THE INVENTION OF A CANON:
THE CASE OF ZOROASTRIANISM

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Contemporary Zoroastrians agree that their religion could be classified as a 'religion of the book'. This classification has been of vital importance for the Zoroastrian community of Iran ever since Islam slowly became the dominant religion of the country in the aftermath of the Arab invasion of Iran in the middle of the 7th century CE. Only as a 'people' or 'religion of the book' (ahl al-kitāb) were the Zoroastrians entitled to pay the jizya and gain a certain legal status and 'protection' by the authorities similar but at the same time inferior to that of the Jews and the Christians. The 'book' in question is the Avesta. However, the transmission and the history of the Avestan texts from the remote age of Zarathushtra to the times of the Islamic conquest of Iran is a vexed question.

1. The writing down of Avestan texts

For centuries the Avesta, that is, the corpus of texts in the Avestan language, has been transmitted exclusively orally from one generation of priests to the next. The oral character of the transmission of the Avestan texts is confirmed by a linguistic observation:

There is no word for 'to read' and 'to write' in the entire Avestan literature. The word for 'to read' in later Iranian languages is derived from the Avestan radices with meanings: 'to recite', 'to chant' or 'to inquire, to converse'. Similarly, the word for 'to write' in later Iranian languages is derived from (the) Av. radix with the meaning: 'to adorn, to decorate, to paint' (Mirza 1987: 284; see Nyberg 1938: 8–9).

When and why were these texts then written down at all? In trying to formulate a hypothetical answer to these questions we can

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1 On this process see now Chokey 1997.
distinguish two types of source materials: explicit statements and implicit assumptions.

a. Explicit statements

According to Pliny the Elder the learned grammarian Hermippus ‘explained the two million verses composed by Zoroaster, also adding summaries to his (Zoroaster’s) scrolls’ (viciens centum miltia versuum a Zoroastro condita indicibus quoque voluminum eius positis explanavit). Hermippus was active in Alexandria in about 200 BCE. Gherardo Gnoli (1994: 500–502) sees this piece of information as an indication of the existence of a written Avesta during the reign of the Arsacid dynasty. It seems more likely, however, that the ‘volumes’ contained in the famous Alexandrian library are to be considered as an early testimony of Zoroaster’s Greek pseudepigraphy which later became quite fashionable in the West.2

A more serious source dates from the second century BCE. In a description of the ritual taking place in two sanctuaries of the ‘Lydians surnamed Persians’ (Λυδίων ἐπίκλησιμοι Περσαῖοι), Pausanias notes that the officiating priest, whom he calls a magus (μάγος), having a tiara upon his head, sings an invocation to some god or other in a barbaric language completely unintelligible to Greeks, ‘reciting the invocation from a book’ (ἐξεθεὶ δὲ ἐπικλημένου ἐκ βιβλίου).3 Pausanias’ observation gains credibility in that it accords rather well with rituals for maintaining certain fires as they still are observed by Zoroastrians in present days — except for the use of books. The use of books by the priests living in Lydia could be explained by their diaspora-situation. On the one hand, living in a society well acquainted with the use of alphabets and books, the Persian priests might have realized the mnemotechnical advantages of using ‘books’. Moreover, it cannot be ruled out that these Lydian-Persian priests had not been educated in the same way as their Persian fellow priests.4 The idea

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3 On this type of literature, see Beck 1991.
4 Pausanias V.27.5.4; V.27.6.5. On a possible emendation of Λυδίων ἐπίκλησιμοι Περσαῖοι to Λυδίων Ἀρτέμιδος ἐπίκλησιμοι Περσαῖοι as suggested by Bureach and accepted by Wikander, see Robert 1976: 29.
5 On the survival of ‘Iranian’ cults and priests in Anatolia in general, see Debord 1986. Robert 1976: 48 concludes that Anahita had maintained at Hyapaia ‘son caractère iranien de l’Avesta depuis l’établissement de la colonie perse jusqu’à la fin du paganisme’. Unfortunately, Robert does not go into the problem of the use of books in the ritual.
that the Lydian-Persian priests deliberately used a book ‘to enhance the solemnity of the rite’ (Boyce/Grenet 1991: 238) sounds at the same time attractive and much too artificial to be convincing. In any case it seems farfetched to use Pausanias’ casual remark as a proof for the existence of a written Avesta in Arsacid times.6

Turning to the East, a Sogdian document from Sassanian times (3rd–7th century CE) should be noted. This manuscript (in the collections of the British Museum) contains a phonetic transcription of an important Zoroastrian ritual-sacral formula, the Ajam Vohu (= Y. 27,14). Being probably made by a Manichaean scribe from Zoroastrian oral tradition (Boyce/Grenet 1991: 124), this specimen of a written Avestan text does not help much to establish the date and scope of the composition of Avestan texts by Zoroastrians.

The Sogdian manuscript, however, is an interesting piece of information in that it may illustrate the different attitudes of Manichaean and Zoroastrian priests towards the religious significance of scripture. As a matter of fact, the Manichaean Coptic Kephalaia makes a point of the fact that Zarathushtra, unlike Mani, the perfect prophet of light, did not write any books himself: ‘Zarades did not write any books, but his disciples after his death remembered and wrote the books which they read today’ (p. 7, l. 30–33; Duchesne-Guillemin 1973: 30). Any interpretation of these lines from the Kephalaia should take into consideration two aspects. First, it is to be noted that the information given in the Kephalaia corresponds exactly to what we learn from a later Zoroastrian text, the Dēnkard (‘Acts of the Religion’).

According to the last chapter of the third book, king Vīštāspa (the king who had accepted Zarathushtra’s religion) took care that the interrogation between the old teachers (pāryākēśān), the first pupils (hāwās) of Zarathushtra, and the prophet (iwshtvar) were written down (DK III 420; de Menasce 1973: 379 [translation]). The statement of the Kephalaia, however, should be seen as a piece of polemics and apologetic: It suggests that Mani’s teaching is superior to Zarathushtra’s because it is based on his own words whereas the Zoroastrians only

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6 It is to be noted, moreover, that Pausanias’ description differs from usual practice in another aspect, too: ‘For a priest to enter the presence of a sacred fire bareheaded, and only then to put on the ātara, is . . . startlingly unorthodox’ (Boyce/Grenet 1991: 236). Is the possibility therefore excluded that these priests whom Pausanias calls ‘Lydian surnamed Persians’ represent a specific (‘synergetic’) or local form of ritual activity? In that case the notice on their use of a book would lose much of its value as a source for the reconstruction of developments in the Iranian heartland.
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have a secondary writing at their disposal. At the end of the Kephalaia-
passage Mani explicitly states that the 'fathers of justice' — the text
is referring to Zarathustra and Buddha — 'did not write their wisdom
in books' (see Hutter 1988: 52). It seems, therefore, hazardous to
conclude from the Kephalaia 'that a written Avesta existed in the
Arsacid period' (Duchesne-Guillemin 1973: 30; see Gnoli 1994: 500;
Henning 1944: 47).7

Another Kephalaia text (nr. 154), moreover, states that the other
apostles whose teachings Mani claimed to fulfil did not write down
their wisdom in the same way as Mani did (see Hutter 1988: 52).8
Last but not least, a Parthian Manichaean text reports that a cer-
tain Gundeš asked Mani about the first of all the scripts of the world.
Mani replies that there were three scripts: the Indian, the Syrian,
and the Greek (Gignoux 1991: 30–31). As there is no mention of an
Iranian script, this seems to imply that the Zoroastrian texts had not
been written down yet.9

The absence of scripture in Zoroastrianism seems also to have
been exploited by Christian apologetics. In the fourth century ce
Saint Basil reports that the Zoroastrians did not know of any books
and doctrinal authorities; instead, they were transmitting their 'impi-
ety' by word of mouth and from father to son (PG XXXII 258;
Gignoux 1991: 31). In addition, several other Syrian Christian authors
implicitly or explicitly attest the oral character of the Zoroastrian
tradition (see Nau 1927: 178–181). When speaking about Zoroastrian
texts, the Christian authors for the most part make use of words like
' to say' or ' to recite', whereas they use words like ' to read' or 'the

7 Significantly, Henning, Duchesne-Guillemin, and Gnoli only refer to the first
passage of the Kephalaia.

8 Another passage of the Copric Kephalaia which deals with the ten advantages
of the Manichaean religion, however, has a more 'open' meaning. To quote the
recent translation of Wolf-Peter Funk (Kephalaia chapter CLI, lines 11–20): 'Die
Schriften (γραφή), die Weisheit (σοφία), die Offenbarungen (ἀποκάλυψις), die
Gleichnisse (παραβολά) und die Psalmen der früheren Kirchen haben sich zu der
Weisheit (σοφία) gesellt, die ich offenbart habe. Wie ein Wasser einem anderen
Wasser zufließt, und sie (gemeinsam) dann umfangreiche Gewässer bilden, so haben
sich auch die alten (ἀρχικος) Bücher mit meinen Schriften (γραφή) zusammengefügt,
(und sie sind) eine einzige große Weisheit (σοφία) geworden — solcher Art, wie sie
in allen alten (ἀρχικος) Geschlechtern (γενεα) nicht geäußert wurde. Nicht hat man
(jemals) geschrieben und enthüllt die Bücher so wie ich (sie) geschrieben habe' (Funk

9 It could, of course, also mean that the Zoroastrian texts had not been written
down in an Iranian script, but this is an unlikely hypothesis.
book' when referring to their own sacred texts, the Bible (Nau 1927: 183, 186, 189).

Since these comments are the products of rival religions, the reliability of the non-Zoroastrian sources is of course rather limited. Nevertheless, both Manichaean and Christian authors from the Sasanian period implicitly presuppose that the Zoroastrians did not attach the same importance to scripture as the Manichaeans and Christians. Some of the evidence, in fact, seems to explicitly contradict the hypothesis that there was anything like a Zoroastrian scripture at all.10

b. Implicit assumptions

The mere fact that Avestan texts have been written down some time or other in Iran and in India, and the absence both of Zoroastrian and non-Zoroastrian reports on this process11 calls for another type of analysis starting from the history of the Avestan manuscripts and the characteristics of the Avestan script.

The oldest known manuscript containing an Avestan text probably dates from 1288 CE. It is unlikely that any stemmata of the different classes of manuscripts predate the year 1000 CE. This does not mean, however, that Avestan texts had not been written down before that period. On the contrary, Henrik Samuel Nyberg had already suggested (1938: 13) that all the extant manuscripts go back to a Sasanian archetype. This hypothesis is still widely held by contemporary scholars (e.g. Kellens 1988: 36b; Hoffmann/Narten 1989: 35).12

The Avestan texts are written in a script consisting of 14 or 16 letters for vowels and 37 letters for consonants. The Avestan alphabet is based mainly on the Pahlavi cursive script and on the so-called Psalter script. Whereas the Pahlavi script had very restricted means for designating the vowel sounds, the Avestan script possesses a wide range of signs that distinguish different vowels. Obviously, the

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10 This does not necessarily mean that some single texts were not written down.
11 The Zoroastrian report that king Vištāspa ordered that the discussions of the first teachers with Zarathushtra be written down is evidently not to be regarded as containing historiographical validity.
12 Some scholars (e.g. Duchesne-Guillemin and Gnoli) still cling to the hypothesis of an Arsacid Avesta first advanced by Andreas in 1902. This idea can neither be verified nor falsified (see above 1.a). In any case 'it has proved to contribute nothing to Avestan philology' (Kellens 1988: 36a).
Greek script served as a model for this purpose. The specific characteristics of the Avestan script indicate that it was invented as ‘an attempt to record an orally recited text with all its phonetic nuances. For that reason the Avestan script must have been the deliberate invention or creation of a scholar or a group of scholars’ (Hoffmann 1988: 49a).

The guiding principle of the invention of the Avestan script with its abundance of 53 letters seems to have been phonetic exactness. This phonetic exactness suggests that the Avestan script had been invented in order to ensure a phonetically correct recitation of the Avestan texts during the rituals (Hoffmann/Narten 1989: 86). Such an aim seems perfectly reasonable in the context of Zoroastrian ‘ritualistics’ which stress the efficiency of the sacred texts and the importance of their correct recitation.

It is of course tempting to connect this observation with some of the great religious conflicts of the Sassanian period. Accordingly, the majority of the scholars have tried to establish the date of the composition of the Avestan texts in the reign of Šābuhr II (309–379 CE) or in the reign of Xusrō I Anōširvān (531–579 CE). It should be observed, however, that the sources describing these conflicts (between Zoroastrians on the one side and Manichaeans, Christians, Jews, Mazdakites, etc., on the other) mention nothing about the writing down of Avestan texts. The composition of Avestan texts could therefore have taken place at other times as well.

Some phonetic characteristics of the Avestan texts seem to suggest that the invention of the Avestan script was a product of a southwestern school of priests (Hoffmann/Narten 1989: 86–87). Since the southwestern region of Iran (Pārs) resisted Islamization longer than other areas, it is theoretically possible that the invention of the Avestan script occurred after the fall of the Sassanian dynasty. Any

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13 ‘This contrasts with the other scripts used in Iran in ancient times, all of which derive from the Aramaic script of twenty-two letters. . . . Of these comparatively few letters some were not even employed’ (Henning 1944: 44).


15 It seems noteworthy that the period between the 4th and 5th centuries CE saw the invention of some other scripts (such as the Gothic, the Armenian, and the Georgian) whose purpose was the writing down of sacred texts; in these cases, the Bible.
attempt to date the composition of the Avestan texts, however, is necessarily a guess.

There are no traces of the Avestan script having been used on rock, stone, brick, papyrus, or ostraca. There is no evidence that it had been used for amulets or on magic bowls. All this, plus the fact that the Avesta was written down in a particular script rather different from those scripts which were used for administrative or commercial purposes, suggests that it was designed to be used exclusively by certain experts (that is, priests) for a well-defined purpose (that is, the writing down of certain Avestan texts). The texts were definitely not written down for public distribution and most probably only a very limited number of manuscripts was ever in circulation.\(^6\) If a canon aims mainly at closure and limitation, then there would scarcely have arisen a need for canonization in the Zoroastrian context.

2. Reports on Canonization in Zoroastrian History:
The Avesta and the Denkard

From a theoretical standpoint the writing down of texts is not the same as the canonization of bodies of texts.\(^7\) Obviously, it is possible to write down texts without canonizing them. This is true for both religious and non-religious texts.

This statement might seem commonplace. Still, the essential difference between the composition and the canonization of texts has not always been observed by scholars. In most of the scholarly literature on Zoroastrianism the question of the written Avesta and the problem of its canonization are not clearly separated. If, however, the writing down of the Avestan texts aimed at establishing a phonetically normative recitation (see above 1.b), the assumption of a canon of the Avesta loses much of its plausibility.

To begin with, it seems convenient to argue that the priests committed mainly those texts into writing that had to be recited during the rituals. This does not exclude the possibility that some other


\(^7\) See also Colpe 1987: 83: ‘Heilige Schriften und Kanon sind also zu unterscheiden, sie können sich aber ebensogut überschneiden... In und für religiöse Gemeinschaften können Heiligkeit und Kanonizität erst recht zusammenfallen. Grundsätzlich aber ist beides zu unterscheiden’.
texts dealing with ritualistic topics (e.g. the Hērbadestān and the 
Nerangestān) were written down, too. Yet, there was probably no 
need to write the bulk of texts containing, for example, ethical, cos-
mological, cosmogonical, didactic, or prophetological materials in the 
Avestān script.

The hypothesis that there was ever a ‘canonical Avesta’ seems to 
be the result of a misunderstanding of certain Pahlavi texts — that is, 
texts written in Middle Persian between the 8th and 10th centuries CE. 
These texts do actually contain evidence for processes of canoniza-
tion, but not as regards the Avesta.

In the fourth book of a large compilation entitled Dēnkard (‘Acts 
of the Religion’), we read the following paragraph concerning some 
actions which were taken by a priest called Tōsār during the reign 
of the first Sassanian king in the third century CE:

His majesty Ardaxšīr . . . acting on the just judgement of Tōsār, 
demanded that all those scattered teachings were to be brought to 
court. Tōsār assumed command; he selected those which were trust-
worthy, and left the rest out of the authority (dāstvār). And thus he 
derected: ‘(From now) on (only) those are true expositions which are 
based on the Mzdacan religion, for now there is no lack of informa-
tion and knowledge concerning them (Shaki 1981: 115 [transcription], 
118–119 [translation]).’

Mary Boyce concluded from this paragraph that Tōsār was respon-
sible for ‘the establishment of a single canon of Avestan texts’ (1987: 
103; see 1992: 28, 133). This interpretation, however, is far from con-
vincing. The text says that Ardaxšīr demanded ‘all those scattered 
teachings’ to be brought to court. Are ‘all those scattered teachings’ 
simply to be identified with the Avesta? Certainly not. In the pre-
ceding paragraph the text is clearly concerned with

whatever had survived in purity of the Avesta and Zand (= the trans-
lations and commentaries of the Avesta) as well as every teaching deriv-
ing from it which, scattered throughout Frānsäh by the havoc and 
disruption of Alexander, and by the pillage and plundering of the 
Macedonians, had remained authoritative (Shaki 1981: 115 [trans-
scription], 118 [translation]).

18 On these texts, see Kotwal/Kreyenbrock 1992.
19 Contrary to Shaki, I have rendered dāstvār by ‘authority’. Shaki renders dast-
vaar by ‘canon’. Since this is the only passage attesting the (hypothetical) meaning 
‘canon’, I think that Shaki’s translation involves circular reasoning.
What Ardaxšir and Töṣar did, according to the Dēnkard, was not to establish a canon of the Avestan texts, but to critically revise the whole religious tradition (consisting of Avesta and Zand and all the teachings deriving from it). The text explicitly states that the Avestan texts were only one part of that religious tradition.

In the scholarly literature on Zoroastrianism it is usually assumed that the major part of the Avesta has been lost. To quote just one representative voice, Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin:

We do not have the complete Avesta today, as it still existed in the 9th century, when the original or a Pahlavi version was summarized in the Dēnkard. It originally comprised 21 books or Naiks, of which only one has been preserved in its entirety. . . . It is estimated that three-fourths of the Avesta has been lost' (1973: 22).

Unfortunately, Duchesne-Guillemin does not specify how and why these texts should have been lost.21 If the Avesta was a canonical writing, that is, a well-defined closed body of texts bearing absolute authority, then this enormous loss of texts would be a very strange thing to happen indeed.22 However, I think that Duchesne-Guillemin proceeds on a mistaken assumption. According to the Belgian scholar, the Dēnkard contains a summary of the complete Avesta. Duchesne-Guillemin is here alluding to the eighth book of the Dēnkard which is in fact a summary, but not of the Avesta; rather, it is a summary of the 'mazda-worshipping religion' (dēn i māzdāš) or the 'religious tradition' (ādārēš i dēn) (see Molé 1963: 61–63 [transcription], 63–64 [translation]). Thus, contrary to the assumption of nearly all the scholars, the text does not claim to contain a summary of the Avesta, but of the religious tradition in its entirety. The eighth book of the Dēnkard obviously tries to systematize the religious tradition of the

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20 This figure has often (explicitly or implicitly) been quoted, see, e.g., Hoffmann/Narten 1989: 1712; Hutter 1996: 187. Interestingly, Ibn Ḥamza (994–1064) reports a similar figure: 'Now as regards the Magians they admit that the books of theirs in which is incorporated their religion were destroyed by Alexander when he slew Dara son of Dara —, that more than two-thirds of them have perished the remnants being less than a third, — that their religious law was comprised in what has disappeared' (translated by Nariman apud Hoosranzhev 1918: 193–194).

21 Scholars usually attribute this remarkable loss of texts rather vaguely to the consequences of the Islamization of Iran.

22 This is not to deny that certain or even many texts were actually lost. As a matter of fact, the author(s) of Dēnkard VIII state(s) that the Zand of the so-called Nixtar-Naik was inaccessible (whereas the Avesta was retained) (see West 1892: 15) and both the Zand and the Avesta of the so-called Vaštta-Naik were inaccessible (see West 1892: 25).
Zoroastrians. Děnkard VIII classifies the religious tradition in three categories, totaling 21 naks ('bundles', 'bunches'). The text explicitly states that the religious tradition consists of 3 divisions (bažin) containing 21 parts (bahr) (Molé 1963: 62 [transcription], 64 [text]). It is therefore futile to compare the description of the religious tradition in Děnkard VIII with the corpus of the extant Avestan texts. Nevertheless, the very fact that this comparison has been made is revealing. It shows the tendency to identify the Avesta with the religious tradition. This tendency is the result of an unconscious application of a Jewish, Christian, or Muslim concept of 'canonical scripture' to Zoroastrian materials.

Last but not least, there is a third paragraph of the Děnkard to be considered in this context. This is the last chapter of the third book. This chapter deals with the history of the Děnkard and describes the activities of durfarrobay ʃ Farrozdān, the main religious authority of the Zoroastrians in the ninth century CE. The text says:

"The blessed durfarrobay ..., the (religious) leader of the people of the Good Religion, by new effort again brought that dispersed copy (of the Děnkard), which was scattered in various regions, together, arranging it into an archive and chapters. By examining and collating it with the Avesta and Zand of the Good Religion and the oral tradition (transmitted) from the first teachers (= the first pupils of Zarathuṣtra), he restored it like a ray from that brilliance" (Shaki 1981: 122 [transcription and translation]; see also de Menasce 1973: 380).

This text is interesting for two reasons: it describes a process of canonization and it defines several sources of authority. As a matter of fact, it states that the 'new' Děnkard as canonized by durfarrobay is based on three independent traditions: (a) the lost, scattered, and re-arranged original copy of the 'old' Děnkard, (b) the Avesta and its translation and/or commentary, the Zand; and finally (c) the tradition of the first teachers, Zarathuṣtra's pupils. What durfarrobay does is to re-arrange the scattered original copy of the 'old' Děnkard...

and to examine and collate it with the two other traditions. As the sum of all three traditions the 'new' Dēnkard evidently claims the superior authority. Significantly enough, this claim is put forward in the last chapter of the third book. This implies an element of closure. If there was anything like a 'canonical' scripture in premodern Zoroastrianism at all, then it was durfarrobay’s Dēnkard—at least from a theoretical point of view.

3. Zarathuṣtra as the Recipient of a Book: Implications and Transformations

Several Pahlavi texts contain reports on the scattering of religious knowledge and traditions (see the survey in Humbach 1991: 50–55). It is remarkable that these texts do not create the illusion of an uninterrupted religious tradition having Zarathuṣtra as its fountainhead. Apart from general allusions to the scattered state of the tradition at particular points in history, there seems to be a certain consensus that Alexander ‘the wicked’ in particular was responsible for the destruction of the tradition. Moreover, in agreement with the Manichaean criticisms, most Zoroastrian Pahlavi texts state that the tradition was fixed after Zarathuṣtra’s lifetime.

As a matter of fact, there is, to my knowledge, just one, and from a theological point of view secondary, Pahlavi text which claims that

24 Like the other passages quoted above, even this text shows no traces of decanonization. It describes the ‘restoration’ and compilation of texts but does not state that any texts have been rejected. As a matter of fact, no ‘non-canonical’ texts have been handed down to posterity. It could happen, however, that some priests compiled ‘new’ texts using older and otherwise unattested Avestan materials. This seems to be the case with the so-called Vahša Nask. The Vahša Nask seems to have been compiled by a priest (or a group of priests) in order to reply to certain questions put to him (or them). In replying he (or they) quoted religious texts supporting his (their) views (see Humbach/JamaspAssa 1969: 57–58). The text was quite misleadingly labeled ‘an apocryphal text’ by Humbach and JamaspAssa in the title of their edition. This classification presupposes the existence of a canon.

25 I would like to draw attention to a parallel tradition that hitherto has not been discussed in this context. In the Šahname Ferdowsi reports the story of Ṭišdīs, the mythical throne of king Xusro II (539–629 ca). According to this story the throne was richly decorated and contained astrological representations which enable one to cast horoscopes from it. It was destroyed by the ignorant Alexander. Fragments of it were afterwards preserved by great people. Ardašīr and his successors collected these fragments and Xusro II restored the throne (on this throne and the ideas connected with it, see Herzfeld 1920). This story uses exactly the same narrative pattern as the reports on the destruction and restoration of the Avesta contained in the Pahlavi texts.
Zarathuṣtra himself had written down his revelations. In a description of the different towns of Iran (Saḥrīhā i Erān) we read in the section on Samarkand: ‘Thereafter Zoroaster brought the religion. By command of King Viṣṭāsp he engraved and wrote the 1,200 chapters in the Avestan script on tablets of gold and put it into the treasury of that fire. Afterwards the accursed Alexander burnt it and cast it into the sea’ (Bailey 1943: 153–154).26 Another Pahlavi text claims: ‘So Zarathuṣtra’s son has composed the entire Avesta with Zand, so that there is one who knows, and the other celebrates’ (Kotwal/Kreyenbroek 1992: 33).

It is only after the Arab conquest and the Islamization of Iran that a New Persian text, evidently adapting Muslim categories, affirms that Zarathuṣtra was the prophet bringing a book. The Zarduṣt-nāme, a ‘biography’ of Zarathuṣtra, that was composed before 978 ce by a certain Kai Kwāṭūs at Ray (Rempis 1963) narrates how Zarathuṣtra comes to king Viṣṭāsp and declares himself the prophet sent by God (I. 821). He shows both Avesta and Zand to the king, declaring that God had given them to him (I. 828–829). Zarathuṣtra promises that the book which he had brought to him contains all the mysteries of both worlds (I. 846–867) (Rosenberg 1904: 42–44 [text], 44–45 [translation]). Obviously, the Islamic environment has contributed to Zoroastrianism by transforming it, at least theoretically, into a ‘prophetic’ religion characterized by a sacred ‘scripture’: Zoroastrianism has a prophet (rasūl) and a book (ketāb).27 This innovation, of course, was very important from a social and political point of view, because it made Zoroastrianism acceptable to the Muslim authorities.

26 Contrary to Bailey, I have rendered dēn by ‘religion’; Bailey translates it as ‘faith’.
27 The text uses the word rasūl, unmistakably making use of the Islamic model.
According to the Zar’dust-name, Zarathuśtra’s book consists both of Avesta and Zand. Even later texts confirm the intimate combination of Avesta and Zand. Thus, in a New Persian text from about 1570 ce, the question is asked whether ‘the Zend-Avesta (texts/books) were brought from before the Creator Ormazd by Zaratuštra Asfantamän, or were they extant before Zaratuštra Asfantamän’. The answer states that there was a little Avesta before the time of Zarathuštra but that he had brought ‘the 21 nasks of the Avesta and Zand’ (Unvala 1922 I:68 [text]; Dhabhar 1932: 433 [translation]). Compared to the systematization of the religious tradition in the eighth book of the Pahlavi compilation Dēnkard, this illustrates an interesting semantic shift: The Pahlavi text sees the ‘bundles’ (nask) as divisions of the religion or the religious tradition (see above 2); the New Persian text applies the concept of 21 ‘bundles’ to Avesta and Zand. This specification is not completely inadequate in that the Pahlavi texts quoted above (see 2) show that Avesta and Zand were among the main parts of the religious tradition.29

Some other New Persian texts, however, went one crucial step further by applying the concept of the 21 ‘bundles’ to the Avesta only. For instance, in the History of the Indian Zoroastrian (Qesse-ye Zartošṭān-e Hendustān) the author, Shapūrji Manekji Sanjana, mentions: ‘The Holy and Unique God gave him (= Zarathuštra) the twenty one Nask from the Avesta’ (1. 49; Cereti 1991: 32 [text], 92 [translation]).

There are, moreover, some New Persian texts describing the content of the 21 nasks. These texts clearly depend on Dēnkard VIII. The New Persian texts reveal some minor differences from each other (see Dhabhar 1932: 1–2). In the context of our discussion, however, the most important point is that these texts obviously assume that the nasks describe the contents of a book called Avesta. A text dated to 1527 ce calls the 21 nasks ‘books’ and makes the comment regarding the first nask: ‘and this is one among the total 21 nasks of the Avesta’ (Unvala 1922 I:4 [text]; for a translation, see West 1892: 419). Thus, the text suggests that the Avesta consists of 21 nasks. Another text written in 1478 ce categorically states that everybody

29 This shift (dēn → zandavesta/avesta wu zand) might perhaps correspond to a semantic development of the term dēn. While the Pahlavi term dēn has a wide range of meanings (‘religious tradition’; ‘religion’; ‘wisdom’; ‘inner self’; ‘conscience’ [see Shaki 1994]), the New Persian dēn means exclusively ‘religion’.
knew that the Avesta had 21 nasks (Unvâlâ 1922 I:7 [text]; for a translation see West 1892: 428). A third text from the first half of the 17th century CE contains a ‘reply about the 21 nasks of the Avesta’, stating that the Avesta has 21 nasks (Unvâlâ 1922 I:9 [text]; for a translation, see West 1892: 433). Later on, the text states that the nasks in the course of time had been diminished to an imperfect state due to the invasion of Alexander.\textsuperscript{30} According to this New Persian text Alexander repeatedly burnt books of the Avesta (Unvâlâ 1922 I:9 [text]; for a translation, see West 1892: 437). Again, a parallel Pahlavi text claims that the writings Alexander had burnt consisted of Avesta and Zand (AWN 7–9; Humbach 1991: 52).\textsuperscript{31} All this evidence shows that in the period between the 10th and the 15th centuries CE the Avesta had become the quintessence of the religious tradition. The Avesta became a well-defined body of texts, a book, consisting at least theoretically of 21 nasks.\textsuperscript{32} This development has at the same time been challenged and reinforced during the 19th century CE.

4. \textit{Rearrangements of the Avestan Texts during the 19th Century}

After the decline of Surat as the main port of Western India, Bombay not only became the economic capital of India, but also the most important stronghold of the Indian Zoroastrians, the Parsis. As a matter of fact, the Parsis contributed in many ways to the rise and flowering of that city. Bombay was, among other reasons, attractive

\textsuperscript{30} It should be emphasized that the text in no way blames the Arab invasion or Muslim authorities for this loss of tradition. However, according to the architect and free-lance journalist Herman Vahramian, the few remaining minstrels in contemporary Iran tell how the caliph had all the Persian manuscripts gathered together, often having purchased them from Arab soldiers who had taken them as plunder; he then had these incalculable riches loaded on to endless caravans and taken to Baghdad, where they heated the public baths of the capital for forty days, as a warning likely to be heeded for many a generation” (Vahramian 1996: 112). To my knowledge, this legend is not attested in Zoroastrian writings. However, an oral tradition that ascribes the loss of Zoroastrian texts largely to the persecutions after the Muslim conquest of Iran was recorded by Williams-Jackson (1906: 359–360) in Yazd.

\textsuperscript{31} Other Pahlavi texts referring to Alexander’s destruction do not state that he destroyed only the Avesta, either, see Humbach 1991: 52.

\textsuperscript{32} This development is already mirrored by al-Mas’ûdî in the 10th century: ‘Zaradusht brought to the king the book of Avesta. . . . The number of the chapters in this book is twenty-one, each chapter comprising 200 leaves’ (Nariman apud Inostrozan 1918: 184).
for settlers since the early government of the city guaranteed a high
degree of religious liberty (David 1973: 136–137). When, however,
the charter of the East India Company was changed in 1813 and
Christian missionaries obtained full freedom to settle and work in
India, the Parsis soon became the target of their missionary zeal.
The activities of the Scottish missionary John Wilson, who arrived
at Bombay in 1829, marked the beginning of far-reaching changes
in the religious sphere of the Indian religions, including Zoroastrian-
ism (see Gupchup 1993: 113–163).33

In a book review that was published in the missionary journal The
Oriental Christian Spectator in July 1831, John Wilson opens his frontal
attack against Zoroastrianism, the religion of the Parsis. One of the
basic features of his criticism was the deficiencies of the Avesta when
viewed as the ‘sacred scripture’ of a ‘revealed’ or ‘prophetic’ reli-
gion. To quote from Wilson’s paper:

The Avesta is the only work which is known to exist in the Zend lan-
guage. By the Parsees it is ascribed to Zertusht or Zoroaster, who is
supposed to have lived about 500 years before Christ. . . . It is only
said, however, to contain a small portion of the writings of that impos-
tor (?). It is highly probable that the work had a later origin, and a
different author. . . . In the Avesta . . . Zertusht is spoken of in such a
manner, on some occasions, as to forbid the idea of his being its com-
poser. It is probable that it is founded on his sentiments; and it is possi-
able that some parts of it may contain fragments of his writings (The

In subsequent writings Wilson concentrates his criticism on one
Avestan text, the Vendidad, since this was the work to which the
Parsis, according to Wilson, attributed the most importance. In his
Lecture on the Vendidad Sade of the Parsis Delivered at Bombay on the 19th
and 26th June, 1833 (printed twice in the same year), for instance,
the missionary tries to prove that the Vendidad ‘has no claim to be
considered as a divine revelation’ (1833: 5). Among many other fea-
tures of Wilson’s destructive review of the Vendidad it should be noted
that the missionary questions the ‘authenticity, genuineness, or cred-
ibility’ (1833: 5–7) of this text. Moreover, he draws attention to the
‘immense number of absurd ceremonies’ contained in the Vendidad
and he observes that the Vendidad ‘represents ceremonial observ-
ances, as more important than moral observances’ (1833: 26, 28–33).

33 On John Wilson and his impact on Zoroastrianism see also Stausberg 1997.
According to the Scottish missionary the Vendidad even ‘contains some passages directly opposed to morality’ (1833: 33–34).

In May 1839 John Wilson succeeded in baptizing two Zoroastrian boys who had attended his missionary school. This step provoked an outcry by the Zoroastrian community and violent action. The converts were threatened and took shelter in the mission house. The leaders of the Parsi community took immediate action by removing all Parsi students from missionary schools. Legal proceedings were instituted against the missionaries (see Gupchup 1993: 139–144). In his affidavit, one of the converts, Dhanjibhai Naoroji, who five years later became the first Indian to study Christian theology at a European university (Edinburgh) (Hinnells 1996: 83), stated that he had been convinced of the fallacy of his old religion by reading John Wilson’s lecture on the Vendidad (The Oriental Christian Spectator [1839] 220).34 The members of the Parsi Punchayat, on the contrary, stated in their affidavit that Dhanjibhai ‘does not and cannot possess sufficient acquaintance or correct judgement’ with and upon the content of the Vendidad, since this was ‘a very abstruse and voluminous ancient religious work written in a dead language’ which is mastered only by the priests (The Oriental Christian Spectator [1839] 169–170).

This particular incident and the general changes of values and attitudes among 19th century Parsis in British India had longlasting consequences for the Zoroastrian religion. Here we are only concerned with one aspect, which I would suggest to term the ‘rearrangement of the Avestan texts’. This historical process consists of three factors: (a) the creation of an Avestan textual corpus; (b) a hierarchization of the Avestan texts; and (c) a hermeneutical and pragmatic de-ritualization and moralization of the religious system.

a. From the Avestan texts to the Avesta

While there are some texts describing the content of (a) the religion or religious tradition; (b) Avesta and Zand; or (c) the Avesta only (see above 2–3), there are no manuscripts containing a wide range of Avestan texts.35 The different Avestan texts have been transmitted

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34 See also Naoroji’s autobiography (1909: 20): ‘Afterwards Dr. Wilson lectured on the Parsi Vendidad. He showed us what wild and superstitious things are contained in it. It was impossible to resist the conclusion that the Vendidad was not from God, and I lost faith in the Parsi religion’.

35 Significantly, this fact has already been observed and used as an argument against the validity of the Avesta by Wilson 1847: 11.
without any claim that they belong to a larger unity called 'the Avesta'.

There is, however, a compilation of Avestan texts called Xorde Avesta ('Short Avesta'). The title suggests that this collection was meant to be a sort of résumé of the whole Avesta. The Xorde Avesta contains several religious hymns and prayer formulae. The precise extent of the Xorde Avesta varies from one manuscript or edition to the next. It often even contains several non-Avestan texts (in Pāzand, Pahlavi, Gujarati, or New Persian). On the contrary, it does not contain important Avestan texts such as the Yasna or the Vendidad. The Xorde Avesta is not mentioned in the description of the 21 masks. It seems to have been an attempt to compile some important texts for the needs mostly of lay people (Geldner 1896: xi).

Significantly enough, the first ones to attempt to present the Avestan texts in their totality were European scholars, who implicitly took it for granted that the texts in the Avestan language were parts of a larger entity, 'the Avesta'. 36 Up to this very day in India, indigenous Zoroastrian editions and translations of the whole Avesta are very rare. 37

During the 19th century, most of the Avestan texts were translated from Avestan into Gujarati, English, and, in the first half of the 20th century, New Persian. The printing of these translations and the emergence of an educated laity drastically changed the status of the Avestan texts for the Zoroastrian community. Whereas the above-mentioned Parsi Panchayat affidavit considers the Avestan Vendidad to be a text with only one group of authorized interpreters, the priests, the Avestan texts became the property of the whole community, easily accessible to everybody.

b. Textual hierarchization

As quoted above, John Wilson had considered at least the possibility that some parts of the Avesta may contain fragments of Zarathuṣtra's

36 See the titles of the first (and to some extent still important) editions or translations: Zend-Avesta, ouvrage du Zend Avesta (Améry and Duperron 1771); Zendavesta or the Religious Books of the Zoroastrians (Westergaard 1892); Le Zend-Avesta (Darmesteter 1892); Avesta, die heiligen Bücher der Parsen (Geldner 1895). See also Haug 1971: 36: 'Westergaard succeeded in editing all the Avesta texts which are known as yet; and to him we owe, therefore, the first complete edition of the Zend-Avesta'.

37 In Iran the situation has changed to a certain extent. Nowadays, some Avesta translations are available even in Muslim bookshops.
own writings. As a matter of fact, this hypothesis foreshadows the results of later research into the history of Zoroastrianism. In the middle of the 19th century comparative linguistics discovered that the Avestan texts consisted of two linguistic strata. This led the German linguistic Martin Haug, who at that time was working as a visiting professor at Pune, to identify the oldest stratum of the Avestan texts, the so-called Gāthās, with Zarathuštra’s own words. This idea was obviously of primary theological importance to the Zoroastrians. It allowed them to rearrange the Avestan texts from a horizontal into a vertical order, the Gāthās as the oldest parts representing at the same time the highest value.

c. Hermeneutical and pragmatic de-ritualization

This hierarchical rearrangement of the Avestan texts offered the opportunity to regard the later or younger texts as less important. In this way, John Wilson’s criticism of the Vendidad, for instance, loses much of its significance. This rearrangement of the Avestan texts can be described as a canonization of a completely new corpus, Zarathuštra’s ipsissima verba, and, at the same time, as a decanonization of the later texts. Being rearranged in such a manner the Avestan texts become ‘the Avesta’.

The hierarchical rearrangement of the Avestan texts corresponds to a de-ritualization of the religious system. The Avestan texts gained independence from their ritual context. The Gāthās, which previously were mainly if not exclusively recited in the course of the Yasna liturgy, became an independent and clearly demarcated corpus of texts that can be studied as such. The different Avestan texts were becoming detached from their ritual Sitz-im-Leben and came to form a new — textual — entity, called ‘the Avesta’. The Avesta had become a book, and Zoroastrianism a religion of the book. For many Zoroastrians, the moral, philosophical, or spiritual value of the texts began to prevail over the efficiency of the rituals which are administered by priests.38 The basic tenets of the faith are defined as ‘good

38 Significantly enough, this development was counteracted in India by an esoteric school of Zoroastrianism, the so-called liv-e khnoom, which lay extreme emphasis on the intrinsic power of the Avestan texts as containing secret vibrations. Moreover, liv-e khnoom emphasizes (against the process described above) ‘the vast compass of the original writings of Zoroaster himself, which consisted of 21 Nasks or volumes’ (Masani 1917: 1).
thoughts, good words, good deeds’, an Avestic formula (Y. 35,2) that is detached from its ritual frame and written in large letters on the portico of recent fire-temples.

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