

A SLEEPY TIME HISTORY BOOK

The 12 Warnings They Left Behind

Why Ancient Texts Keep Returning to Floods, Lost Worlds, and Civilization Beginning Again

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Why Ancient Texts Keep Returning to Floods, Lost Worlds, and Civilization Beginning Again

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A Note Before We Begin

The old stories are easiest to hear at night.

The room grows quiet. The familiar world recedes. A voice from a distant age speaks of a world that existed before this one, of knowledge that crossed a boundary, and of a warning almost nobody understood until it was too late.

This book follows twelve of those warnings. It does not ask the reader to believe that every flood was one flood, or that every ruined city belongs to a forgotten global civilization. It asks a slower and more interesting question: why did people so far apart keep imagining the end in such similar shapes?

Each chapter separates four things that are easily tangled together: what the surviving text says, how that text reached us, what material evidence can support, and what remains genuinely unresolved. The mystery survives. The certainty does not have to be invented.

This preview contains one complete chapter from the planned volume. Its world is not drowned. It freezes. A ruler is told to build a hidden enclosure and carry into it the best of people, animals, plants, fire, water, and seed. It is an ancient refuge story, but not quite an ark. That difference is where the chapter begins.



CHAPTER 9

The Enclosure Built for a Deadly Winter

BEFORE THE WINTER COMES, THE WORLD IS ALMOST too good.

There is no killing cold. No unbearable heat. No old age, sickness, or death. The herds multiply, people flourish, and the earth fills until there is no longer room for them. Three times the ruler Yima steps forward. Three times he presses the earth with a golden seal and bores it with a poniard inlaid with gold. And three times the earth opens wider.

It is an odd beginning for a story of extinction. Humanity is not being punished for violence. The world has not decayed. It has succeeded so completely that it must be enlarged.

Then the meeting is called.

Ahura Mazda, the wise lord, gathers the spiritual beings at a celebrated place. Yima gathers the finest mortals. The warning given there is precise enough to be terrifying and strange enough to resist every easy explanation.

A winter is coming. Snow will fall thick, even on the highest tops of the mountains. The beasts of the wilder-

ness, of the mountain peaks, and of the valley floors will take shelter in underground abodes. Where the country once bore plenty of grass for cattle, a place showing so much as a sheep's footprint will be a wonder in the world once the snow melts.

Yima is told to build a *vara*: an enclosure, a refuge, a bounded place apart from the exposed world. Into it he must bring the seeds of the best people, the best animals, and the best plants. Inside, water must flow. Food must not fail. Lights must shine. Nothing sick, malformed, violent, or decayed may enter.

The command resembles an ark story until one looks closely. There is no boat. There is no rain. The chosen ruler does not drift above a drowned world. Instead, he builds a sealed and ordered world within the world, and life waits inside it while the surface becomes unrecognizable.

What the text actually says

The account appears in the second section, or Fargard, of the *Vendidad*, one of the surviving works of the Avesta, the sacred literature of Zoroastrianism.^[1] It unfolds as a conversation in which the prophet Zarathustra asks questions and Ahura Mazda answers them.

The first half concerns Yima's long reign. Ahura Mazda initially asks him to receive and carry the religious law. Yima declines that role, saying he is not suited to it. He accepts another task instead: to make the world increase and to guard it so that living things prosper.

Under Yima, the world becomes a realm without the ordinary boundaries of human life. Cattle and people grow numerous. The earth is filled with flocks, fires, dogs, birds, and red, blazing lights. When there is no room left, Yima steps forward in light, southwards, on the way of the sun. He presses the earth with the golden seal, bores it with the poniard, and asks it to open asunder and stretch itself afar. The earth grows larger by one-third. The whole sequence runs again, and the earth grows larger by two-thirds; it runs a third time, and the earth grows larger by three-thirds.

Only after this age of abundance does Ahura Mazda announce the catastrophe. Darmesteter's translation calls the coming seasons "evil winters," bringing "the fierce, deadly frost" and snow-flakes falling thick on the highest tops of the mountains.^[1:1] The beasts take shelter underground, and afterwards, the text says, "a place wherein the footprint of a sheep may be seen will be a wonder in the world."^[1:2]

The instructions for the vara are architectural, biological, and moral at once. Yima is to make a vara as long as a riding-ground on every side of the square. He is to bring in breeding pairs or seeds of cattle, beasts of burden, useful animals, people, trees, fruits, and foods. The occupants are not a random remnant. They are selected examples of flourishing life.

The interior is divided into a largest, a middle, and a smallest part, with nine streets, six, and three, and a descending share of the seeds of men and women brought to each.

Water flows in a channel; birds settle on green that never fades, with food that never fails; dwelling-places stand with balcony, courtyard, and gallery. The vara is sealed with the golden ring and given a door and a window self-shining within. The population lives without deformity, disease, deceit, cruelty, jealousy, or poverty. The lights are described in two classes, uncreated and created, and the passage says that a year seems only as a day.

That last detail changes the atmosphere of the whole account. The vara is not merely a bunker stocked for one brutal season. Time itself feels different inside it.

When Zarathustra asks who carries the religion of Mazda into this place, the answer is the bird Karshipta. When he asks who rules there, the answer names Urvatat-nara and Zarathustra.^[1:3] The refuge belongs at once to Yima's ancient reign and to the sacred order of the text's present.

How the story was transmitted

The *Vendidad* is not a diary from the reign of a historical king. It is a religious work preserved within a long and complicated tradition of oral recitation, compilation, commentary, copying, and translation.

Even the name Yima carries history inside it. In later Persian tradition he becomes Jamshid, the radiant king of a golden age.^[2] Stories gather around him: splendor, royal power, pride, decline, and loss. The figure known from later epic literature is related to the ruler in the Avestan

account, but the two should not be flattened into a single unchanging character.

The chapter in which the *vara* appears also shows signs of layers. Its first part is about the expansion of a crowded, deathless earth. Its second part is about preservation through a lethal winter. The join between them is not seamless. Scholars have long asked whether older stories were combined, reworked, or placed within a later religious framework.^[3]

That matters because the text's present form does more than remember danger. It defines an ideal community. The *vara* preserves healthy bodies, pure species, sufficient food, clean water, light, and correct worship. It excludes not only disease but social and moral disorder. Survival and purity have become parts of the same design.

Translation introduces another layer. Words such as *vara* do not arrive with one modern picture attached. "Enclosure" is safer than "underground city," although underground refuges are common in modern retellings, and it is the Pahlavi commentary Darmesteter translates alongside the text, rather than the Avestan verses themselves, that places the *vara* below ground. The surviving description is difficult in places, and the precise layout cannot be recovered with confidence. A translation that sounds like a technical blueprint can make the architecture seem clearer than the source allows.

The same caution applies to the lights and the unusual movement of time. They may belong to a realm imagined as remote, blessed, or cosmologically distinct. Reading

them as electric lamps and suspended animation tells us more about the modern reader than the ancient sentence.

What the physical evidence supports

There is no archaeological site securely identified as Yima's vara. No layer of ancient settlement has produced an inscription saying that its occupants entered because Ahura Mazda warned them of the winter in this text. The story cannot be pinned to a dated catastrophe by the text alone.

The earth has, of course, endured severe cold phases. Human communities have also built enclosed shelters, stored seed and food, protected breeding animals, and moved herds according to the seasons. None of those broad facts is surprising. None is specific enough to prove this account preserves a memory of one Ice Age event.

One grounded possibility is more modest. The image of a protected enclosure may preserve something of pastoral life: a winter station where selected animals, stores, and people could survive conditions outside. Over generations, the practical memory of sheltering a herd could grow into a complete refuge for the finest specimens of creation.

That is plausible as a route by which stories change. It is not a recovered origin. The vara in the surviving text is much more than a cattle station. It is spacious, fertile, illuminated, morally ordered, and strangely placed in time. A practical enclosure may explain one thread without explaining the whole fabric.

The comparison with flood narratives is equally limited. Both patterns preserve life through selection. Both place a warned ruler between a doomed world and a later one. But the mechanism, moral setting, architecture, and aftermath differ. Similar narrative tools do not require a single historical disaster behind them.

The strongest physical conclusion is therefore a narrow one: ancient communities knew that winter could isolate, starve, and kill, and that survival depended on protected space, water, food, seed, and breeding stock. The text takes those realities and builds from them an ideal world in miniature.

What remains unresolved

The largest question is what sort of place the vara was in the imagination of the people who preserved the story.

Was it first a real seasonal enclosure, enlarged by retelling? Was it always a mythic refuge? Did later editors connect an old royal legend with a religious vision of a protected community? Or did the story move in the other direction, with an ideal afterlife or distant land gradually acquiring the language of a building?

The catastrophe is unresolved too. A deadly winter is not the most common ancient image of world destruction. That gives the episode its power, but not a date. Attempts to match it to a particular climate event must bridge an enormous gap between a mythic narrative, an uncertain

history of composition, and a physical record that does not name Yima.

Then there are the details that refuse to become ordinary. The lights are created and uncreated. A year seems like a day. A bird carries sacred teaching into the enclosure. The inhabitants live without bodily defect or social misery. These are not stray decorations around a practical emergency shelter. They signal that the vara belongs partly outside normal geography and time.

Perhaps that is why the story survived.

An ark carries life across chaos. Yima's enclosure does something quieter. It holds a small, perfected world still while catastrophe passes outside. The warning is not only that winter comes. It is that civilization can become a refuge so complete, so ordered, and so separate that those within it no longer experience time as the rest of the world does.

The text never tells us when the doors open.

NOTES

1. James Darmesteter, trans., *The Zend-Avesta, Part I: The Vendidad, Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 4, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1895), Fargard II. [^] [^] [^] [^]
2. Encyclopaedia Iranica, "Jamsid I. Myth of Jamsid," online edition. [^]
3. Encyclopaedia Iranica, "Vendidad," online edition. [^]

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Chapter 9: The Enclosure Built for a Deadly Winter

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About This Preview

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This is a design and editorial sample, not the complete book. The final volume is planned as twelve illustrated chapters.

Sources and method

The chapter is based on James Darmesteter's public-domain translation of Fargard II of the *Vendidad*, checked against modern reference articles in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. Modern scholarship is paraphrased, not reproduced. The source registry travels with the manuscript so that every chapter can be audited before publication.

Historical traditions are presented as traditions. Similarities between stories are not proof of a shared event, and no archaeological or geological claim is treated as established unless the physical record supports it.

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