

# Avesta

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The **Avesta** /əˈvɛstə/ is the primary collection of religious texts of Zoroastrianism, composed in the otherwise unrecorded Avestan language.<sup>[1]</sup> Collected during the Sassanid Period of much more ancient oral accounts, according to Jean Kellens, "The book was originally given the name *abestag*, which the Parsees later turned into *Avesta* and which probably comes from the Old Iranian •upa-stavaka, 'praise (of Ahura Mazda)'".<sup>[2]</sup>

The Avesta texts fall into several different categories, arranged either by dialect, or by usage. The principal text in the liturgical group is the *Yasna*, which takes its name from the Yasna ceremony, Zoroastrianism's primary act of worship, and at which the *Yasna* text is recited. The most important portion of the *Yasna* texts are the five Gathas, consisting of seventeen hymns attributed to Zoroaster himself. These hymns, together with five other short Old Avestan texts that are also part of the *Yasna*, are in the Old (or 'Gathic') Avestan language. The remainder of the *Yasna*'s texts are in Younger Avestan, which is not only from a later stage of the language, but also from a different geographic region.

Extensions to the Yasna ceremony include the texts of the *Vendidad* and the *Visperad*.<sup>[3]</sup> The *Visperad* extensions consist mainly of additional invocations of the divinities (*yazatas*),<sup>[4]</sup> while the *Vendidad* is a mixed collection of prose texts mostly dealing with purity laws.<sup>[4]</sup> Even today, the *Vendidad* is the only liturgical text that is not recited entirely from memory.<sup>[4]</sup> Some of the materials of the extended Yasna are from the *Yashts*,<sup>[4]</sup> which are hymns to the individual *yazatas*. Unlike the *Yasna*, *Visperad* and *Vendidad*, the *Yashts* and the other lesser texts of the Avesta are no longer used liturgically in high rituals. Aside from the *Yashts*, these other lesser texts include the *Nyayesh* texts, the *Gah* texts, the *Siroza*, and various other fragments. Together, these lesser texts are conventionally called *Khordeh Avesta* or "Little Avesta" texts. When the first *Khordeh Avesta* editions were printed in the 19th century, these texts (together with some non-Avestan language prayers) became a book of common prayer for lay people.<sup>[3]</sup>

The term *Avesta* is from the 9th/10th-century works of Zoroastrian tradition in which the word appears as Zoroastrian Middle Persian *abestāg*, Book Pahlavi *ʾp(y)stʾkʾ*. In that context, *abestāg* texts are portrayed as received knowledge, and are distinguished from the exegetical commentaries (the *zand*) thereof. The literal meaning of the word *abestāg* is uncertain; it is generally acknowledged to be a learned borrowing from Avestan, but none of the suggested etymologies have been universally accepted.

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# Historiography

The surviving texts of the Avesta, as they exist today, derive from a single master copy produced by Sasanian Empire-era (224–651 CE) collation and recension. That master copy, now lost, is known as the 'Sasanian archetype'. The oldest surviving manuscript (*K1*)<sup>[n 1]</sup> of an Avestan language text is dated 1323 CE.<sup>[1]</sup> Summaries of the various Avesta texts found in the 9th/10th century texts of Zoroastrian tradition suggest that about three-quarters of the corpus has since been lost.<sup>[3]</sup>

A pre-Sasanian history of the Avesta, if it had one, is in the realm of legend and myth. The oldest surviving versions of these tales are found in the ninth to 11th century texts of Zoroastrian tradition (i.e. in the so-called "Pahlavi books"). The legends run as follows: The twenty-one *nasks* ("books") of the Avesta were created by Ahura Mazda and brought by Zoroaster to his patron Vishtaspa (*Denkard* 4A, 3A).<sup>[5]</sup> Supposedly, Vishtaspa (*Dk* 3A) or another Kayanian, Daray (*Dk* 4B), then had two copies made, one of which was stored in the treasury, and the other in the royal archives (*Dk* 4B, 5).<sup>[6]</sup> Following Alexander's conquest, the Avesta was then supposedly destroyed or dispersed by the Greeks after they translated the scientific passages that they could make use of (*AVN* 7–9, *Dk* 3B, 8).<sup>[7]</sup> Several centuries later, one of the Parthian emperors named Valaksh (one of the Vologases) supposedly then had the fragments collected, not only of those that had previously been written down, but also of those that had only been orally transmitted (*Dk* 4C).<sup>[7]</sup>

The *Denkard* also transmits another legend related to the transmission of the Avesta. In that story, credit for collation and recension is given to the early Sasanian-era priest Tansar (high priest under Ardashir I, *r.* 224–242, and Shapur I, *r.* 240/242–272), who had the scattered works collected, and of which he approved only a part as authoritative (*Dk* 3C, 4D, 4E).<sup>[8]</sup> Tansar's work was then supposedly completed by Adurbad Mahraspandan (high priest of Shapur II, *r.* 309–379) who made a general revision of the canon and continued to ensure its orthodoxy (*Dk* 4F, *AVN* 1.12–1.16).<sup>[9]</sup> A final revision was supposedly undertaken in the 6th century under Khosrow I (*Dk* 4G).<sup>[10]</sup>

In the early 20th century, the legend of the Parthian-era collation engendered a search for a 'Parthian archetype' of the Avesta. In the theory of Friedrich Carl Andreas (1902), the archaic nature of the Avestan texts was assumed to be due to preservation via written transmission, and unusual or unexpected spellings in the surviving texts were assumed to be reflections of errors introduced by Sasanian-era transcription from the Aramaic alphabet-derived Pahlavi scripts.<sup>[n 2]</sup> The search for the 'Arsacid archetype' was increasingly criticized in the 1940s and was eventually abandoned in the 1950s after Karl Hoffmann demonstrated that the inconsistencies noted by Andreas were actually due to unconscious alterations introduced by oral transmission.<sup>[11]</sup> Hoffmann identifies<sup>[12]</sup> these changes to be due<sup>[13]</sup> in part to modifications introduced through recitation;<sup>[n 3]</sup> in part to influences from other Iranian languages picked up on the route of transmission from somewhere in eastern Iran (i.e. Central Asia) via Arachosia and Sistan through to Persia;<sup>[n 4]</sup> and in part due to the influence of phonetic developments in the Avestan language itself.<sup>[n 5]</sup>

The legends of an Arsacid-era collation and recension are no longer taken seriously.<sup>[17]</sup> It is now certain that for most of their long history the Avesta's various texts were handed down orally,<sup>[17]</sup> and independently of one another, and that it was not until around the 5th or 6th century that they were committed to written form.<sup>[1]</sup> However, during their long history, only the Gathic texts seem to have been memorized (more or less) exactly.<sup>[4]</sup> The other less sacred works appear to have been handed down in a more fluid oral tradition, and were partly composed afresh with each generation of poet-priests, sometimes with the addition of new material.<sup>[4]</sup> The Younger Avestan texts are therefore composite works, with contributions from several different authors over the course of several hundred years.

The texts became available to European scholarship comparatively late. Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron travelled to India in 1755, and discovered the texts among Indian Zoroastrian (Parsi) communities. He published a set of French translations in 1771, based on translations provided by a Parsi priest. Anquetil-

Duperron's translations were at first dismissed as a forgery in poor Sanskrit, but he was vindicated in the 1820s following Rasmus Rask's examination of the Avestan language (*A Dissertation on the Authenticity of the Zend Language*, Bombay, 1821). Rask also established that Anquetil-Duperron's manuscripts were a fragment of a much larger literature of sacred texts. Anquetil-Duperron's manuscripts are at the Bibliothèque nationale de France ('P'-series manuscripts), while Rask's collection now lies in the Royal Library, Denmark ('K'-series). Other large Avestan language manuscript collections are those of the British Museum ('L'-series), the K. R. Cama Oriental Library in Mumbai, the Meherji Rana library in Navsari, and at various university and national libraries in Europe.

## Structure and content

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Look up *Avesta* in Wiktionary, the free dictionary.

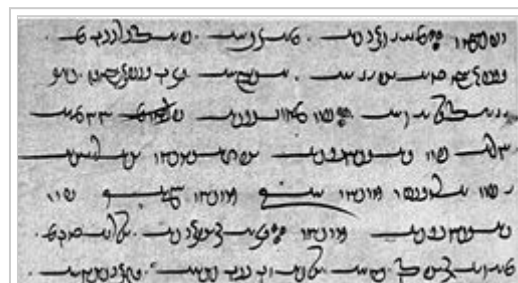
In its present form, the Avesta is a compilation from various sources, and its different parts date from different periods and vary widely in character. Only texts in the Avestan language are considered part of the Avesta.

According to the *Denkard*, the 21 *nasks* (books) mirror the structure of the 21-word-long *Ahuna Vairya* prayer: each of the three lines of the prayer consists of seven words. Correspondingly, the *nasks* are divided into three groups, of seven volumes per group. Originally, each volume had a word of the prayer as its name, which so marked a volume's position relative to the other volumes. Only about a quarter of the text from the *nasks* has survived until today.

The contents of the Avesta are divided topically (even though the organization of the *nasks* is not), but these are not fixed or canonical. Some scholars prefer to place the categories in two groups, the one liturgical, and the other general. The following categorization is as described by Jean Kellens (see bibliography, below).

## The Yasna

The *Yasna* (from *yazišn* "worship, oblations", cognate with Sanskrit *yajña*), is the primary liturgical collection, named after the ceremony at which it is recited. It consists of 72 sections called the *Ha-iti* or *Ha*. The 72 threads of lamb's wool in the *Kushti*, the sacred thread worn by Zoroastrians, represent these sections. The central portion of the *Yasna* is the *Gathas*, the oldest and most sacred portion of the Avesta, believed to have been composed by Zarathushtra (Zoroaster) himself. The *Gathas* are structurally interrupted by the *Yasna Haptanghaiti* ("seven-chapter *Yasna*"), which makes up chapters 35–42 of the *Yasna* and is almost as old as the *Gathas*, consists of prayers and hymns in honour of the Supreme Deity, Ahura Mazda, the Angels, Fire, Water, and Earth. The younger *Yasna*, though handed down in prose, may once have been metrical, as the *Gathas* still are.



Yasna 28.1 (Bodleian MS J2)

## The Visperad

The *Visperad* (from *vîspe ratavo*, "(prayer to) all patrons") is a collection of supplements to the *Yasna*. The *Visperad* is subdivided into 23 or 24 *kardo* (sections) that are interleaved into the *Yasna* during a *Visperad* service (which is an extended *Yasna* service).

The *Visperad* collection has no unity of its own, and is never recited separately from the *Yasna*.

## The Vendidad

The *Vendidad* (or *Vidēvdāt*, a corruption of Avestan *Vī-Daēvō-Dāta*, "Given Against the Demons") is an enumeration of various manifestations of evil spirits, and ways to confound them. The *Vendidad* includes all of the 19th *nask*, which is the only *nask* that has survived in its entirety. The text consists of 22 *Fargards*,

fragments arranged as discussions between Ahura Mazda and Zoroaster. The first *fargard* is a dualistic creation myth, followed by the description of a destructive winter on the lines of the Flood myth. The second *fargard* recounts the legend of *Yima*. The remaining *fargards* deal primarily with hygiene (care of the dead in particular) [*fargard* 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 16, 17, 19] as well as disease and spells to fight it [7, 10, 11, 13, 20, 21, 22]. *Fargards* 4 and 15 discuss the dignity of wealth and charity, of marriage and of physical effort, and the indignity of unacceptable social behaviour such as assault and breach of contract, and specify the penances required to atone for violations thereof. The *Vendidad* is an ecclesiastical code, not a liturgical manual, and there is a degree of moral relativism apparent in the codes of conduct. The *Vendidad*'s different parts vary widely in character and in age. Some parts may be comparatively recent in origin although the greater part is very old.

The *Vendidad*, unlike the *Yasna* and the *Visparad*, is a book of moral laws rather than the record of a liturgical ceremony. However, there is a ceremony called the *Vendidad*, in which the *Yasna* is recited with all the chapters of both the *Visparad* and the *Vendidad* inserted at appropriate points. This ceremony is only performed at night.

## The *Yashts*

The *Yashts* (from *yešti*, "worship by praise") are a collection of 21 hymns, each dedicated to a particular divinity or divine concept. Three hymns of the *Yasna* liturgy that "worship by praise" are—in tradition—also nominally called *yashts*, but are not counted among the *Yasht* collection since the three are a part of the primary liturgy. The *Yashts* vary greatly in style, quality and extent. In their present form, they are all in prose but analysis suggests that they may at one time have been in verse.



Faravahar, believed to be a depiction of a *Fravashi*, as mentioned in the *Yasna*, *Yashts* and *Vendidad*

## The *Siroza*

The *Siroza* ("thirty days") is an enumeration and invocation of the 30 divinities presiding over the days of the month. (cf. Zoroastrian calendar). The *Siroza* exists in two forms, the shorter ("little *Siroza*") is a brief enumeration of the divinities with their epithets in the genitive. The longer ("great *Siroza*") has complete sentences and sections, with the *yazatas* being addressed in the accusative.

The *Siroza* is never recited as a whole, but is a source for individual sentences devoted to particular divinities, to be inserted at appropriate points in the liturgy depending on the day and the month.

## The *Nyayeshes*

The five *Nyayeshes*, abbreviated *Ny.*, are prayers for regular recitation by both priests and laity.<sup>[3]</sup> They are addressed to the Sun and Mithra (recited together thrice a day), to the Moon (recited thrice a month), and to the Waters and to Fire.<sup>[3]</sup> The *Nyayeshes* are composite texts containing selections from the *Gathas* and the *Yashts*, as well as later material.<sup>[3]</sup>

## The *Gahs*

The five *gāhs* are invocations to the five divinities that watch over the five divisions (*gāhs*) of the day.<sup>[3]</sup> *Gāhs* are similar in structure and content to the five *Nyayeshes*.

## The *Afrinagans*

The *Afrinagans* are four "blessing" texts recited on a particular occasion: the first in honor of the dead, the second on the five epagomenal days that end the year, the third is recited at the six seasonal feasts, and the fourth at the beginning and end of summer.

## Fragments

All material in the *Avesta* that is not already present in one of the other categories falls into a "fragments" category, which – as the name suggests – includes incomplete texts. There are altogether more than 20 fragment collections, many of which have no name (and are then named after their owner/collator) or only a Middle Persian name. The more important of the fragment collections are the *Nirangistan* fragments (18 of which constitute the *Ehrbadistan*); the *Pursishniha* "questions," also known as "Fragments Tahmuras"; and the *Hadokht Nask* "volume of the scriptures" with two fragments of eschatological significance.

## Other Zoroastrian religious texts

Only texts preserved in the Avestan language count as scripture and are part of the Avesta. Several other secondary works are nonetheless crucial to Zoroastrian theology and scholarship.

The most notable among the Middle Persian texts are the *Dēnkard* ("Acts of Religion"), dating from the 9th century; the *Bundahishn* ("Primordial Creation"), finished in the 11th or 12th century, but containing older material; the *Mainog-i-Khirad* ("Spirit of Wisdom"), a religious conference on questions of faith; and the *Book of Arda Viraf*, which is especially important for its views on death, salvation and life in the hereafter. Of the post-14th century works (all in New Persian), only the *Sad-dar* ("Hundred Doors, or Chapters"), and *rivayats* (traditional treatises) are of doctrinal importance. Other texts such as *Zartushtnamah* ("Book of Zoroaster") are only notable for their preservation of legend and folklore. The *Aogemadaeca* "we accept," a treatise on death is based on quotations from the Avesta.

## References

### Notes

1. *K1* represents 248 leaves of a 340-leaf *Vendidad Sade* manuscript, i.e. a variant of a *Yāsna* text into which sections of the *Visperad* and *Vendidad* are interleaved. The colophon of *K1* (K=Copenhagen) identifies its place and year of completion to Cambay, 692Y (= 1323–1324 CE). The date of *K1* is occasionally mistakenly given as 184. This mistake is due to a 19th-century confusion of the date of *K1* with the date of *K1*'s source: in the postscript to *K1*, the copyist – a certain Mehrban Kai Khusrow of Navsari – gives the date of his source as 552Y (= 1184 CE). That text from 1184 has not survived.
2. For a summary of Andreas' theory see Schlerath (1987), pp. 29–30.
3. For example, prefix repetition as in e.g. *gpaitī ... paitiēntī* vs. *paiti ... aiiēnī* (Y. 49.11 vs. 50.9), or sandhi processes on word and syllable boundaries, e.g. *adāiš* for \**aṭ.āiš* (48.1), *ahiiāsā* for *ahiiā yāsā*, *gaṭ.tōi* for \**gatōi* (43.1), *ratūš šiiāoθanā* for \**ratū šiiāoθanā* (33.1).<sup>[14]</sup>
4. e.g. irregular internal *hw* > *x*<sup>v</sup> as found in e.g. *harax<sup>v</sup>ati*- 'Arachosia' and *sāx<sup>v</sup>an*- 'instruction', rather than regular internal *hw* > *ṛ<sup>v</sup>h* as found in e.g. *aojōṛ<sup>v</sup>hant*- 'strong'.<sup>[15]</sup>
5. e.g. YAv. -ō instead of expected OAv. -ē for Ir. -ah in almost all polysyllables.<sup>[16]</sup>

### Citations

1. Boyce 1984, p. 1.
2. Kellens 1987, p. 239.
3. Boyce 1984, p. 3.
4. Boyce 1984, p. 2.
5. Humbach 1991, pp. 50–51.
6. Humbach 1991, pp. 51–52.
7. Humbach 1991, pp. 52–53.
8. Humbach 1991, pp. 53–54.
9. Humbach 1991, p. 54.
10. Humbach 1991, p. 55.
11. Humbach 1991, p. 57.
12. Hoffmann 1958, pp. 7ff.
13. Humbach 1991, pp. 56–63.
14. Humbach 1991, pp. 59–61.

15. Humbach 1991, p. 58.
16. Humbach 1991, p. 61.
17. Humbach 1991, p. 56.

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## Full texts

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- [avesta.org](http://avesta.org): translation by James Darmesteter and L. H. Mills forms part of the Sacred Books of the East series, but is now regarded as obsolete.

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