

The Language and the Texts



Mon of Darius—Column III, Behistun (6th century B.C.)

The Language

Avestan

Avestan, the language of Zarathushtra's revelation, belongs to the Indo-European family of languages and is a sister language to Sanskrit. Zarathushtra's hymns seem to have been transmitted orally from generation to generation for nearly two thousand years. It is believed that there was no Avestan script during that period in ancient Iran. Through the millennia, however, the corpus of Avestan literature increased and the language itself underwent certain philological changes. As a result of this, all the post *Gāthic* compilations came to be known as part of the Younger Avesta. The corpus of all the literature—the Avesta—was probably first committed to writing during the latter half of the mid-Sasanian period.

Old Persian

Old Persian also belongs to the Indo-European family of languages and is a cousin language to Avestan. It became the official language of the Achaemenians (550-330 B.C.) from the 6th century B.C. onwards. The cuneiform inscriptions of King Darius I (522-486 B.C.) which are to be found at Behistun in Iran, are in Old Persian.

Middle Persian (Pahlavi)

Pahlavi is one of the Middle Iranian languages which developed from Old Persian during Sasanian times (224-651/2 A.C.). It has a polyphonic alphabet of 14 basic letters which were derived from an earlier Aramaic alphabet also used by the Achaemenians. It is believed that the development of the Middle Iranian languages started from the 3rd century B.C. onwards.

Zand

The *Zand* comprises of the explanations and commentaries of the Avesta compilations which were first written down in a cursive

Pahlavi script. *Zand*, therefore, is not a language as is commonly believed.

Pazand

The *Pazand* comprises of the explanations and commentaries of the Pahlavi texts which were written down in the newly formed Avestan script. The 46-letter Avestan alphabet was invented as late as the 5th century A.C. in Sasanian times. It is believed that the Avestan script was structured on the earlier polyphonic Pahlavi script.

The Avesta

Contents of the Avesta

The Avesta as it exists today, contains ceremonial liturgies, invocations to individual divinities, the "law against the demons" and various other supplementary prayers. It also includes some loosely connected rules for the conduction of liturgical services. A large portion of the Avesta is believed to have been lost to history; what remains is a com-

plex collection of writings, which may be divided into a number of individual texts each complete in itself.

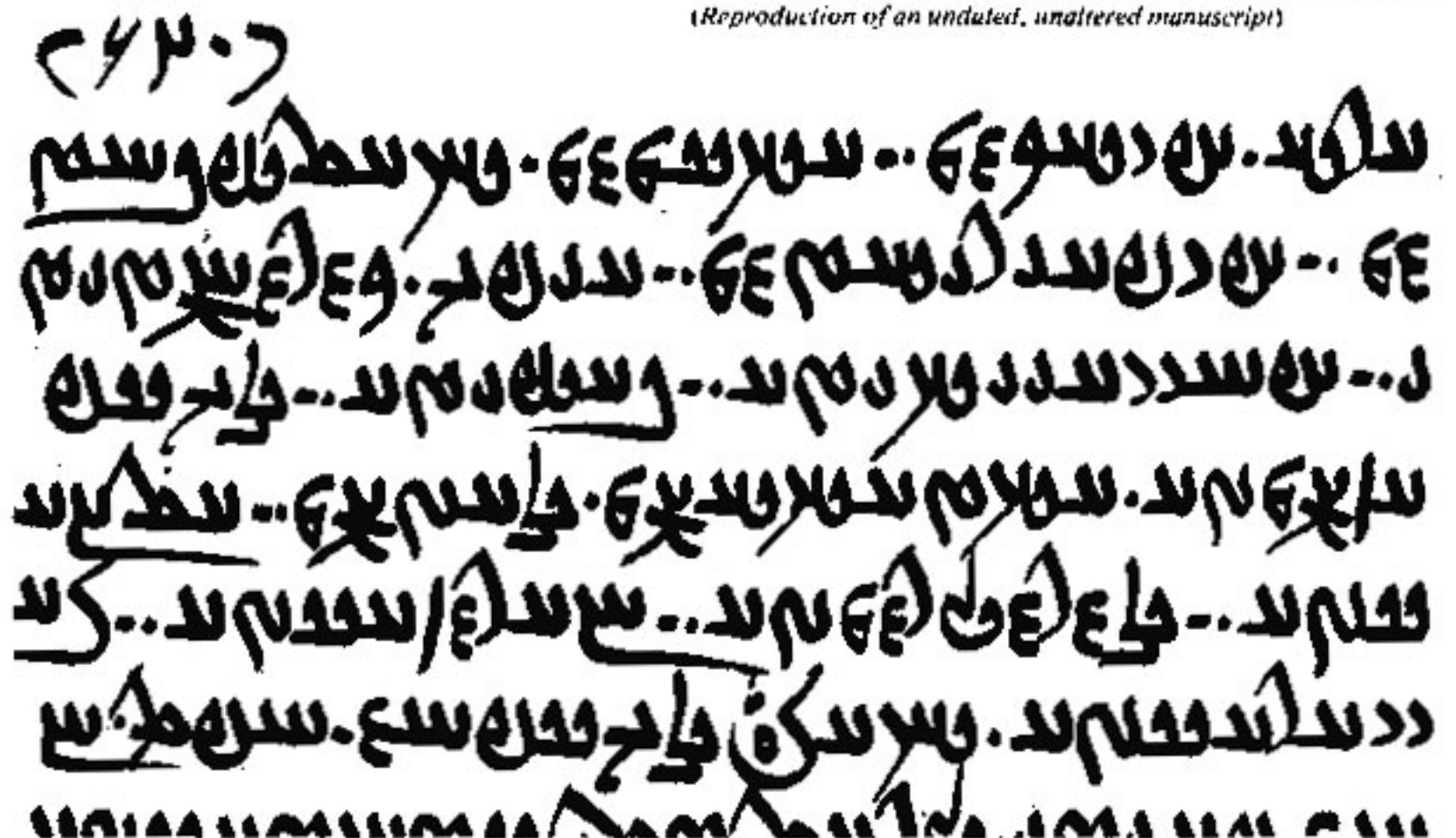
The Avesta in its present form may be classified into 5 divisions :

1. *Yasna* (which includes the *Gāthās*)
2. *Yashts*
3. *Visperad*
4. *Vendidād*
5. *Khordeh Avesta*

The *Yasna* :

The *Yasna*, which is the act of worship, consists of a series of invocations and oblations addressed and offered to all the divinities of the Zoroastrian pantheon, who are invoked in an hierarchical order. The *Yasna* is divided into 72 chapters, some of which are repetitive. The entire *Yasna* is recited in the *Yasna (Guj. Jashne)* ceremony in which the sap of the pounded *hōm* twigs and pomegranate leaves

A portion of the Yasna compiled and written in the Avestan script (Reproduction of an undated, unaltered manuscript)



(*Ph.urwarām*) is extracted and mixed with goat's milk (*Ph.jiwām*) and consecrated well-water (*Ph. āb zōhr*). The main corpus of the *Yasna* is formed by the *Staota Yesnya* which begins with the *Ahunavar* prayer (Y.19) and ends with the *Airyema Ishyō* prayer which is recited immediately after the end of the fifth *Gāthā* (Y.53). The *Gāthās* are thus insulated to form the spiritual core of the *Yasna* ceremony.

The *Yashts* :

These are the hymns of praise devoted to the worship of individual divinities, the *Yazatas*, who are the "adorable beings worthy of worship" in the Zoroastrian pantheon. Many of the *Yazatas* have a day or month named in their honour.

The *Yashts* are recognized by their introduction and conclusion which are similar in style and syntax to each other. Each *Yasht* however, differs widely in age and content.

The *Visperad* :

The word *Visperad* comes from the Avestan word *Visperatavō* meaning "All the Lords". The *Visperad* is not an independent book, but it is a collection of supplements to the *Yasna*. The *Visperad* ceremony is performed with portions of the *Yasna* interspersed within it. There are 24 chapters (*Av. kērēti*) in the *Visperad*. Most of these chapters consist of formal invocations in the style of the *Yasna*. The *Visperad* is generally performed during the *Gāhāmbār* festivals and it contains expositions on the ritual portions of the *Yasna*.

The *Vendidād* :

The *Vendidād* ("The Law Against the Demons") is not a liturgical work. It is regarded as the *Leviticus* of the Parsis¹; that is, their ecclesiastical law book in which are specified in great detail the laws of purity, atonements for sins and religious penances. It also contains divergent material which

1. D. Mackenzie, p 8.

includes the geography of the Avesta, laws against breach of contract, the importance of the *dakhma*, pollution by dead bodies, the importance of the dog, and priestly duties to be observed. The *Vendidād* is said to have formed the original 19th *Nask* of the Sasanid Avesta. As it exists today, it contains 22 chapters or *fargards* which are mostly in question-answer form.

The *Khordeh Avesta* :

The *Khordeh Avesta* or the *Minor Avesta* is a short extract from the entire Avesta. The *Khordeh Avesta* consists of :

1. The five *Nyāishes*, which are litanies in praise of the sun, light/contract, moon, water and fire.
2. The five *gāhs* or watches of the day.
3. The *Sirozah*, which contains two sets of minor and major invocations in honour of a pantheon of Zoroastrian divinities. Each invocation is addressed to the specific divinity of the day; there are three additional divinities—Burz, Hōm and Dahm—who are invoked on other occasions, making a total of 33 invocations in each set.
4. The *Āfrīnagāns* or blessings.

The editing of the *Khordeh Avesta* has been ascribed to Ādurbād ī Mahraspandān, during the reign of Shapur II (309-379 A.C.). The modern day *Khordeh Avesta* includes an amalgam of additional Avestan and Pahlavi prayers which are recited by the laity on different occasions.

Fragmentary Avestan Texts :

A few large fragments of writings, many incomplete in themselves, have been preserved.

1. *Nīrangistān* : It is an extensive exposition on the rituals of the Zoroastrian tradition.
2. The *Nasks* : It is known that the Avesta once consisted of 21 *Nasks* and the existing Avestan texts are a part of the original; only the *Vendidād* and the 3 fragments of the *Hādokht Nask* have survived independently.
3. Other Avestan fragments.

The Middle Persian Texts

The Middle Persian texts are a storehouse of information for any serious student of Zoroastrianism. The Pahlavi texts form an important link between early Zoroastrian thought and its subsequent development through the ages.

It is important to realize that the Middle Persian texts are full of abstract allegorical concepts and metaphors which, at times, are difficult to comprehend. However, one must try to grasp the underlying principles which lie behind the written word, in order that one may appreciate the continuity and richness of the faith and tradition.

Some of the Major Pahlavi Texts

Bundahishn : 6th century A.C.

The term *Bundahishn*, meaning creation, is applied to the Pahlavi work which relates to the cosmogony, cosmology, mythology and legendary history of the ancient Iranians. The fuller text is known as the *Iranian Bundahishn* or the *Zand Āgāhīh*, "knowledge from the Zand".

Dādestān-i-Mēnōg-i-Khrad : 6th century A.C.

This text ("Opinions of the Spirit of Wisdom") comprises of 62 questions which were asked to the Spirit of Wisdom on matters connected with the religion. The topics included the nature of wisdom, the creation of the world, the nature of truth, the 10 happiest and unhappiest lands, the 33 good works, the 30 cardinal sins and information on the best types of food, grain, fruit and wine.

Ardā Wirāz Nāmāg : final redaction in the 9th century A.C.

The *Ardā Wirāz Nāmāg* appears to have been initially compiled in ancient times; however, in its surviving form, it seems to be a work of the post Sasanian period. The righteous Wirāz, it is said, was temporarily transported in spirit "from the land of the living to the land of the

dead". The spirit of Wirāz, for seven days and nights, made a grand tour of heaven and hell while his body was in a trance. During this journey, he saw the rewards and retributions meted out to the righteous and wicked souls in heaven and hell respectively. This text is popular and widely read by many Zoroastrians.

Zādspram : 9th century A.C.

The *Zādspram* was written by *mobed* Zādspram, the son of *mobed* Juwānjam. It deals with subjects similar to those in the *Bundahishn* and it also includes legends regarding Zarathushtra and his family, the omniscience of Wisdom, the nature of the evil spirit, the formation of men, and the renovation of the world at the end of time.

Dādestān-i-dīhīg : 9th century A.C.

This text ("Opinions of the Religion") was written by Manushchihr, the brother of Zādspram and son of *mobed* Juwānjam, the high priest of Pars and Kerman. It comprises of 92 questions and answers about the faith. The answers given by Manushchihr include a wide variety of topics like the expiation of sin, the importance of the *sudreh, kūstī*, adoption, guardianship, the role of priests and the doctrine of death, followed by the renovation of the world.

Epistles of Manushchihr : 9th century A.C.

It seems that the above epistles (letters) were written by Manushchihr to refute and rebuke the shortcuts and changes that his brother Zādspram wanted with regards to rituals. In the epistles, Manushchihr ordered an immediate return to former customs and traditions.

Shkand-gumānīg Wīzār : 9th century A.C.

The *Shkand-gumānīg Wīzār* ("Doubt-dispelling explanation") is an excellent metaphysical treatise in which are tackled the fundamental concept of duality, the doctrine of good and evil, their separate origin and existence, and other philosophical issues, by a genius of his time - Mardānfarrokh i Ohrmazd dādān.

جسای بر سپهر
 گل از باو و بار
 که از ابرویم
 بریز کل اندام
 ندارد کسب
 درم کشته از
 که با من همی
 بکوشی و آسایش
 ز من رهت نهان
 بایران کنج و
 بخش بدو نامه
 نواری همه لشکر
 که نیکو زواید آسا
 که هرگز نه منی زنی
 بهیچ بود بارش و
 همی تاج و تخت کور
 نشیند بخوبی و آرا
 ز دانش برو با پاره
 زمانه فکندی بخند
 بدو دل شیر آینه
 بسی شور و تلخی باج
 که این پرشم تلخ
 بچنگیل پور و
 سیارم بدو کچه و تا

مرا به اجرم ابرام
 شب تیره طبل نخبه همی
 ندانم که عاشق کل آنکه
 که دادم که طبل چکوبید همی
 همی ناله از مرکب سفید

سرو سدی نو آمد برید
 گل از ناله او سبب الهی
 چو بر کل نشیند کشاید
 بزودیکت خورشید فرما زوا

درم دارد و نقل و نان و طبل
 بیا لیر طبل بنالد سسی
 بخندد همی طبل از هر دو
 سرشک هر روز من شکو

خاک آنکه دل ساودارد بوی
 همه که بر لاله و سنبل است
 ندانم که ز کس جرات درم
 در فشان شودش اندیش
 ز طبل سخن گفتن چکوب

انگار و اسان رسم و سفند ما

Shāyest-nē-shāyest: 9th century A.C.

Shāyest-nē-shāyest meaning "the proper and improper" is a compilation containing miscellaneous laws and customs regarding sin and impurity, as well as it includes some information about religious ceremonies and basic Zoroastrian doctrine:

Dēnkard: 9th century A.C.

The *Dēnkard* ("The Acts of the Religion") is the longest extant Pahlavi work which was written by Ādur Farnbāg Farrokhzādān, and edited and enlarged by Ādurbād Emēdān. It contains a synopsis of the Zoroastrian religion during that period, together with a list comprising the whole of the Sasanid Avesta which was contained in the 21 *Nasks*. However the *Dēnkard* does contain certain eclectic religious beliefs which, it is said, derive their source from the early Platonic, Gnostic and Zurvanite schools.

The Shāhnāmē: 11th century A.C.

The *Shāhnāmē* ("Book of Kings") is an Iranian epic composed in verse form by the great Iranian Firdausi Tusi. He started his work in 975 A.C. and completed it in 1010 A.C. after having composed 45,000 lines of rhyming poetry in the *Motoqareb* meter. Firdaus derived his source and inspiration from

Pahlavi chronicle called the *Khwadāy Nāmag* — the book of Kings. In his poem he outlines the life and times of the mythical Pīshdādiān and the heroic Kayāniān dynasties. The latter part of his poem bears the stamp of historical veracity, after the advent of Alexander the Accursed. The poem is replete with rich imagery and stories which, if understood, gives one a deep insight into Iranian thought, history, literature and culture.

The Persian Rivāyats: 14th to 18th century A.C.

The *Persian Rivāyats* comprise of a collection of letters, treatise and messages of instruction given by the Iranian priests in reply to the questions asked by their counterparts in India mainly between the 15th and 17th centuries A.C. The *Rivāyats* cover a variety of topics including the doctrine, laws and the instructions incorporating ancient observances and rituals as practised by the Zoroastrian community in Iran. The most famous of the *Rivāyats* is the one compiled by Hormazyar Framarz, whose *Rivāyats* were translated into English by the great Parsi scholar, *Ervad* Bamanji N. Dhabhar, and published by the K. R. Cama Oriental Institute in 1932. In this edition, are also included the English translations (done by *Ervad* Dhabhar) of the *Olmā-i-Islam*, *Bahman Yasht*, *Jāmāspi*, *Ahkān i Jāmāsp*, *Saddar Bundahesh* and numerous other topics of interest.

A portion of the *Shāhnāmē* in the Persian language and script

چو با پور و شان بر آید همی
 بجایا سب گفت از زمان شهریک
 که این کار را خوار ما به در
 اگر من سرخست شاهنشاهی