

## MR. K. ENOSTRANZAV'S PAPER ON THE OSSUARIES AND ASTODÂNS OF TURKES- TAN, WITH A FEW FURTHER OBSER- VATIONS ON THE ASTODÂN.\*

Read on 24th June 1908.

President—MR. S. M. EDUARDES, I.C.S.

At the monthly meeting of Wednesday, the 29th August 1888, I had the pleasure of reading before our Society, a paper entitled "*Astodân* or a Persian coffin said to be 3,000 years old, sent to the Museum of the Anthropological Society of Bombay by Mr. Malcolm of Bushire." The paper was printed in the Journal of our Society (Vol. I, No. 7.).<sup>1</sup> On 30th October, 1889, I read at Paris, before "L'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres," a paper on a cognate subject under the title of "Quelques observations sur les Ossuaires, rapportés de Perse par M. Dieulafoy et déposés au Musée du Louvre."<sup>2</sup> It has been published in the transactions of that learned body.<sup>3</sup> I produce before the Society, the *Astodân* or ossuary, which formed the subject of my paper about 20 years ago. I find, that the bones in it have now been a good deal more destroyed during this period than when I saw them at first.

The Museum of our Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society had received from Mr. Bruce of Bushire, in 1813, a similar *Astodâns*, though not of the same type and size; and a paper was read on the 6th of July 1813, before the Society, by Mr. William Erskine, under the title of "Observations on two Sepulchral Urns found in Bushire in Persia."

---

\* Journal, Vol. VIII., No. 5, pp. 331-342.

<sup>1</sup> *Vide* above, pp. 7-21.

<sup>2</sup> *Vide* my "Asiatic Papers", pp. 255-60.

<sup>3</sup> Séance du 30 Octobre 1889.

Such Astodâns or bone-receptacles of various forms, kinds and sizes are found in many parts of Persia. Lieut. Selby, Sir John Macdonel Kinneir and other travellers have referred to these in the accounts of their travels.<sup>1</sup>

My paper in 1888 before this Society had drawn the attention of Rev. Casartelli, of St. Bead's College, Manchester. In his article, entitled "Astodâns, and the Avestic Funeral prescriptions" in the *Babylonian and Oriental Record* of June 1890 (Vol. IV., No. 7.), he refers to my paper at some length in connection with the Hon. John Abercromby's reference to a similar custom in the Caucasus, in his "Trip Through the Eastern Caucasus" published in 1889.

Now, I am led to refer to this subject again, by an interesting paper by Mr. K. Enostranzav, a Russian scholar, who has kindly done me the courtesy of sending me a copy of his paper through the kind favour of Mr. A. Polovtsoff, who was then the Russian Imperial Consul-General in our city. The author had commissioned Mr. Polovtsoff to examine the Astodân, referred to by me in my paper before the Society in 1888. I had the pleasure of showing it to him, and it was arranged, that he was to get photographs taken, for Mr. K. Enostranzav, of that Astodân and of other similar urns in the Museum of the B. B. R. A. Society. At my request, Mr. Polovtsoff has kindly translated Mr. Enostranzav's Russian paper into English. I submit the translation for being published in our Journal, and I offer my thanks, and, I may be permitted to say, our Society's thanks also, to Mr. Polovtsoff for the trouble he has so kindly taken to translate the Russian article.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Vide* (a) *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, London, Vol. XIV, pp. 219-246, for Lieut. Selby's paper on his Navigation of the River Karun; (b) Sir J. M. Kinneir's *Memoir of the Pers'ian Empire*; (c) *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Bombay*, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 12; (d) *Journal B. B. R. A. S.*, Vol. II., p. 214; (e) *Journal B. B. R. A. S.*, Vol. V., p. 398.

For some similar urns of other people, *vide* the Reports of the Proceedings of the Meeting of the B. B. R. A. S. on 17th November 1853. *Journal B. B. R. A. S.*, Vol. V., p. 398.



As a Parsee, I am very glad to welcome this help from Russian scholars in the field of ancient Irânian subjects. Russia rules and exerts influence over a large tract of Central Asia, where the ancient Irânians once ruled. The Parsees, as a body, should be glad to welcome any help given by Russian scholars and travellers in the direction of new researches, throwing further light on ancient Iranian literature, science, religion, etc. It was with that view, that I, some years ago, had written to the Asiatic Society of St. Petersburg, a letter asking their help in the matter.

While submitting the translation of the Russian article on "The Ossuaries and Astodâns of Turkestan" by Mr. K. Enostranzav for our Journal, I beg to make a few observations on some of the points touched in the article :—

1. The article refers to the fact that some ossuaries were found in 1899 in a Jewish house, while digging a well, and says, that "the custom of bone-boxes being current among the Jews, it is of course impossible to deny that an occasional ossuary may possibly be Jewish."

Firstly, the fact, that an ossuary is found in a Jewish house, does not in itself lead us to conclude that it is a Jewish ossuary.

Secondly, the statement suggests the question:—"Is the Jewish custom of bone-boxes an original custom among them or a borrowed one?"

We know that the ancient Jews were much influenced by the ancient Persians in the matter of their religious beliefs and customs. About a year ago,<sup>1</sup> I drew the attention of this Society, to the similarity between the "Kiss of Peace" of the Jews, and the "Hamâzor" of the Parsees. I think that, if the Jews had, at any time in their history, adopted the custom of having bone-boxes, they must have taken it from the ancient Persians. As I have shown in my previous paper on the Astodân, the ancient custom of preserving the bones had an origin in the belief in Resurrection. Oriental

<sup>1</sup> *Vide* Journal of the Anthropological Society, Vol. VIII, No. 2.

scholars, like Drs. Haug<sup>1</sup>, Jackson<sup>2</sup>, Cheyne<sup>3</sup> and Graetz<sup>4</sup>, are of opinion, that the Jews had borrowed the belief of Resurrection from the ancient Zoroastrians. So, it is possible, that they, or some of them, borrowed, with that belief, the custom of the preservation of bones, which had its origin in the belief in Resurrection.<sup>5</sup>

2. The article, while comparing the Turkestan ossuaries with the Bushire ossuary in our Museum, refers to the fact, that in both "all or many of the bones are broken," and says, that the fact can be explained, not only by that (a) "the bones were first boiled, then cleaned and put in boxes, but (b) also, that they belonged to corpses which had been pulled to pieces (according to the ritual of Mazdeism)."

(a) I do not know what the author means by boiling. If he means what we ordinarily mean by the word, then, I say, that we have no authority to infer, that the ancient Zoroastrians boiled the bones, before putting them into boxes.

(b) Again, I do not understand what Mr. Enostranzav means by "pulled to pieces according to the ritual of Mazdeism." The Zoroastrian ritual has nothing to do with the process as to how the flesh of the corpse is devoured by the flesh-eating animals.

3. Coming to the differences, Mr. Enostranzav draws attention to the following points:—

1. The Turkestan ossuaries have a rich ornamentation while those from Bushire and Southern Persia, have nothing of the kind.

The spirit of the teachings of the Avesta, and later religious writings of the Parsees, point to perfect simplicity and perfect freedom from any kind of ornamentation.

<sup>1</sup> Haug's Essays on the Parsees, 2nd Edition, pp. 312-13.

<sup>2</sup> (a) "The Biblical World" of August 1896, p. 157. (b) The American Oriental Society's proceedings, April 1893, pp. XXXVII-XXXIX.

<sup>3</sup> "The Origin and Religious Contents of the Psalter" by Dr. Cheyne, (1891) pp. 400-401.

<sup>4</sup> History of the Jews, Vol. I, pp. 417-418.

<sup>5</sup> Vide my "Glimpse Into the Work of the B. B. R. A. Society during the last 100 Years, from a Parsee Point of View," pp. 45-46.



2. Some of the Turkestan ossuaries and almost all found in Samarkand, have no lids.

The Vendidad does not speak of any lid, but the Dadistan-i-dini specially refers to a lid made of one stone (*nekumbe min ayokh sagi*). I think that the ossuaries without lids is a later development. The original object being, to provide for protection against rain and other disintegrating causes, latterly, the object was sought to be served by providing ossuaries which afforded sufficient protection against those causes.

4. Mr. K. Enostranzav refers to a passage of Hamza of Isphahan, wherein he says that the Persians "do not know burial in graves and hide the dead in *dahms* and *nausses* (في الدهومات والنواويس). Now the word *dahm* is the word *dokhma*—even now used for the Tower of Silence. But it is not certain what the other word *ناوس* is. Mr. K. Enostranzav says, that, Arabic writers use the word for sarcophagus. He thinks that the word refers to the Astodân. I think this word is a later corrupted form of the Avesta word *Nassu* (نسس),

Pahlavi, *nasai* (نسس) *نسس* i.e., decomposing dead matter

According to the teaching of the Avesta, bones of dead bodies also are 'nasu'. So the receptacles of bones also may be considered 'nasu'. In India, the houses that contain the biers, the shrouds and other articles used for carrying the dead bodies, are still called *Nassa-khâneh*, i.e., the house of *Nasâ*.

With these few remarks, I give here, the English translation of Mr. K. Enostranzav's paper.

Mr. K. Enostranzav's paper translated  
by Mr. A. Polovtsoff, late Russian Imperial  
Consul—General in Bombay.

“The OSSUARIES AND ASTODÂNS OF TURKESTAN.”

The so-called clay coffins, more correctly bone-boxes or ossuaries, found in Turkestan, have already more than once been the objects of discussion and study, both in the sittings and on the pages of the Memoirs of Oriental Department (of the Russian Imperial Archæological Society) and in the communications, reports and appendices to the reports of the Turkestan Association of Lovers of Archæology. Compared to other monuments of the pre-Moslem epoch in the western part of Central Asia, ossuaries have had, relatively speaking, the best luck. At the present moment, however, it is impossible to deny that much remains to be found, much is expected from investigation, and therefore no definite conclusions can be made; we have before us a scientific question still unsettled. In the present notice I should like only to call attention to a few facts and to some information which might perhaps serve as material for comparisons in the ulterior elucidation of this question.

Clay ossuaries attracted particular attention in 1899 when in Samarcand, during the digging of a well in a Jewish house, six of those ossuaries were discovered at a depth of 3 arsheens (about 7 feet). The importance of this find lay in the circumstance that it offered a “possibility of defining the general shape of the coffins, the method of burying bones in them and the place for their preservation.” Information is however extant about similar ossuaries having been found at earlier times in Tashkent, in its neighbourhood and also in other parts of Turkestan. These communications, notwithstanding their briefness, are interesting, as they indicate a wide area of dissemination of the ossuaries, which circumstance, in its turn, is important for formulating and solving the question as to what people those ossuaries belong. The find of the Samarcand



ossuaries in a Jewish house led to the surmise "till further finds are made" of the ossuaries being of Jewish origin. The custom of bone-boxes being current among the Jews, it is, of course, impossible to deny that an occasional ossuary may possibly be Jewish, but taking into consideration their considerable quantity and broad geographical dissemination, it is apparently right to consider the greater number of Turkestan ossuaries as being non-Jewish. Ossuaries being non-current in Islam, the *a-priori* surmise of their belonging to the ante-worshipping population appeared to be the most probable; it was besides pointed out that "the rite of cleaning the bones from flesh and of burial of the forms is not in contradiction to the Avesta." In view of this general consideration, we will quote certain data, which complete it.

In 1888, a Parsee scholar, Jeevanjee Jamshetjee Mody, read a report in a sitting of the Bombay Anthropological Society about an ossuary, sent from Bushire to the museum of that Society. In 1889 he printed his report. This ossuary is made of stone out of a whole block and is covered with a lid, also of a whole slab of the same stone. The dimensions of the ossuary are as follows: 28 inches in length, 14 inches in width, 10 inches in height and the thickness of walls about 1 inch. On the four sides of the ossuary, as also on the four sides of the lid, small holes are noticeable; perhaps they were intended for fixtures. The ossuary is filled with the bones of one person about 60 years old. The conditions of the find were as follows: it was discovered 7 miles from Bushire, in a vault at a depth of 5 or 6 feet, under an earthen wall, the probable remains of a structure. The size of the ossuary does not admit of the idea of its being used as a coffin—only the bones of a dead person could be put together in it. Mr. Mody remarked then that it was the first case of a stone ossuary of this type having been sent from Persia and that this type is comparatively rare, whereas another type "barrel-shaped jar coffins," is met with oftener. About this second type of clay ossuaries of oblong

form we have information dating from the beginning of the XIXth century. Though the information of Justin, quoted by Mr. Mody, about the ancient Parthians leaving their dead to be eaten by birds does not allow us to infer that they used ossuaries, he nevertheless considers it plausible to attribute these ossuaries to the ancient fire-worshipping population, the ancestors of the present Parsis, according to the tradition extant in Persia. Mr. Mody confirms his explanation by texts. The ancient religious custom of preserving bones in ossuaries originates, he believes, in a fragment of the Vendidad (VI, 49-51), according to which, Ahura-Mazda commands to deposit the bones of a deceased person in a place, safe from the dog, the fox, the wolf and the rain-water, putting them in Astodâns or simply exhibiting them on beds to the sun's rays. He detects a further development of this prescription in the Datistani-Dinik (question 17), where it is recommended, after the flesh of the corpse has been eaten, to collect the bones in an Astodân, which will not allow them to be touched by rain-water, moisture, dog nor fox, which will be perforated for letting in the light, which will be made, and its lid as well, of a whole piece of stone. The narratives of Herodotus and Strabo about corpses being covered with wax (in Herodotus after the flesh of the corpse has been eaten), Mr. Mody compares with the reddish sand in the ossuaries sent to Bombay in 1813, and explains that by the wish to better preserve the bones, the preservation of the bones being necessary for the resurrection of the body.

Mr. Mody's article was echoed in 1890, by the European scholar Mr. Casartelli, who once more examined in detail the texts quoted in Mr. Mody's article<sup>1</sup>. Noting the difference in the explanation of the word "Astodân" in Avesta (Datistani Dinik) as vault and in Mody as ossuary, he considers it possible to blend both views, though he himself in the present

<sup>1</sup> L. C. Casartelli, *Astodâns and the Avestic Funeral Prescriptions*, *The Babylonian and Oriental Record* IV., 1889-90, pp. 145-153.



case is inclined more towards the interpretation of the word as meaning ossuary. To this he is prone particularly on account of the information about finds of ossuaries and bones, given by Mr. Mody.

As regards the precept of the Vendidad, the narrative of Abu-Hamid al-Andalusi, which he knows by the translation in the article by Doru, assists him to re-establish the reading of the word, denominating the third sort of material for ossuaries: stone, clay (or gypsum, or something similar) and textiles. He explains, that the bags, in which bones were assembled by the "Zirikhgerans," the fore-fathers of the Koubans in Daghestan, were the same ossuaries of fire-worshippers, as the stone and clay boxes, brought from Bushire. Such, in general outline, is the new information, which the article of Mr. Mody with Casartelli's additions gives us<sup>1</sup>. Let us now compare this information of Mr. Mody with the Turkestan ossuaries.<sup>2</sup> The dimensions of the Turkestan clay ossuaries are as follows: length about 13-14 vershoks, width about 7-8 v., height about 5-6 v., thickness of walls about  $\frac{1}{2}$  v. As we see, these dimensions correspond nearly exactly to those of the stone Bushire ossuary. Further, it is of interest that as in the ossuaries from Southern Persia, in the Turkestan ones as well, all or

---

<sup>1</sup> Darmsteter in his new translation of the Avesta.—Le Zend-Avesta, Vol. II., (Annales du Musée Guimet, XXII, Paris, 1892) 92-94 and 158, seems to accept Mr. Mody's interpretation; the explanation of the 3rd material for ossuaries by Casartelli is not indicated by him and it is not clear, whether he knew this explanation or did not accept it (for him the third material is earth). It is interesting, that the most ancient occurrence of the word Astodān, in a Graeco-Aramean inscription in Lycia of the IV-V century B. C. has the meaning of "tomb." In the Grundriss der Iranischen Philologie, II, 5, 1904, 694 is accepted the interpretation of Mody, 'Astodān' coffin. Elucidation of the comparison between dahm and Astodān in later Rivayats (*ibid.* II, I, 1896, 128) is of great interest for the question of Astodāns.

<sup>2</sup> I will be principally guided in my description of Turkestan ossuaries by the information given by T. I. Poslavsky, "Contributions to the Question of Clay Coffins" (Proceedings of the Turkestan Society of Lovers of Archæology, Tashkent, 1893, part VIII, 36 and foll.).

many of the bones were broken (Mody, 7) and lay in confusion; this fact can perhaps be explained not only by that, that the bones were first boiled, then cleaned and put in boxes, but also that they belonged to corpses which had been pulled to pieces (according to the ritual of Mazdeism). Let us not lastly suppose that they both contain nothing except bones and fine sand or fine earth, which is also important from a point of view of ritual. There exist, however, also differences which are worthy of note. An element most important for definitions, ornamentation, richly represented and deserving study in the Turkestan ossuaries, is little known in those from Southern Persia. Apparently, the stone ossuary from Bushire bears none at all, otherwise Mr. Mody, who has minutely described the ossuary, would have mentioned it. Besides that, on some of the Turkestan ossuaries, lids are absent (about the Samarcand ones Mr. Poslavsky is of opinion, that they were all without lids); this absence of lids is interesting from the standpoint of ritual. However, the similitude which we have pointed out seems to us to have its importance and now we must expect further enquiries in that sense.

By way of conclusion, a few words about historical information.<sup>1</sup> The passage in Tabari-i-Nersahi is well known, where the death of the Boukhar-khoudat, the separation of the flesh from the bones in his body and the transport of the bones to Bokhar are mentioned. However, we do not know where the bones of the Boukhar-khoudat were preserved. Hamza of Ispahan (ed. Gottwald, page 46) speaking of Persians, says, that they do not know burial in graves and hide the dead in "dahms" and "nausses" "(في الدهمات والنواويس)". The word *dahm* is known, that is the place, where the fire-worshippers expose the dead bodies for the birds of prey to eat them ("Towers of Silence"); it is more difficult to define

<sup>1</sup> About the funeral rites of the Persians under the Sassanides the short notice of Procopius of Caesarea (I.-II.). It also refers to Agathias II, ch. 22, 23, 31.



the meaning of the word (ناوس).<sup>1</sup> Dozy (Supplement) and Vallers have brought together some information about this question. This word (apparently from the Greek *vabg*) is met with in the works of Arabic writers in two senses: crypt, vault and sarcophagus, tomb.<sup>2</sup> As to the mentioning of this term in connection with Central Asia, I will note that Tabari (I, 879, 17), speaking of the defeat of the Sassanian King Firooz, by Akhshoonvar, king of the Ephtalites, says that the bodies of the Sassanian king and the other persons were buried in nausses. Nöldeke in his translation says Zrabgebaüden and seems even ready to consider those constructions dahms. This of course refers to rather a remote epoch, but even from more recent times we have references about the nauss in Central Asia. The same Tabari (I, 1448,5) relates the execution of a dikhkan of Samarcand by Sayid-al-Harashi in 104 of the Hejira—he crucified him in Rebinjan on a *nauss*. In the present case the translation by “ossuary” has to be excluded, as it is impossible to crucify on an ossuary.

It is difficult to say what the meaning may be, whether it is tomb, mausoleum or graveyard (compare glossary to Tabari), but in every case we have to deal with a construction made by fire-worshippers, erected either during the moslem domination or previously.

The word *nauss*, joined in Arab texts to the word *dahm*, but distinct from the latter, corresponds to *Astodan*, equally joined sometimes to *dahm*; both words have a dual meaning; both burial vault and tomb.<sup>3</sup> We do not know whether the

<sup>1</sup> Gottwald translates *monumenta et mausolea*.

<sup>2</sup> These 2 meanings are especially clear in the following passages:—  
Dozy, from Hön-Batuta, Quatremère and Vallers, who quotes (Sacy. A. 6, dalletif).

<sup>3</sup> Arab writers mention “coffins” in Sassanid Persia (see Tbi. Kuteiba, Oozun-al-Akhbar, Tabari). Relating the death of the Governor of Yemen under Hormisd IV, Marzuwan, those writers say, that Marzuwan was put in a coffin, and the coffin was brought to Chosroes, who had it put in his treasurehouse having written upon it the deeds of Marzuwan. It is very possible, that in this case the word *نابوت* means Ossuary.

ancient dahms<sup>1</sup> were similar in form to the modern ones, but when there were fire-worshippers in Central Asia, both they and similar constructions probably existed there. As the most ancient monuments of Chinese Turkestan can be understood only after a previous acquaintance with Buddhism, so the antiquities of Western Turkestan belonging to the pre-Moslem epoch, will be explained from the standpoint of customs to a great extent by the ritual of Mazdeism (and for the artistic side—by Sassanian art).

---

<sup>1</sup> Ancient dahms have been preserved in Nausari and belong to the XVII C. (see Darmsteter, 158 l. c.).