The Language and the Texts

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.D.). 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 Sassanian 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 complex 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. *Yashis*
3. *Visperad*
4. *Vendidad*
5. *Khordeh Avesta*

**The Yasna**

The *Yasna*, which is the act of worship, consists of a series of invocations and obligations 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. Ijasne*) ceremony in which the sap of the pounded *hōm* twigs and pomegranate leaves are fed into the fire. A portion of the *Yasna* compiled and written in the Avestan script (reproduction of an undated, unaltered manuscript).
(Ph. urwōrtm) is extracted and mixed with goat’s milk (Ph. jwōm) and consecrated well-water (Ph. ab zōhr). The main corpus of the Yasna is formed by the Staota Yasnya which begins with the Ahunavart prayer (Y.19) and ends with the Ahrvema Išhyō prayer which is recited immediately after the end of the fifth Gāthā (Y.33). 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 Visperavātā 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. kōrō) in the Visperad. Most of these chapters consist of formal invocations in the style of the Yasna. The Visperad is generally performed during the Gāthāmār festival and it contains expositions on the ritual portions of the Yasna.

The Vendidad:
The Vendidad (“The Law Against the Demons”) is not a liturgical work. It is regarded as the Leviticus of the Parsis; that is, their ecclesiastical law book in which are specified in great detail the laws of purity, punishments for sins and religious penances. It also contains divergent material which 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 Vendidad 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 Khordah Avesta:
The Khordah Avesta of the Minor Avesta is a short extract from the entire Avesta. The Khordah Avesta consists of:

1. The five Nyāshes, 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—Buz, Šōm, and Dāhm—who are invoked on other occasions, making a total of 33 invocations in each set.
4. The Frīnagāns or blessings.

The editing of the Khordah Avesta has been ascribed to Ādur Dād Dāhraspāndān, during the reign of Shapur II (309-379 A.C.). The modern day Khordah 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. Nirangistān: 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 Vendidad and the 3 fragments of the Hīdākhst 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 Agāhīh, "knowledge from the Zand".

Dādestān-i-Maḥūg-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.

Arđī Wirāz Nāmag : 9th century A.C.

The Arđī Wirāz Nāmag 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.

Zādsprām : 9th century A.C.

The Zādsprām was written by moḥed Zādsprām, the son of moḥed Juwānīn. 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-Dīhūg : 9th century A.C.

This text ("Opinions of the Religion") was written by Manushchīh, the brother of Zādsprām and son of moḥed Juwānīn, the high priest of Pars and Kerman. It comprises of 92 questions and answers about the faith. The answers given by Manushchīh include a wide variety of topics like the expiation of sin, the importance of the sadreh-kīšet, adoption, guardianship, the role of priests and the doctrine of death, followed by the renovation of the world.

Epistles of Manushchīh : 9th century A.C.

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

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

The Shkand-gumānīg Wirāz ("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—Mardīnfarrokh I Ohrmazd dāčīn.
Shāyest-ī šāyest: 9th century A.C.

Shāyest-ī šāyest 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 Ādūrbaṇīg Farrokhzadān, and edited and enlarged by Ādurbūd Ezmādān. It contains a synopsis of the Zoroastrian religion during that period, together with a list comprising the whole of the Susamid Avesta which was contained in the 21 Naskas. However the Dēnkard does contain certain eclectic religious beliefs which, it is said, derive their source from the early Platonics, Gnostics and Zoroastrian schools.

The Shāhnāme: 11th century A.C.

The Shāhnāme (”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 Motaqarab meter. Firdausi derived his source and inspiration from Pahlavi chronicle called the Khwādgy Nāmag—the book of Kings. In his poem he outlines the life and times of the mythical Fāhīdēdān and the heroic Kayánhān 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 Rīvāyats: 14th to 18th century A.C.

The Persian Rīvāyats comprise of a collection of letters, treatises 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 Rīvāyats 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 Rīvāyats is the one compiled by Hormāz Frāmar, whose Rīvāyats were translated into English by the great Parsi scholar, Ervād Bāmanji N. Dhahbār, and published by the K. R. Cama Oriental Institute in 1932. In this edition, are also included the English translations (done by Ervād Dhahbār) of the Olmā-i-Bilām, Bāman Yāsht, Jāmāspī, Aftādān-i Jāmāspī, Sāddor Būdahēsh and numerous other topics of interest.