

PAPER

DIVERSITY IN “AVESTA” TRANSLATIONS: CONSEQUENCES AND THE UNRELIABILITY OF HISTORICAL CONCLUSIONS

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Abstract

This article examines the inconsistencies and interpretative discrepancies found in various translations of the Avesta, particularly focusing on the Videvdat (Vendidad) section. By comparing the English translation by James Darmesteter with the Uzbek translation by Asqar Mahkam and the Russian translation by Rtveladze et al., the study highlights significant differences in the treatment of priest typologies and references to dogs in ritual contexts. These disparities, such as the omission or duplication of certain fargards, raise questions about the reliability of historical conclusions derived from different versions of the text. The article also explores how these translation differences can impact our understanding of Zoroastrian ritual practices, religious hierarchy, and socio-cultural values reflected in ancient texts.

Key words: Avesta, Videvdat, Zoroastrianism, James Darmesteter, Asqar Mahkam, priest typology, translation studies, ritual dog, Sagdid, ancient Iranian religion, textual discrepancy.

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt today about the immense contribution made by the peoples of the land between the two rivers (Amudarya and Syrdarya) to world civilization and the spiritual development of humanity throughout the centuries. The book Avesta, a great legacy of our ancestors' thought and spirituality, remains an essential source for illuminating the most ancient pages of the history of the peoples of this region. However, recent studies have revealed that Avesta and its various translations (in Uzbek, Russian, and English) contain a number of problematic elements. This article aims to examine some of the key differences found in today's various translations of Avesta.

RESULTS

One of the sections of the Avesta, the Videvdat, previously known in the form Vendidad, is also referred to as part of the “Little Avesta.” The language of the Videvdat contains more irregularities

and errors when compared to other sections, such as the Gathas. As a result, I. Gershevitch has suggested dating this final part to the later period of the Achaemenid Empire. [1. P24.] It is well known that numerous scholars have worked on translating the Avesta. One of the earliest English translations was by James Darmesteter in 1898. [2.P.6] Based on his translation of the Videvdat, a typology of priests was developed using the “YOMITX” method. [3. P.3] According to this, information about priests appears in parts 57–58 of the fifth fargard and parts 17–18 of the seventh fargard. These priests participated in Zoroastrian rituals and sacrifices, and each had a distinct role. Below is a typology of priests who took part in sacrifices. Darmesteter's translation differs from others. In the Uzbek translation by Asqar Mahkam [4. P.126], these priests are mentioned only twice, and Mahkam refers to them as eight authoritative religious leaders. In this translation, parts 17–18 of the seventh fargard are omitted.

In the Russian translation by Rtveladze E.V., Saidov A.Kh., and Abdullaev K.V. (2008), the names of the priests are not listed individually, but are referred to generally as “жрецом” (priests). [5. P.94.] Here, too, parts 17–18 of the seventh fargard are omitted.

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Both Russian authors explain that these parts were repetitions of parts 57–62 of the fifth fargard. However, in Darmesteter's version, these sections are preserved, making this a subject of scholarly debate. We found it necessary to consult other sources as well. In Darmesteter's translation of the Yasht section [6.P.31], the Zaotar (a priest who chants hymns and recites prayers) is mentioned 14 times. In this section, Zoroaster himself appears to perform the role of Zaotar. For instance, in Hordad Yasht, part 8: "The names of those (Amesha-Spentas) smite the men turned to Nasus by the Drujes: the seed and kin of the karapans are smitten, the scornful are dead, as the Zaotar Zarathushtra blows them away to woe, however fierce, at his will and wish, as many as he wishes." Here, Zoroaster is explicitly described as a Zaotar. In D. N. Mackenzie's *A Concise Pahlavi Dictionary* (1971), the term "Zaotar" is also defined as the primary officiating priest. [7. P.203] After the fall of the Sasanian Empire, the Zoroastrian priesthood hierarchy in Iran was simplified. During the Yasna ritual, sacrifices were conducted by two priests: the Zaotar and the Raspi. These two roles are still preserved among Zoroastrians in modern-day Iran. It is well established that the Avesta is one of the oldest written sources providing information about the lifestyle and economy of ancient peoples. In addition to details on agricultural practices, the text contains information about animals involved in these activities. We analyzed data related to dogs mentioned in the Avesta.

DISCUSSION

A comparative analysis of the translations of Videvdat, which is a part of the Avesta, reveals significant differences even though they are translations of the same book. We focused on Asqar Mahkam's Uzbek translation and James Darmesteter's English version. In Darmesteter's translation, dogs are first mentioned in the fifth fargard. In this section, dogs are categorized according to their function. In part 29 of the fifth fargard, the text explains how many people become defiled when a dog dies among humans and the demon Nasu arrives.

According to both translations, if a shepherd's dog dies, seven people are defiled; if it is a house dog, six people are defiled. However, the numbers differ slightly: in Mahkam's version, all 7 out of 7 are defiled, whereas Darmesteter notes 7 out of 8 — a discrepancy that invites debate.

In part 30 of the fifth fargard of the English version, we find information about the Vohunazga dog, an ownerless dog. It cannot perform the duties of a domestic or shepherd's dog, but it can catch Khrafstras (harmful creatures) and participates in the Sagdid ritual. Also mentioned is the Taruna dog, a hunting dog, which in Pahlavi implies a dog not older than four months. These parts (30–38) are omitted in the Uzbek translation by Mahkam, so this information is not found there. In part 31, the Jazu dog is mentioned, but the name is not translated from Pahlavi. In part 32, two dogs, Aiwizu and Vizu, are referenced, but their names are also untranslated from Pahlavi.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, The comparative analysis of Avesta translations shows that differences among Darmesteter's English, Mahkam's Uzbek, and Rtveladze's Russian versions extend beyond language to omissions, duplications, and interpretative shifts.

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