

SKY BURIAL AMONG PERSIANS

By Rami Yelda

It was in the Bronze Age when Prophet Zartosht (Zoroaster) introduced Zoroastrianism to Persians who lived on the great plateau called Iran. In Avesta, the sacred book of Zoroastrians, Ahuramazda, "the Wise Lord" and the four main elements: fire, water, earth and air are kept in much esteem. Respect of these elements became some of the fundamentals of the faith--a practice that has persisted among the dwindling number of Zoroastrians to the present time. It is this commitment to the preservation of nature and the purity of the four elements that, as an example, even these days Zoroastrian priests who tend fires in their temples wear masks similar to those worn by surgeons so as not to desecrate the fire with their breath. The obsession with purity would later become the downfall of Persia. Blood and flesh, including menstrual blood, were considered as unacceptable polluters. It was this infatuation against any defilement of the earth that would become the cause of the downfall of the once mighty Persian Empire to the invading Muslim Arabs in the 7th century AD. Unlike Persians, Muslims did not have bizarre rules in regards to female hygiene. For this reason, it is hard to believe, considering the unjust treatment of women in Islam, the most ardent converts to Islam were women!

Following their religious beliefs, Zoroastrians would wash the corpse and after the required prayers, carry it on an iron bier (easier to cleanse than wood), to the top of a hillock called *dahkmeh* (known as "towers of silence" by foreigners) and lay it on a stone slab. A slit would be made in the shroud to help the vultures scavenge the body which they would pick clean in a matter of three hours. The bones would be left in the open until completely devoid of any blood and then would be dropped in a well in the middle of the *dahkmeh*.

As a farewell to the departing soul and while the birds fly overhead, the relatives would feast on wine and meatless food at the bottom of the hillock. Once the bones had dried, sun-drenched, and rendered of any of the highly defiling blood, they would then be deposited in the central deep pit.

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Vultures have a prominent place in Zoroastrian burial rituals. Vultures are dumb birds but they have an extraordinary sense of smell. A vulture can smell blood or decaying flesh from hundreds of mile away and fly towards it. Other birds of prey, like Eagles and crows, have the same attraction to blood and decaying flesh but arrive at the scene later than vultures.

In 1937, the Iranian government outlawed the Zoroastrian burial ritual, but in the city of Yazd, where most of the Zoroastrians live, it was practiced until 1965 when it was finally abandoned. At present, to prevent defiling, Zoroastrians bury their dead in stone coffins or in graves surrounded by cement. (Cremation being unthinkable, other nonpolluting ways to dispose of corpses are being considered. These are: laser beams, acid baths, or high-intensity electrical power.)

Sky burials continue to be practiced by Parsis (Zoroastrian-Iranians who fled to India in the 10th century after being persecuted by the invading Arabs). The problem in India, especially in major cities like Mumbai where Parsis dwell, is that *dakhmehs* built long time ago in the countryside are now in the middle of overpopulated cities. The problem Parsis face today is the poisoning and death of vultures which feed on dead cows that are contaminated with fertilizers. For this reason, Parsis are now considering new methods to raise vultures in aviaries for their burial rituals.

The burial ritual as practiced by Persians was limited to fellow Persians. Criminals and foreigners who had committed crimes were not considered as worthy of such rituals. One of the early practices of dealing with criminals invented by the Persians was impaling and killing the luckless victim by piercing him on a sharp stake, keeping his feet above the holy ground, letting him suffer and die slowly while the birds of prey did their part. Another method was tying the victim on a tree (again, the feet well above the ground) until the vultures and other birds of prey had devoured him. Later, Persians improved on their execution technique and started crucifying their prisoners on T-shaped crosses.

Alexander the Great invaded Persia in the 4th century BC and died in Babylon in 323. His empire was divided among three

of his generals. Seleucus Nicator inherited the greater Persia and started the Selucid Dynasty that lasted until 224 AD. During their rule, the Selucids took some of the Persian practices to Greece. Crucifixion was one of them. Romans, who became the inheritors of Hellenic culture, adopted the practice and established a detailed protocol making it a form of torture and capital punishment that was exclusively used for enemies of Rome. (As it was with the Persians, Romans too, prohibited the crucifixion of women.) According to the historian Josephus, during the siege of Jerusalem one of the Roman perfects named Titus, carried mass crucifixions in Judea.

It was the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth that made this form of execution well known. After Jesus underwent Jewish and Roman trials, he was condemned to die by crucifixion. According to the four Canonical Gospels, as part of the Roman execution protocol, Jesus was whipped and scourged causing significant blood loss. Jesus was then made to carry the horizontal crossbar (*patibulum*) to the site of execution where the crossbar was added to the upright post (*stipes*). Jesus was then crucified with both wrists (not hands) and feet nailed to the cross. What the Gospels fail to mention is the flying of vultures over Jesus and the two other victims. When Jesus was breathing his last, following Roman practice, he was given a coup de grâce by a legionnaire. The spear had pierced his side and extended to his heart.

After the physical death of Jesus, the cross, an execution device first used by Persians, became the symbol of Christianity.