

Pirān und Zeyāratgāh: Schreine und Wallfahrtsstätten der Zarathustrier im neuzeitlichen Iran (Acta Iranica 48), Robert Langer, Leuven, Paris, and Walpole, MA: Peeters, 2008, ISBN 978-90-429-2193-1, XVIII + 708 pp. + Bilder-DVD

Robert Langer's work deals with modern Zoroastrian shrines in Iran. He documents and evaluates a broad range of shrines and places of pilgrimage. The majority of his 106 cases are located in the provinces of Kerman and Yazd, the two traditional core areas of Iran's Zoroastrians, as well as in Isfahan, Fars, Khorasan, Khuzestan, and Tehran. The study is based on two spells of field research; more than 1,300 photographs are accessible on a DVD annexed to the book.

The description of the shrines composes the main part of this book (pp. 219–659). Each entry starts with a reference to the hierarchical administrative unit to which a shrine belongs, then follows up with names, bibliography, location, and previous research. Part Two is an architectural description of the construction, of

the site as a whole and its ritual space, and of its administration. Part Three is an inclusive, if not exhaustive, list of written and oral sources. The latter includes quotes—mainly found in Persian books (in their original and in German translation)—legends, interviews, but also a careful documentation of the sites' inscriptions. Part Four informs of the time and forms of use as well as volume and composition of visitors. Part Five is a historical contextualization and evaluation of the sites. The author's statement (p. 19) that he has brought together philological, art historical and ethnological methods, and those of the religious studies, is correct; in the opinion of this reviewer, it is a successful combination.

The chapter dealing with the documentation of shrines is preceded by an encompassing, and multifaceted analysis (pp. 29–196). Historical contexts and demography (pp. 29–40) is followed by an architectural contextualization of Zoroastrian shrines (pp. 41–45), where Langer argues that their material starting point is the farm on the one side, the traditional urban building on the other. He diagnoses a development from living room to shrine; the latter is not characterized by a specific, fixed set of elements, but draws from “the repertoire of house construction” (p. 44). What is characteristic for the ritual place of a *pīr* is a domed room erected on top of a quadratical or round floor (p. 191). Three types of legends are linked to shrines (p. 56f.). These include legends legitimizing the shrine's establishment; these often turn around a miracle involving the shrine's protagonist. Another type is the discovery legend, in form of a dream or a vision, in which the dreamer is asked by the shrine's protagonist to visit, take care of, and perhaps expand the site. This aspect is crucial for the recognition of a site as a *pīr* (p. 52). Third, there are confirmatory or affirmatory legends, where additional dreams or visions of other people verify or bolster the recognition of a shrine.

Langer chooses the recent example of Pīr of Ostād Māster Ḥodā-baḥš to “treat not only the religious framework, but also the social and political context of a shrine's establishment” (p. 115), providing an excellent analysis of that shrine's development to a commemorative site (pp. 115–132). He then treats the ritual activities typical of a shrine visit, dividing them into individual and collective devotion and pilgrimage (pp. 132–149). The individual visitor making a *zīyārat* brings something with himself: sweets, oil for lamps, incense sticks, candles, etc. Visitors take off their shoes and cover their heads before entering the shrine's ritual spaces. The most important rituals include the burning of wood in a special vase, the lighting of incense sticks, candles, and of oil lamps, as well as touching the altar as well as reciting short prayers (pp. 132–138). Collective devotional visits follow the Zoroastrian calendar; the shrine of a particular Yazata is visited more frequently at general religious holidays and especially during the day devoted to the Yazata in Zoroastrian calendar (pp. 138–143).

One of the most important parts of Langer's analysis is the typology of shrines (pp. 149–169). Here, the author uses more than one criterion: protagonists, names, functions, architectural and geographical-topographical characteristics. The first criterion helps to classify especially “refuge shrines,” understood to be sites where some of the later Sasanian court members disappeared while

fleeing the Islamic invasion. Other protagonists include Zoroastrian Yazatas like Varahrām, but also historical personalities, be they founders or objects of commemoration (p. 81). Shrines are named after their equipment, their architectonical or topographical characteristics, their protagonists or their function. Important is the recognition of the significance of the six Iranian Zoroastrian Yazatas (pp. 70–76): the shrines that are explicitly named after Yazatas bear names that Boyce³ has already described as highly popular Yazatas, namely Varahrām, Mihr, Aštād, Wahman, Ādur and Tīr (Teštar). The author's typology is clear, whereupon he distinguishes according to architectural-topographic characteristics between local, trans-local, regional, trans-regional, and virtual shrines. Private shrines include ritual spaces serving as altars or rooms in a private residence; these are dedicated to the exclusively female *sofre* ritual, a collective meal also common in Islamic Iranian culture. Private shrines include also ritual spaces annexed to private residences that are open to the public.

The author next compares the terminology, architecture, and administration of Islamic and Zarathustrian shrines (pp. 180–196). A remarkable, special inter-religious case is the Ziyāratgāh-e Šāh-Vīr-e Šāh-e-Ĥorāsān (pp. 221–223), located right next to the shrine of the Eight Imam in Mashhad. Zoroastrians believe this shrine to be the Sasanian fire temple Āzar-Ĥordād in Tus; it also is believed to be the place where Sasanian prince Šāh-Vīr disappeared and thus a holy Zoroastrian site. However, the author was not able to find a Zoroastrian visitor of this shrine; this reviewer would have liked to see a more penetrating study of this particular case, although this book focuses on the breadth of Zoroastrian shrines (pp. 25–27). One of Langer's research questions revolves around the inter-religious links between Islam and Zoroastrianism regarding shrines; hence, it would have been useful to ascertain whether the above-mentioned shrine is ultimately real or not. Either way, the author should have better studied the shrine's bi-religious function. Langer's statement—that non-Muslims' visits carry the death penalty—cannot be verified. As far as this reviewer knows, visitors' religion is not checked at the entrance; Langer's statement is probably based on the Setī-Pīr's origin legend (p. 621).

Langer's study is methodologically very solid; nonetheless, two points need to be made. First, he does not distinguish between a Zoroastrian and a (Zoroastrian) researcher of Zoroastrianism. Langer quotes a passage from the *Dānešnāme-ye Mazdayasnā* (p. 138) written by Iran's Zoroastrian high priest, claiming that it represents an authoritative condemnation of shrines. Langer dismissively interprets the fact that the encyclopedia entry does not treat shrines in detail as an indication of the high priest's reservation (p. 137). However, this reviewer believes that the objectivity of an author—and, indeed, of the highest religious authority of a community—should be accepted as credible; and his texts should not simply be represented as his personal religious creed. This approach

³Mary Boyce, *A Persian Stronghold of Zoroastrianism: Based on the Ratanbai Katrak Lectures* (Oxford, 1977), 90.

is visible also when Langer describes the oral comments of a (Zoroastrian) scholar of Iranian Studies and her article—which were in fact published in a European edited volume—as an “indigenous theory” (p. 113).

Second, Langer does not distinguish between the general religio-cultural context and specific religious forms of expression. This lacuna is especially problematic in a study about a religion like modern Iranian Zoroastrianism, which stands in constant religio-cultural interaction with the surrounding Islamic-Shiite milieu. For example, in his discussion of the architectural conditions for shrines, Langer mentions traditional house constructions including one to four iwans and claims that “one of these iwans is elevated in Zoroastrian houses because of its use as a ritual space” (p. 43; also 97, 103)—but overlooks the fact that the slight elevation of one of the iwans is not specific to Zoroastrian houses, but a general trait of traditional Iranian architecture.

Similarly, Langer “explains” the cooking of stews amongst Zoroastrians “historically, as a function of their marginal economic situation and the resulting poverty” (p. 142). However, amongst Shiite Iranians, too, the donation of stews is common; hence, it should not be over-interpreted as something specifically Zoroastrian. The same argument could be made regarding the Zoroastrian use of Indian incense sticks. It does not show—against the author’s claim—a more intensive contact between Iranian and Indian Zoroastrians since the mid-nineteenth century (p.118f), but it could easily be the result of its widespread availability on the Iranian market.

We would like to highlight the relevance of Langer’s findings about the close link between shrines and water for the study of Zoroastrianism. This link is reflected in the spatial proximity of the main ritual space to a water source (p. 45). Langer argues that this fact is crucial for the space where the *sofre* ritual is practiced: the latter takes place in particular in a room adjacent to the room that contains the house’s water wheel. Such water source rooms can even form the crystallization point of an agricultural shrine. The indispensability of such a room for such shrines clearly results from a double shrine: here, two shrines with annexed ritualistic spaces were created around a shared water source (pp. 164, 272–274, 277–281). Moreover, eight shrines are named after Hezr, who is responsible for fecundity, prosperity, and sufficient water provisioning in agriculture (pp. 74, 79). The mountainous shrines around Yazd are characterized by a combination of rocks and water sources, more specifically the springing of water from the rocky mountain slopes (pp. 60, 166). Besides, the ritual significance of the water wheel is reflected in the form of a ritual practice in the shrine, where “a vow can be marked by tying a band to a tree or a water wheel” (p. 133).

Two other marginal remarks are of interest. First, Langer documents a shrine in Ardakan (Yazd) named after Fredōn (Pīr-e Šāh-Fereydūn; pp. 390–394). Although Fredōn is of minor importance in the clerical texts, it appears to have a certain significance in general religious practice. Another indication can

be found in a newly published document from the early Islamic period.⁴ Second, Langer quotes the refrain of a song that speaks about thirty-three pieces of *Esfand*. Zoroastrians deduct this fact from the number of the Ratus (p. 30) ascribed to the days of a month (p. 98f.). And in fact, there is a reference to the number 33 in Y.1.10 that quotes the number of Yazatas.

Without doubt, it is the wide range of the objects studied and their comprehensive and precise documentation that turned this book into a massive volume. Nevertheless, it appears that a more suitable format—e.g. the omission of line breaks between bibliographical details for each shrine (in section 1.B)—could have saved space. Similarly, although the cataloging of the shrines according to provinces makes apparent sense, the very detailed listing results in a confusing table of contents (examples like section 3.3.7.4.2.1.1.5.3) and in the continuous repetition of units. Despite this detailed structure, the page header remains the same throughout 650 pages (“3: Gesamtdokumentation”) and does not help in locating specific entries. The author could also have shortened the book by using abbreviations instead of complete bibliographical information in the first chapters, especially when they are linked to three versions of an author’s name as well as year of birth. Finally, the work—which offers such comprehensive information about Iran’s Zoroastrian shrines and will be used also as a reference work—unfortunately lacks an index.

Notable is the side-by-side presentation of indigenous Zoroastrian terms in modern Persian next to their German translations. Transcriptions and translations are almost flawless. The few exceptions include the formula “*yā moškel-gošā moškel-e hame rā bogošā*” which should have been translated as “Oh problem solver! Solve everyone’s problem” rather than as “Oh problem solving the whole problem should be solved” (“Oh Problemlösen alle Probleme sollen gelöst werden”) (p. 107). Likewise, *morād-e del-etān* should be translated as “wish of your heart” rather than as “wish of your spirit” (“Wunsch Ihrer Seele”) (p. 147). The author adds “sic” to the transcription of *Tūs* (p. 222); however, both *Tūs* and *Tūs* are commonly used spellings of the word in Persian. Note 300, on p. 96 is incomplete. Besides, a few Avestan words are not reproduced in their usual transcriptions: *Fravašī* (85) (*Frauwašī*), *spānta* (*spənta-*), *Amāša-Spānta* (p. 98) (*Aməša Spənta*), *Xvarānah* (p. 123, note 377) (*Xʷarənah*), *būxta-* (p. 124, note 378) (*būxta-*), *Vərəθraγna* (p. 173) (*Vərəθraγna*).

Finally, it should be mentioned that this remarkable study has merited the Iranian research award “Cultural Research of the Year 2002, 8th Course (International): First Award.”

Kianoosh Rezaia
Georg-August Universität Göttingen
© 2011, Kianoosh Rezaia
DOI:10.1080/00210862.2011.525064

⁴See Dieter Weber, *Berliner Pahlavi-Dokumente: Zeugnisse spätsassanidischer Brief- und Rechtskultur aus frühislamischer Zeit; mit Beiträgen von Myriam Krutzsch und Maria Macuch* (Iranica 15) (Wiesbaden, 2008), 114 (doc 27).

Copyright of Iranian Studies is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.