

Restoring the Chapter Count of the Original Avesta

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

Introduction

These days most Zoroastrians, as well as those interested in their religion, perceive the *Avesta* as a moderately sized set of religious rituals which encapsulate the *Gāthās* and a number of other theologically interesting works. In this way, the *Avesta* is seen as a liturgical manual that, while containing a few interesting insights on theology, mythology, and practice, is otherwise mainly concerned with the current, ongoing ritual. Moreover, material containing exegetical commentaries or mythological narratives, such as one finds in most other religious traditions, is supposed to have existed alongside these rituals as oral knowledge until it was finally written down towards the end of the Sasanid period of Iran (224–651 AD) in a corpus commonly referred to as Pahlavi literature. It is often asserted that this Pahlavi literature, while explaining many things the *Avesta* seemingly does not, reflects the dualistic theology of the Sasanids and does little to elucidate earlier Zoroastrian belief.

This perception, which in my experience has been a guiding paradigm of Zoroastrian hermeneutics in the modern age is determined inaccurate on reexamination. Standing in stark contrast to this viewpoint 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 negotiated via modern interpretation but are explained either in great detail or terse, general summaries, depending on the source. Moreover, the Pahlavi literature may 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,¹ and many of these works are directly or indirectly derived from contemporary translations of now missing Avestan books.²

Since the full scope of what could be deduced regarding the full Sasanid canon is a mammoth task, this article will mainly focus on restoring the original chapter count of the *Avesta*, given the matter is sufficiently complex. This article is also 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

¹ For instance, in *Šāyest Nē Šāyest* 1.3–4 (as well as throughout and in the *Pahlavi Nērangestān*) six primary Sasanid commentators of the *Avesta* are mentioned—*Gōgušasp*, *Ādur-Ohrmazd*, *Sōšyāns*, *Ādurfarnbag Narseh*, *Mēdyōmāh*, and *Abarg*—who seemed to have either produced commentaries of the whole *Avesta* or solely the legal section. Given this, and the size of the *Avesta* at roughly a million words (see fn. 3), this alone could have constituted a sizable midrashic corpus.

² Such as *Dēnkard* Book 7 to the *Spand Nask* and the *Bundahišn* to the *Dāmdād*, for both see below.

rigorously edited to correspond numerologically to the Gāθās and the *Ahunwar* Prayer, and each book necessarily had a numerologically significant number, such as 22, 36, or 144, allowing it to make numerological correspondences in the greater Avesta and to stand on its own as a numerological system. (For numerological correspondence in relation to Avestan material, see Vevaina 2024, pp. 50–61; Vevaina 2024a in general).

Sources

To start, there are two key sources for the Sasanid 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, pp. 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 Gāθās. Furthermore, Book 7, in my analysis, is a piece-by-piece summary of a now missing, individual Avestan book on the legend of Zaratūštra, in a style akin to *Dēnkard* 9.

Regarding the *Dēnkard*, it should be noted that while the author 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 *Waštāg Nask* as well as the *zand* (‘translation with commentary’) of the *Nādar Nask*; although, one would not be remiss in assuming they were also missing sections of other books. It should further be noted that the author 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 *Nādar Nask*, even though he had access to the Avestan text (see also West 1892, p. 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, including 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*. In this respect, the *Rivāyats* can be very useful if not taken as definitive.

The final source is the *Wizīdagīhā ī Zādspram* (‘Anthology [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 *Zādspram* (West 1892, pp. 9 and 404) that the Avesta was organized according to the *Ahunwar* or *Yaθā Ahū* 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 *Gāθic*, ‘that which is related to the Gāθās’; the *Haḍa.mąθric*, that which is ‘alongside the *mąθrā-s* (Gāθās)’, i.e. priestly science, philosophy, geography, theology etc.; and the *Dātic*, which was primarily legal but also contained some mythical history. Each of these sections had 7 nasks (or books) for a total of 21 nasks, with each book having a corresponding word in the Yaθā Ahū prayer.

Both these sources also tell us the point of this article: that there were 1000 *fragard-s* (‘chapters’) of the Avesta for the 1016 lines of the Gāθās. This particular line count is gained by adding the actual line count of the Gāθās, 896, to the 120 lines of the *Yasna Haptañhāiti*, imparting an added numerologically significance to the Gathas. This, in fact, may have been one of the motivations behind the composition Haptañhāiti, a prospect which needs to be investigated further.

Beyond this, Zādspram (West 1892, pp. 401–405) also tells us that there were 278 categories for the 278 stanzas of the Gāθās and 6666 ordinances for the 6666 words of the Gāθās (again, both are reached by the addition of the *Haptañhāiti*). 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, coincidentally, are the only Avestan books which Dēnkard 8 distinctly notes these categories/sections. As this is most probably the only information we possess regarding the categories and ordinances, determining the rest would be guesswork.

All the same, it is strange that we are told there were only 1000 fragards for the 1016 lines of the Gāθās, rather than 1016. As the Sasanid Avesta was probably canonized from a larger set of Avestan works, likely by a council of religious authorities under the authority of Tansar (see **Attribution**), 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 *Vendidād* (here on, *Wīdēwdād*) was compiled during the Parthian or Sasanid Dynasties (see Malandra 2000), and the Zands of Young Avestan tend to show a decent understanding of the language (e.g. the Pahlavi *Wīdēwdād*’s similarity to the *Wīdēwdād*), 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 chapters of the *Wīdēwdād* seem to be borrowed from other Avestan nasks during the initial canonization, as I argue. Cf. Grenet’s (2005) tentative suggestion that Fragard 19 was recycled from the Spand, which I instead see as a strong probability; I further argue that Fragard 1 is from the *Dāmdād* and 2 is also from the Spand, see below.

A more probable explanation is that enough chapters were missing by the times of the Dēnkard and 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 *Nigādom*, the Dēnkard is preferable. The chart

is laid out below:

Gāθic:

- Staota Yesniia (Stōd-yasn): R33
- Sūdgar: R, D22
- Warštmānsr: R22, D23
- Bag: R21, D22
- Waštag: R22
- Hādōxt: R30, D133
- Spand: R60

Total: 315

Haḍa.maθric:

- Dāmdād: R32
- Nādar: R35
- Pāzag: R22
- Ratuštāiti: R50 (13)
- Bariš: R60 (12)
- Kaškaysraw: R60 (13)
- Wištāsp-sāst: R60 (8)

Total: 319

Dātic:

- Nigādom: D30(?), R54
- Duzd-sar-ōzad: D, R65
- Huspārām: D, R64
- Sagādom: D, R52
- Vendidad/Widēwdād: 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. (For the transliterations of the Pahlavi names of the nasks, see Vevaina 2024, p. 213).

Gāθic (i.e. Spiritual)

Staota Yesniia (Stōd-yasn):

This book was composed of the Gāθās, the *Yasna Haptaṅhāiti*, 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 Gāθās (along with the Haptaṅhāiti and the four core prayers), the *Staota Yesniia* contained a few other old prayers and compositions, such as the *Fravarānē* and the *Fšūšō Maθra*. This number of 33 is also given to us in the *Yasna* ceremony, which is the liturgy that encapsulates the *Staota Yesniia*, as in *Yasna* 2.10, the ceremony is dedicated to the 33 *ratus* (‘models’) of *Aša*, which were first spoken forth by *Zaraθuštra*.

Sūdgar

This book was part of a series in the *Gāθic* section which elaborated on each *hāiti* (‘concatenated poem’; see Schwartz 2002 [2006]) of the Gāθās as well as the *Haptaṅhāiti* and the four manthras. This book in particular related myths and legends to each section of the Gāθās. We have a chapter-by-chapter summary in Dēnkard 9 which agrees with the Rivāyats’ number of 22 fragards.³ The number of 22 is the most common chapter count of Avestan books as it mirrors the number which represents the Gāθās: 22. The name *Sūdgar* probably means ‘explicating/ enacting the benefits (of the Gāθās)’ implying that the author(s) saw these myths as the beneficial things which one could glean from the Gāθās. In connection with Dēnkard 9, the *Pahlavi Rivāyats*, not to be confused with the Persian Rivāyats, has two sections which derive from separate chapters of this book: 18d.3–22 on Fragard 10 and 18f on Fragard 14.

Warštmanšr (Varəštō.Maθra)

This is another book in the series which elaborated on the Gāθās, 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.maθra*, is best understood as ‘making real the Manthras (of *Zaraθuštra*)’ (see Insler 1975, p. 150, who takes [O]Av. *varšt-* to mean ‘bring to realization’ [i.e. ‘to actualize’] 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.

Bag (Baṅam)

This is another in the Gāθās series; it detailed the greater meaning of each piece of the Gāθās, including the theological ramifications and recitational considerations. Its first three chapters are found in *Yasna* 19–21, where we are given its Avestan name: *baṅam*, accusative of *baṅā* (‘*Gāθic*’ piece, section’. The name was possibly shortened from *baṅam baṅam* ‘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.

Waštāg

Since 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

³ Besides the *Yasna* and *Staota Yesniia*, the average size of an Avestan fragard tends to be 800–1200 words, which I have obtained through a tentative wordcount analysis of all extant Avestan material containing ‘full fragards’ (e.g. *Wīdēwdād*, *Yašts*, *Hādōxt* 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%.

certain if this was part of the Gāthās series, it being the final book in the *Gāthic* section with 22 chapters makes it likely. There is no reason to doubt the numbering.

Hādōxt (Haḍa.aoxta)

This book was seemingly a large compilation of compositions posthumously attributed to Zaratuštra and his companions, hence the name *haḍa.aoxta* ‘what was said alongside (the Manthras of Zaratuštra)’, in my estimation. Against Jean Kellens (2002), there is no reason to see this book as a complement to other liturgical texts because the few surviving fragments (Hādōxt 1–2, Srōšyašt Hādōxt.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 throughout the Avesta, including its frequent use in the Vištāsp Yasht to refer to what Zaratuštra 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, since 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 by Zādspram (see West 1892, p. 404), alongside the religious and broadly encompassing nature of its content.

Spand

This book was a legendary biography of Zaratuštra and the history of the religion before and after him. Besides a short summary in Dēnkard 8 and interpretative sources like the *Wizīdagīhā ī 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 and the summary of the legal books in 8. (West 1897, pp. ix–xviii, was of the opinion Dēnkard 7 was based on 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 because it is used for the last three books of the Haḍa.maθric, the numbers work well both here and in that section.

In accordance with Dēnkard 7, we can see it started with a narrative of the mythical history leading up to Zaratuštra (interestingly, Dēnkard 7.1.20/21–24 reads like a summary of *Wīdēwdād* Chapter 2, indicating that chapter may have been derived from here). It then covered the life and legend of Zaratuštra, followed by a history of the religion after him. This history sadly only survives in Dēnkard 7.7 which is muddled by an attempt, most likely of the Zand, to read Sasanid figures into an older narrative.⁴ Finally, the book had a prophecy of the end of Zaratuštra’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 derived from the same base Avestan narrative (via the Zand).

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

○ Total: 326

⁴ 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.

Haḍa.maθric

Dāmdād

This was a creation narrative which included accounts of biology and geography in its grander creation narrative. 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, p. xxiv) was of a similar opinion.

Given this likelihood, *Wīdēwdād* 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 being contained 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*. Separately, this chapter was borrowed as the first chapter of the *Wīdēwdād* to make it reach 22 chapters, leading to the modern confusion regarding the origin of *Wīdēwdād* 1. Similarly, *Zamyād Yašt* (19).1–7, also akin to *Bundahišn* IX (MacKenzie 1989), was likely from this book as well; indicating that at some point after the Muslim invasion it was extracted and inexplicably placed before the likewise extracted *Bagān-yasn* chapter on the *xʷarənah* (*farr*) of ancient Iran, giving rise to the inapplicable name *zamyād yašt* ‘Hymn to the Land’.

As for the count of 36, if the *Greater Bundahišn*, which dates perhaps a century or two after the *Dēnkard* (Anklesaria 1956, pp. 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. The fact that several of the *Bundahišn*’s chapters are material contemporary to its writing, and many other chapters are less comprehensive than others, could point to the fragmentary nature of the Zand and/or the whole *Dāmdād Nask* at the time of composition.

Nādar

The Rivāyats give us the number of 35, which, as 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. *Pahlavi Rivāyat* Chapters 35 and 65 were possibly drawn from the *Nādar Nask* as well.

Pāzag

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 mānsr*, 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 can be seen as having 23 separate ‘sentences’, or distinct descriptions, on this book with each describing a different chapter. While my arguments are a bit tentative for the *Pāzag*, it is very common for the Rivāyats to be a number short in the books with chapters around 22.

Ratuštāiti

A book on everything that pertained to *Ratus* (spiritual leaders who also acted as judges, concurrently a word meaning ‘model’ and ‘judgment’). While the short Dēnkard summary, perhaps based on the first few chapters, gives the impression of a strictly legal work, the summaries found in the Rivāyats suggest it also contained other types of material, such as instructions for building cities and the nature of humans and animals, indicating alternate meanings of *ratu*. 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 caused by the slow decline of the Zoroastrian community. If we attribute the loss to Alexander, we also have to attribute 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 (may) have covered. The Rivāyats state that there were 60 chapters but 12 remained. The Rivāyats’ summary of this book is likely derived from these 12 remaining chapters along with any oral knowledge of the book in its whole. Such a likelihood should extend to the other 3 fragmentary *Haḍa.mqθric* books.

Kaškaysraw

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

Wištāsp-sast

This book must have been similar to the *Spand* but about the story of Kava Vištāspa 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* (the Greek borrowing of Iranian *Vištāspa*) 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 *Wištāsp-sast* have the same chapter count, are at the end of their sections, and cover Zaratuštra and his patron respectively (for a contradictory opinion, see Sundermann 2013). In this way, the *Zand ī Wahman Yasn* and *Pahlavi Rivāyat 36* (both of which appear to be derived from the same base text) are possibly drawing from this apocalyptic section of the *Wištāsp-sast*.

Haḍa.mqθric count: 36, 36, 23, 50, 60, 60, 60

- Total: 325

Dātic (legal)

Nigādom

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 *Nigādom* of thirty fragards” while the Rivāyats say it had 54 sections. E.W. West (1892, p. 35, fn. 3) attributes the discrepancy to the Rivāyats reaching their calculation by 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. p. 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 *Nigādom*” followed by “in the fifth section 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 (this problem 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 *Duzd-sar-ōzad* (ibid., p. 74): “The first of eighteen sections of the [*Duzd-sar-ōzad*] contains particulars about the thief,” and in the *Huspārām* (ibid, p. 92): “One section of the first thirty of the [*Huspārām*] is the *Aērpāstīstān*, particulars about.” More examples can be found throughout.

Duzd-sar-ōzad

The Rivāyats say there were 65 fragards. The Dēnkard gives us this number in three separate places: “The first of eighteen sections of the [*Duzd-sar-ōzad*]” (ibid. p. 74), then “One section of the next twelve is the *Pasūš-haūrvastān*” (ibid. p. 81), then finally “The first section of the last thirty-five is the *Stōristān*” (ibid. p. 84). This counts to 65.

Huspārām

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 [*Huspārām*]” (ibid. p. 92) followed by “one section of the next twenty contains particulars...” (ibid. p. 105) then finally “six fragards of one section of the last fourteen contains particulars” (ibid. p. 112). This reaches 64.

Sagādom

The Dēnkard and Rivāyats give us the number of 52, with the Dēnkard having it in the phrasing “of the first thirty” (ibid. p. 121) and “of the last twenty-two” (ibid. p. 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 *Hādōxt* in the Dēnkard.

Widēwdād

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 *Widēwdād*, although this does not affect our numbering. As stated a few times in this article, particularly under the *Dāmdād* and *Spand*, the fragards of this book not containing religious/purity laws, that is 1–3 and 19–22, were

likely recycled from other places of the Avesta in order for the chapter count to reach 22. The chapters chosen either had themes regarding the purity of the Earth and the attacks of Ahriman (1–3) or medicine, particularly against the ills and diseases caused by Ahriman (19–22).

Čihrdād

This book was a mythical history of mankind and the various kings of ancient Iran, probably cast in long, epic poetry.⁵ 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 Wīdēwdād precedes it and the Bagān-yasn (also being 22) follows it. Its name in Avestan is to be reconstructed as *ciθrō.dāta* ‘the establishment of lineage(s)’, since 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 Dātic section was crafted it was 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 Hōm and Srōš 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. The name *Bagān-yasn* means the ‘yasna-s to the gods’, seemingly retaining an earlier use of Av. *yasna* like Sanskrit *yajña*.

Dātic count: 65, 65, 65, 65, 22, 22, 22

- Total: 326

Numbering of Sections

For most of 2024, I tried several 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 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 that these ancient redactors had devised. And yet, with this evenly denominated numbering of sections, one only gets 977 chapters, and the question still remains of how to get to the proper number.

⁵ Two Avestan quotations found in Pahlavi Wīdēwdād 2.5, (Anklesaria 1946, p. 18) regarding Yima and Kay Us are likely from this book (cf. Schwartz forthcoming).

In total, we have 326 for the first and last section, with 325 in the middle. As just 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, because if we add these 39 missing chapters to the 33 chapters of the *Staota Yesniia*, 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 Yesniia* into a ceremonial ritual. Moreover, the identity of these 39 chapters is most certainly the repetitive, liturgical material found throughout in the modern Yasna. Moreover, if we add these 39 chapters of the Yasna onto the 326 chapters of the *Gāθic* section, we reach 365 chapters, one for each day of the year. This is especially important considering how fundamental the Gāθās and the *Gāhānbār* holidays were to the seasonal functioning of the year. Moreover, the *Gāθic* being the largest section with the addition of the Yasna indicates the primacy of the Gāθās 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 Yesniia*.

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

Original fragard count:

Gāθic:

- Staota Yesniia: 33/72
- Sūdgar: 22
- Warštmānsr: 23
- Bag: 22
- Wašttag: 22
- Hādōxt: 144
- Spand: 60

Total: 365 (326 + 39)

Haḍa.maθric:

- Dāmdād: 36
- Nādar: 36
- Pāzag: 23
- Ratuštāiti: 50
- Bariš: 60
- Kaškaysraw: 60
- Wištāsp-sāst: 60

Total: 325

Dātic:

- Nigādom: 65
- Duzd-sar-ōzad: 65
- Huspārām: 65
- Sagādom: 65
- Wīdēwdād: 22

- Čihrdād: 22
- Bagān-yasn: 22

Total: 326

Grand total: 365 + 325 + 326 = 1016

Review

As we can see from the chart, 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 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 *Hādōxt* was the only book changed in the *Gāthic* section, which points to the care taken to keep this section intact. It was changed from 133 (according to the Dēnkard) to 144 based on the significance of this number, 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 *Haḍa.məθric* section, only the first three books were changed by a small amount: 4, 1, and 1. Because the Dēnkard gives us no numbers for any of the books in this section (besides the 23 separate descriptions of the *Pāzag*'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 *Gāthic* section (the *Bag* and *Warštmānsr*).

The *Dātic* section received the most changes and the largest jumps. Firstly, the Rivāyats gave the more correct number for the *Nigādom*, while the Dēnkard was confused. The next nask, the *Duzd-sar-ōzad*, had the correct number of 65, while the following nask, the *Huspārām*, was 1 chapter short, at 64. Finally, the *Sagādom* is given the number of 52 chapters, similar to the *Nigādom*. 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 *Hādōxt* was missing at that time. Still, because 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 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 reconstruction would have been impossible without the numbers given by the Rivāyats, since they give us a chapter count for every single book. Even though they were missing chapters in more than a few places, the count they give for each book is remarkably reliable, except for their count of 30 for the *Hādōxt*, which, without the number of 133 from the Dēnkard, would have required a considerable assumption to reach the correct system. In some places the books are missing one chapter (such as the *Bag*, *Warštmānsr*, *Nādar*, and *Pāzag*) 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 *Nigādom* and the *Sagādom*. What is also surprising is that their chapter count for the last four books of the *Haḍa.məθra* (the *Ratuštāiti*, *Bariš*, *Kaškaysraw*, and the *Wištāsp-sāst*) work both in the overall and section count despite their

own admittance of their missing large parts of these books. The fact that they remember the original chapter count of these books, while being ignorant about the missing parts of the *Hādōxt* and the 4 law books, for example, points to a more recent loss of these books, despite their attribution to Alexander.

Changes made

Gāθic:

- Staota Yesniia: 33 → (+39 = 72)
- Sūdgar: 22
- Warštmānsr: 23
- Bag: 22
- Waštag: 22
- Hādōxt: 133 → 144 (11)
- Spand: 60

Total: 315 → 326 (+39 = 365)

Haḍa.maθric:

- Dāmdād: 32 → 36 (4)
- Nādar: 35 → 36 (1)
- Pāzag: 22 → 23 (1)
- Ratuštāiti: 50
- Bariš: 60
- Kaškaysraw: 60
- Wištāsp-sāst: 60

Total: 319 → 325

Dātic:

- Nigādom: 30 → 54 → 65 (35/11)
- Duzd-sar-ōzad: 65
- Huspārām: 64 → 65 (1)
- Sagādom: 52 → 65 (13)
- Wīdēwdād: 22
- Čihrdād: 22
- Bagān-yasn: 17 → 22 (5)

Total: 296 → 326

Total: 930 → 977 (+39) → 1016

Attribution

This intricate system 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, p. 53) describes Tansar, under the authority of Ardašēr, as collecting all the scattered remnants of the Avesta, approving and disapproving of certain books, and consolidating the scriptural authority to the Sasanian 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, pp. 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 achievements (ibid. pp. 31–34). More consequentially, (ibid. p. 37) he also states that of the (Achaemenid) Avesta written on 1200 ox hides (that is, partitioned into parchments)⁶ only 1/3 survived the destruction of Alexander as they were memorized by heart. Tansar also states that of third that was memorized by heart, none of it contained law and ordinances. If this is true, it may mean the legal materials were composed or heavily recompiled under his auspices, which is evidenced by the numerous grammatical and syntactical problems and “patchwork” nature of the *Wīdēwdād* (see Malandra 2000).










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

What 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 *Gāthās* 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 *Čihrdād* gave us myths, the *Bayqm* and *Bariš* explained religious concepts, the *Dāmdād* detailed a creation account, and the *Wīdēwdād* prescribed rules for righteous conduct. While the Avesta as it existed before the modern era does resemble the

⁶ In general, this prospect is regarded as dubious. However, for evidence of a Parthian Avestan script, Av.  (ý) was likely adapted from  a Greek terminal Sigma in the Avroman documents (Minns 1915, Parchment II) via a unique cursive (ibid. p. 27), perhaps Seleuco-Parthian, to represent a phonetic variation of the /y/ phoneme in initial position that was likely a palatized ž sound (see Martínez and de Vaan 2014, pp. 8–9, 22). In the creation of the current Script, this ž allophone would be represented by a variation of  (š),  (y), leading to the archaic  being used for the non-palatized initial /y/ and being flipped for initial /w/  (v), both of which retain the shorter bottom of the Sigma and ‘blocky’ shape in proper Avestan graphology. Moreover,  (Av. θ) may derive from  (Phi), via the same cursive, suggesting the variant  may be a distinct letter, perhaps via Aramaic Ṭēth.

canon of other religions, it seems to be an exception because 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 (*Hōm Yašt*) and 19–21 (*Bayqm* 1–3) were pulled from the *Bagān-yasn* and the *Bayqm Nask* 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 reasoning may extend to the *Staota Yesniia*, 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 Yesniia*, including the Gāθās, may have had an existence outside the Yasna, a prospect which, while unattested, could raise questions for the transmission and received pronunciation of the Gāθās.

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 Gāθās (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 learner how to search for deeper truth. Such a sentiment is reflected in Zoroaster’s own words in Yasna 48.3, according to which, one who truly understands the ‘hidden proclamations/utterances’ (*gūzrā sēnghānhō*, see Schwartz 2022a) in effect becomes like Mazda.

While this precedent of sophisticated interrelation exists in the Gāθās (and we now have evidence for a similar complexity in the Avesta as a whole), it is possible that this process was present in individual Avestan books. For instance, it has been shown that the summary of the *Sūdgar Nask* in Dēnkard Book 9 exhibits elements of ring composition (Vevaina 2024, p. 3). One may also wonder if the four great authorities of Zoroastrianism in the 5th and 6th centuries after Zoroaster: *Frəzuua*, *Srūtō.spāda*, *Zraiah*, and *Spəntō.xratu*, who produced interpretations of his teachings and were said “to seek their thoughts, words, and deeds in the [manthras]” (as summarized from the Spand by Dēnkard 7.7.8–10, cf. Farvardīn 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 Gāθās and the Avesta can’t be conclusively proven without possessing the entirety of the Avesta, 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 Sasanid 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 community 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 Gāθās of Zoroaster, the very origin of the Zoroastrian religion.

Appendix

During the research for 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 large epitome of the *Spand Nask* (not an attempt at a narrational work of interpretation, such as the comparable *Wizīdagīhā ī Zādspram*), due to it being primarily a collection of overviews of events with frequent allusions to what the Avesta or the *dēn* (here ‘system of religious understanding’) 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 the short summaries of the Avesta (Dēnkard 8) or the long summaries of three Avestan books (Dēnkard 9) rather than after, it is likely that the original author, Farrozzādān, intended this as a summary of the *Spand*, but when the secondary author, Ēmēdān, was recompiling the remnants of Farrozzādān’s work, he mistook this as an original work and subsequently placed it before the Avesta summaries (cf. West 1892, p. 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 *Wīdēwdād* 2, where Yima creates the enclosure to protect from the winter storm, is most likely the base text for Dēnkard 7.1.20–24,⁷ suggesting that *Wīdēwdād* 2 was borrowed from the first section of the Spand (via Dēnkard 7.1 where Ahura Mazda converses with pre-Zarathushtrian Iranian heroes) to make the *Wīdēwdād* reach 22 chapters. More importantly, the winter ‘flood’ narrative bears heavy influences of Mesopotamian flood myths, such as the Atrahasis epic, an opinion of which is ultimately Professor Schwartz’s (personal communication). This allows us tentatively to date this work to Median or Achaemenid times (see Grenet 2005 for an independent 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 Sasanid dynasty”, must be re-examined. Upon a closer look, it seems to be a genuine account of the time between Zaratūštra and the *Spand*. However, this account is distorted by an attempt, most likely of the Zand, to read Sasanid figures into an older Avestan narrative, usually saying something along the lines of “regarding __, it/the *dēn* says...”. These supposed references to Ardašēr, Tansar, or Ādurbād, for example, have nothing to do with said person, and the quotations often bear the compositional 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 connection with Zādspram 23 which likely draws on the same material in question) is that it was cast in the ‘millennia of Zaratūštra’⁸ (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 Zaratūštra, with the latter giving very specific years for the important figures directly after Zarathushtra. Then, in Z 23.11–12 and D 7.7.7, both imply some

⁷ 7.1.20 on Yima and the four classes may have been an elaboration by the Zand. Cf. Dēnkard 7.9.3 (and *Pahlavi Rivāyat* 48.17) where the enclosure is opened, giving closure to the narrative set up in *Wīdēwdād* 2, which, in Vd 2.40–44, describes the *vara* as existing up to the date of composition.

⁸ Dēnkard 8’s summary of the Spand in general accords well with Dēnkard 7, although 8.14.10–11 seems to be referring to this account.

great tragedy and subsequent dark times in the 4th century (~300 years) after Zaratuštra.⁹ After this Dēnkard 7.7.8–10 then tells us the four figures who helped revive the religion in the 5th and 6th centuries, these being *Frəzuua*, *Srūtō.spāda*, *Zraiiāh*, and *Spəntō.xratu* (cf. Farvardin Yasht.115).

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

Also, of potential interest is the *Zand ī Wahman Yasn*¹⁰ which, discounting the first two chapters, reads as if its following a parallel narrative to Dēnkard 7.8–11, albeit in an interpretive manner. This prospect must be considered thoroughly another time; although, the quotation in Dēnkard 7.8.10 mentioning mixed iron makes the possibility of a parallel connection strong.

All the same, 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, although the distinction between myth and genuine history is impossible to make with our present evidence.

⁹ This is likely the origin of the dating of Zaratuštra 300 years before Alexander, as some earlier catastrophe was recast by the Zand of the *Spand*, evidenced by Denkard 7.7.7, to be caused by Alexander.

¹⁰ The name itself seems to imply an Avestan text (probably the *Wištāsp-sāst*'s equivalent section to the *Spand*'s apocalyptic narrative) was extracted as a “Vohu Manah Yasna”, either a sequential honoring of the *Aməša Spənta*-s with (apocalyptic ?) Avestan texts or an honoring of the (pseudo ?) historical *Vohu-Manah*, son of *Spəntōddāta*, who is conflated with Ardašēr in Chapter 3.24 (cf. Dēnkard 7.7.5). Also worth considering is *Pahlavi Rivāyat* 48.56, likely from the *Spand*, having *Sōšyāns* perform multiple *yasna*-s to raise the dead.

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*Many of the Pahlavi materials can also be accessed via Avesta.org
(<https://www.avesta.org/avesta.html>).