no numbers for any of the books in this section (besides the 23 separate descriptions of the Pazag's content, which was discussed earlier), this discrepancy could be solely on the Rivāyats part, which was also one chapter short on two books in the Gathic section (the Bag and Waršt-mansr).

The Datic section received the most changes and the largest jumps. Firstly, the Rivāyats gave the more correct number for the Nigadum, while the Dēnkard was confused. The next Nask, the Duswarud, had the correct number of 65, while the following Nask, the Husparum, was 1 chapter short, at 64. Finally, the Sagadum is given the number of 52 chapters, similar to the Nigadum. For whatever reason, the first and last of the 4 law books are both missing roughly a dozen chapters, a similar amount to what the Hadoxt nask was missing at that time. Still, as these were all legal books, it is very plausible that the redactors would have had the ability to rearrange chapters and content to reach an even number of 65 each. Finally, the Bagān-Yasn is given the number of 17 by the Rivāyats, rather than the more likely number of 22. It could be they were simply missing 5 chapters, or it could be that the organization of this book led to some confusion, perhaps due to the way it had ordered the reworked pre-Zoroastrian epic poetry. Again, the number of 22 makes the most sense.

Finally, I should note that this would have been impossible without the numbers given by the Rivāyats, as they give us a chapter count for every single book. Even though they were missing chapters here and there, the count they give for each book is remarkably reliable, except for the Hadoxt, which, without the number of 133 from the Dēnkard, would have required a large assumption to reach the correct system. In some places they are missing one chapter (such as the Bag, Warsht-Mansr, Nadar, and Pazag) or a few chapters (such as the Dāmdād and Bagān-Yasn) and in others they are missing roughly a dozen chapters, such as in the Nigadum and the Sagadum. What is also surprising is that their chapter count for the last four books of the Hadha-Manthra (the Ratuštāiti, Bariš, Kishkisirub, and the Vištāsp-sast) work both in the overall and section count despite their own admittance of them missing large parts of these books. The fact that they remember these books' original chapter count, while being ignorant about the missing parts of the Hadoxt and the 4 law books, for example, points to a more recent loss of these books, despite their attribution to Alexander.

### Changes made

Gathic:

- Staōta Yesnya: 33 → (+39 = 72)
- Sūdgar: 22
- Waršt-mansr: 23
- Bag: 22

- Vaštag: 22
- Hadoxt: 133 → 144 (11)
- Spand: 60

Total: 315 → 326 (+39 = 365)

Hadha-Manthric:

- Dāmdād: 32 → 36 (4)
- Nadar: 35 → 36 (1)
- Pazag: 22 → 23 (1)
- Ratuštāiti: 50
- Bariš: 60
- Kishkisrub: 60
- Vištāsp-sast: 60

Total: 319 → 325

Datic:

- Nigadum: 30 → 54 → 65 (35/11)
- Duwasrud: 65
- Husparum: 64 → 65 (1)
- Sagadum: 52 → 65 (13)
- Vidaēvadāta: 22
- Čihrdād: 22
- Bagān-Yasn: 17 → 22 (5)

Total: 296 → 326



Total: 930 → 977 (+39) → 1016

### Attribution

This intricate system, as I indicated earlier, is best attributed to the official canonization of the Avesta under the hērbad (aēθrapaiti) and great figure of Zoroastrianism, Tansar. The Dēnkard in two separate places (see Humbach, 1991, pg. 53) describes Tansar, under the authority of Ardashēr, as collecting all the scattered remnants of the Avesta, approving and disapproving of certain books, and consolidating the scriptural authority to the Sassanian state.

Interestingly, the Letter of Tansar seems to be at its core a genuine letter of Tansar, if muddled by translation and interpolation (for a discussion, see Boyce 1968, pg. 1-22). It does give some insights into the reasoning of Tansar. For instance, he saw himself as carrying on a long tradition of asceticism and wisdom-searching born out of the trying times of Darius (III), and that he viewed himself as intricately connected to the souls of Zoroastrians long past, who would rejoice in his restoration of the religion (ibid. pg. 31-34). More importantly, (ibid pg. 37) he also states that of the (Achaemenid) Avesta written on 1200 oxhides (that is, partitioned into parchments)<sup>6</sup> only 1/3 survived the destruction of Alexander as they were memorized by heart.

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<sup>6</sup> In general, this prospect is regarded as dubious. However, for evidence of a Parthian/Pre-Sassanid Avestan script, Av.  (ȳ) was likely adapted from  a Greek terminal Sigma (Minns 1915, Parchment II) via a unique cursive (ibid. pg. 27), perhaps Seleuco-Parthian, to represent a phonetic variation of the /y/ phoneme in initial

However, while it seems certain that Tansar was responsible for canonizing the Avesta, there is no conclusive proof that this system was devised by or under him. In fact, this system only seems to be vaguely remembered by the Dēnkard and Zādspram. Still, it is most likely that this system would have been devised during the official canonization, with perhaps modifications or alterations later on.

## Conclusion

The system I have demonstrated here is, in my opinion, the uncovering of a highly sophisticated, numerological, and interrelated system compiled from a larger set of religious literature in order to create a wholly cohesive and authoritative canon of scripture worthy of esteem and veneration. This system must have been born from a desire to treat the Avesta as being intimately tied to each minute piece of the Gathas and the Ahunwar, giving it the authority as an extension of those which are the very core and origin of the religion.

Interestingly, based on the chapter count given by the Rivāyats, the Iranian Zoroastrian community may have still had about 60% of the Avesta in the 14th-15th centuries AD, along with a functional knowledge of the contents of each book. This is remarkable as today we have maybe 13% of the Avesta, by my estimation, and, without the Dēnkard or the Rivāyats, we would have no knowledge of the rest.

Also to be noted is the Yasna's unique relationship to the Avesta. Generally, in organized religions (e.g. Buddhism, Hinduism, and the Abrahamic religions), liturgies and liturgical manuals are not considered part of the canon but exist alongside it and complement it. Otherwise, the religious canon contains materials that explicate and elaborate on the core religious ideas, usually consisting of mythical history, religious poetry, and prescriptive rules (among other things). In our two summaries, we see a nearly identical system exhibited in the Avesta. Books like the Sūdgar and Čīhrdād gave us myths, the Bayām and Bariš explained religious concepts, the Dāmdād detailed a creation account, and the Vidaēvadāta prescribed rules for righteous conduct. While the Avesta as it existed before the modern era does resemble the canon of other religions, it seems to have an exception as it embedded deeply the main liturgy as a way of giving the Yasna added significance.

The identity of the Yasna, however, certainly differed from our current version to some extent. Most notably, Yasna 9-11 (Hom Yasht) and 19-21 (Bayām 1-3) were pulled from the Bagān-Yasn and the Bayām Nasks respectively. The reason for this was likely that the Yasna was starting to lose sections, just like many Avestan books, and these were substituted from other Nasks in order to keep the chapter count at 72. Such a reasoning may extend to the Staota Yesnya, as the number of 33 seems unreachable with the current Old Avestan and Archaic (or Archaizing) Young Avestan materials contained in the Yasna. Also, worth noting is that the Staota Yesnya, including the Gathas, seems to have had an existence outside the Yasna, a prospect which, while unattested, could raise questions for the transmission and received pronunciation of the Gathas.<sup>7</sup>

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position that was likely a palatized ž sound (see Martínez and de Vaan 2014, pg. 8-9, 22). In the creation of the current Avestan Script, this ž allophone would be represented by a variation of 𐬯 (š), 𐬯 (y), leading to the then archaic 𐬯 being used for the non-palatized initial /y/ and being flipped for initial /w/ 𐬯 (v), both of which retain the shorter bottom of the Sigma and 'blocky' shape in proper Avestan graphology. Moreover, 𐬯 (Av. θ) may derive from 𐬯 (Phi), via the same cursive, suggesting the variant 𐬯 may be a distinct letter, perhaps via Aramaic 𐤕ēth.

<sup>7</sup> Although such speculation is useless without any physical evidence.

As for why this system of sophisticated interrelation and interconnection, which may pass completely undetected unless one is made aware, was encoded into the Avesta, one may find an existing precedent in the even more complex systems of SOLOS and SCRIM that are employed in the Gathas (see Schwartz 2022 for an introduction). The reasoning for such hidden complexity seems to be a bit obscure, but one may understand it as a way to make an extremely significant piece of literature ‘monumental enough to be worthy’. However, a concurrent reasoning may be that the process of encoding deeper connections and hidden knowledge was a way of teaching an initiated how to search for deeper truth. Such a sentiment is reflected in Zaratustra’s own words, in Yasna 48.3:

*aṭ vaēdāmnāi | vahištā sāsnanqm  
yqm hudā | sāstī ašā ahurō  
spəntō vīduuā | yaēcīṭ gūzrā səṇṇhāṇhō  
θbāuuqs mazdā | vaṇhəuš xraθbā manāṇhō*

Now for one knowing is the best of teachings,  
Which the beneficent Lord teaches through the Order [of existence],  
(To be) a growthful knower of those, truly, which are hidden proclamations;  
(To be) one like You, O Wisdom, by an intellect of the Good Mind.

While the precedent exists in the Gathas (and we now have evidence for a similar complexity in the Avesta), it is possible that this process of sophisticated interconnection was present in individual Avestan books. For instance, it has been shown that Dēnkard book 9’s summary of the Sūdgar Nask exhibits of ring composition (Vevaina, 2024, pg. 3). One may also wonder if the four great authorities of Zoroastrianism in the 5th and 6th centuries after Zaratustra, Arəzuua, Sruta-spaḍa, Zraīah, and Spənto-Xratu, who produced interpretations of his teachings (as summarized from the Spand by Dēnkard 7.7.8-10, cf. Fravardin Yasht.115) could have composed Avestan works with similar systems or otherwise belonged to a system which continued such complexity.

Ultimately, such a system of interrelation between the Gathas and the Avesta can’t be conclusively proven without the whole Avesta extant, and we are reliant on piecing this system together from multiple sources, the results of which are evident in what I have written. Still, given that each assumption is logical and harmoniously concurrent, I feel confident in the veracity of this reconstruction.

This Avesta, this canon of the Sassanid Dynasty, certainly must have been a very large and sprawling work, consisting of 1016 chapters spread across 21 different books, covering every topic the redactors thought necessary. Sadly, due to the slow decline of the Zoroastrian priesthood and that great filter which was the small liturgical corpus of the Parsi priesthood, this text is mostly lost to us, and what remained, conforming to the particular needs of Zoroastrianism in the 16-18th centuries, gives one a skewed perception of the whole. Still, it seems certain such a corpus existed, and that it contained within, among many other things, a complex numerological system, intricately tying it to the Gathas of Zaratustra, the very origin of the Zoroastrian religion.

## Appendix

During the research of this article, I discovered evidence that the Spand Nask, via Dēnkard 7.7, likely contained a genuine Avestan historical account; although, at the present I am unable to write about it fully, hence this appendix. As stated before, Dēnkard 7 is best interpreted as a ‘play-by-play’ summary or large epitome of the Spand Nask (not an attempt at a genuine, narrational work of interpretation, such as the comparable Selections of Zādspram), due to it being primarily a collection of overviews of events with frequent allusions to what the Avesta or the Dēn (here ‘religion’) says (of which can often be reconstructed to Avestan originals, see Cereti 2010). A connection between the two is admitted by Dēnkard 8 under its brief summary of the Spand, although it does not detail the exact connection.

As to why Dēnkard 7 is placed before rather than after the short summaries of the Avesta (Dēnkard 8) or the long summaries of three Avestan books (Dēnkard 9), it was likely that the original author, Farroxxzādān, intended this as a summary of the Spand, but when the secondary author, Ēmēdān, was recompiling the remnants of Farroxxzādān’s work, he mistook this as an original work and subsequently placed it before the Avesta summaries (cf. West 1892, pg. xliii, for it being the author(s) initial intent to do a Dēnkard 9 summary of each Avestan book, although he attributes this to the second author).

Interestingly, the narrative of Vidaēvadāta 2, where Yima creates the enclosure to protect from the winter storm, is most likely the basis for Dēnkard 7.1.20-24,<sup>8</sup> suggesting that Vidaēvadāta 2 was borrowed from the first section of the Spand (via Dēnkard 7.1 where Ahura Mazda converses with pre-Zarathushtrian Iranian heroes) to help it reach 22 chapters.<sup>9</sup> More importantly, the overt (ice) flood narrative was possibly influenced by Mesopotamian flood myths (such as the Atrahasis epic), which allows us to tentatively date this work to Median or Achaemenid times (see Grenet 2005 for an unrelated dating of the Spand to Achaemenid times).

Most importantly, given that Dēnkard 7 is a summary of the Spand, the narrative of Dēnkard 7.7, typically assumed to be a “history of the Sassanid dynasty”, must be re-examined. Upon a closer look, it seems to be a historical account of the time between Zaratuštra and the Spand which is distorted by an attempt, most likely of the Zand, to read Sassanid figures into an older Avestan narrative, usually saying something along the lines of “regarding \_\_, it/the dēn says this...”. These supposed references to Ardashir, Tansar, or Adurbad, for example, have nothing to do with said person, and the quotation often bears the narrative style of Avestan material (see Dēnkard 7.7.7, 12-13, 14-17, 19-20, 21-25, and 26-28).

With that being said, what can be drawn from this fragmentary historical account (in conjunction with Zādspram 23 which draws on the same material in question) is that it was cast in the ‘millennia of Zaratuštra’<sup>10</sup> (with similar millennia given in Dēnkard 7.9-11) as well as some rough, preliminary dates. Firstly, Dēnkard 7.7.5-6 and Zādspram 23 give an account of the early days of the religion after Zaratuštra, with the latter giving very specific years. Then, in Z

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<sup>8</sup> 7.1.20 on Yima and the four classes may have been an elaboration by the Zand. cf. Dēnkard 7.9.3 where the enclosure is opened, giving closure to the narrative set up there (cf. also Pahlavi Rivāyat 48.17, where the whole of the passage seems to be interpreting the same base text as Dēnkard 7.9).

<sup>9</sup> Any non-legal material in the Vidaēvadāta, again, was likely borrowed from other parts of the Avesta, where Vidaēvadāta 1 would make more sense in the Dāmdād as part of the accounting of creation, 2 in the pre-Zarathushtra ‘conversings with Mazda’, 3 from an uncertain place, 19 again from the Spand (see Grenet 2005), and 20-22 from uncertain places.

<sup>10</sup> Dēnkard 8 summary of the Spand in general accords well with Dēnkard 7, although 8.14.10-11 seems to be referring to this account.



23.11-12 and D 7.7.7, both imply some great tragedy and subsequent dark times in the 4<sup>th</sup> century after Zaratustra. Following this Dēnkard 7.7.8-10 then tells us the four figures who helped revive the religion in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, these being Arəzuua, Sruta-spaḍa, Zraiah, and Spənto-Xratu (cf. Farvardin Yasht.115).

From here, the narrative is completely lost. Although, in Dēnkard 7.8 a prophetic account of the 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries after Zaratustra is given, allowing us to determine this book saw itself in the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century after Zaratustra. Given a tentative dating of the Spand to Median/Achaemenid times (i.e. the 7<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries BC), we can estimate this book saw Zaratustra as living 700-600 years before 700-400 BC, or ~1400-1100 BC.<sup>11</sup>

Also, of potential interest is the Zand i Wahman Yasn<sup>12</sup> which, discounting the first two chapters, reads as if its following a parallel narrative to Dēnkard 7.8-11, albeit in a very interpretive manner. This prospect will be considered thoroughly at another date; although, the quotation in Dēnkard 7.8.10 mentioning mixed iron makes the possibility of a parallel connection strong.

Regardless, this account is unfortunately lost, but the prospect of it once existing raises questions about the assumptions we typically make regarding the nature of Avestan material as well as the origin of the historical method.

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<sup>11</sup> Given the extremely tentative nature of these estimations, one could easily see the ice flood narrative as a native Central Asian tradition and move the dates to a different range. What's more certain is the restored Spand timeline with an as-of-now uncertain date of composition.

<sup>12</sup> The name itself seems to imply an Avestan text (probably the Vištāsp Nask's equivalent section to the Spand's apocalyptic narrative) was extracted as a "Vohu Manah Yasna", either a sequential honoring of the Aməša Spəntas with apocalyptic Avestan texts or an honoring of the (pseudo-?)historical Vohu-Manah, son of Spəntōdāta, who is conflated with Ardašir in Chapter 3.24 (cf. Dēnkard 7.7.5). Also worth considering is Pahlavi Rivāyat 48.56, likely from the Spand, having Soshyans perform multiple yasnas to raise the dead.

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