Reviews of Books


*Studien zur Pahlavi-Übersetzung des Avesta* is the thoroughly revised version of the introduction to the author’s doctoral dissertation, which also entailed a new edition of the first four chapters of the Pahlavi translation of the Avestan text, the *Videvdad*, including commentaries and glossaries.

By publishing his introduction as a separate study the author pursue several goals. First, he aims at partially mending the standing of the Pahlavi translation, which for a long time, especially in the nineteenth century, was regarded as an important tool for our understanding of Avestan texts, but has ever since, barring a few exceptions, fallen into desuetude. However, the author’s expressed purpose is not to evaluate the Pahlavi translations in terms of their usefulness as a means of interpreting the Avesta, but as the testimony of an indigenous exegetical tradition that could elucidate the Sasanian and post-Sasanian reception of the Avesta. Second, the dependence of a number of Pahlavi texts on the Pahlavi translations of the Avesta increases their importance for Pahlavi philology. Finally, were the Pahlavi translations to prove somewhat reliable, they could be partially rehabilitated for Avestan philology as well.

The study consists of five chapters. It is preceded by a preface (pp. ix–x); Chapter 1, “Das Avesta und dessen Pahlavi-Übersetzung” (pp. 1–34), deals with the Sasanian Avesta and its Pahlavi translation; chapter 2, “Geschichte der Avestaforschung in Bezug auf die Pahlavi-Übersetzung” (pp. 35–105), with the history of Avestan studies and Pahlavi translations; chapter 3, “Überlieferung des Avesta und dessen schriftliche Fixierung” (pp. 106–63), with the transmission of the Avesta and its written redaction; chapter 4, “Zur Datierung der Pahlavi-Übersetzung des Avesta” (pp. 164–239), with the dating of the Pahlavi translations; and finally chapter 5, “Übersetzungsweise in der Pahlavi-Version des Avesta” (pp. 240–341), with the most crucial issue of translation techniques. These chapters are followed by a postface (pp. 343–47); indices (pp. 349–56); abbreviations (pp. 357–59); and finally the bibliography (pp. 361–79).

Chapter 1 begins with a discussion of the meaning of the expressions *Avesta* and *Zand*, notably the history of attempts to etymologize the term *zand* in relation to the Avestan word *čāni*. The author concludes that the emergence of the designation *Avesta* and *Zand* is to be dated between the sixth and ninth century C.E., that is, between the redaction of the Pahlavi translation of the *Videvdad*, wherein these terms do not occur, and the writing of the *Pahlavi Yasna* and other Pahlavi compilations of the ninth century, where they do occur (p. 13). Then follows a summary of the extant Avesta as reported in the Pahlavi text, the *Dēkastrā*, as well as a discussion of Jean Kellens’ hypothesis that two different Avesta corpora, namely, the “large Avesta” including the Pahlavi translations and the “ritual Avesta” mainly consisting of the *Yasna*, *Yatsī, Viṣparad*, *Videvdad*, and the *Avestād Ahavasta*, without Pahlavi translations, may have existed side by side. The author, although in agreement with this proposition, nonetheless suggests that at a later stage Pahlavi translations based upon the text of the “large Avesta” were also added to the ritual texts (p. 29).

Chapter 2 is a fascinating Forschungsgeschichte of European scholarship’s dealings with the Avesta and Pahlavi translations, beginning with Thomas Hyde and Asquiel-Dugiron in the eighteenth century, moving on to the giants of the nineteenth century, among them Martin Haag, Karl Geldner, Christian Bartholomae, and James Darmesteter, and those of the twentieth century, up to and including the more recent work on the Avesta and Zand versions of the *Hūm Yāst* by Judith Josephson. The seventy-one-page *Avestaforschung* is then followed by a brief section dedicated to Pārsī scholarship on the Pahlavi translations of the Avesta, and some concluding remarks. However, while commenting on the importance of Josephson’s work, the author concludes (p. 101): “Wenn nämlich die Übersetzer die Verhältniskategorien des Avesta richtig wiedergeben, dann muss ihnen doch eine gewisse grammatisches Kompetenz in der Avestasprache zugestanden werden” (thus if the translators are able correctly to reproduce the verbal categories of the Avesta [in Pahlavi], then one ought to ascribe to them a certain grammatical competency in the Avestan language). This very notion of grammatical knowledge of the Avestan language by the Pahlavi translators constitutes one of the author’s main theses, which he fully develops in chapter 5.
Chapter 3 is yet another informed survey, this one on the transmissional history of the Avesta and its textual fixation. The author first surveys the evidence of the Pahlavi literature as reflected in the Dēnkard (DKM. 411.17–414.15) (pp. 106–13) and other Pahlavi texts (pp. 115–24), which report a tripartite transmission scheme for the Avesta: (1) the creation of a written Avesta by Whēstēk; the preservation by Dārty, son of Dārty (Darius III), of two copies thereof; (2) the destruction of these copies by Alexander of Macedon, and King Walārī’s attempt to reconstitute its dispersed parts; and finally (3) the establishment of an Avestan canon under Sāhār I. The survey of the Pahlavi literature is then followed by another treating its critical assessment in modern scholarship (pp. 124–35), finally leading to the author’s conclusions (pp. 135–62) that the Avestan texts were put into writing, and the Avestan script, the main agent of this operation, invented, some time between the fifth and seventh centuries C.E. (p. 163).

Chapter 4, building upon the endeavor of chapter 3 to establish the dates for the redaction of the Avesta, investigates the dating of the Pahlavi translations. The author proceeds by exploring the internal chronology of the Pahlavi translations, the sum of which may be described as follows (pp. 235–56): (1) the early translation of the Avesta may have circulated already before our common era, but the first concrete reference to (a more likely) oral (rather than written) Middle Iranian version of the Avesta (“das erste klare Zeugnis für das Vorhandensein einer Vernakularversion eines avestischen Textes”) is to be found in Kerdir’s inscriptions from the third century C.E.; (2) the final phase of the redaction for the older strata of the Pahlavi translations (of the Avesta), which include the Videvdad, Nārangaŋestān, and Herbaudešān, is to be dated to the sixth century C.E., since many of the historical figures (both priests and kings) as well as events occurring after the sixth century are absent from these texts; (3) the Pahlavi translations of the Yasna, while showing some of the archaism of the “older” translations, are still closer in time to the younger stratum of Pahlavi translations, namely, the Vawardag Abastāg, on account of their usage of the terms Zend and Abastāg ud Zend; (4) finally, the Videvdad Abastāg comprises translations from different periods, with some reaching back to the “older” translations of the sixth century, and others having taken shape in India.

Chapter 5 is certainly the pièce de résistance of the study, and treats the core issue of the translation techniques. First, the author provides a survey of the structure of the Pahlavi translation (pp. 240–42) by illustrating the extent to which the translations seek strictly to adhere to the Avestan Vorlage. This adherence consists in (1) finding an appropriate, and possibly related, Pahlavi word for the Avestan original; (2) following the Avestan word order; and (3) providing, in spite of these restrictions on the semantic and syntactic structure of Pahlavi, an appropriate sentence. All this having the net result that the Pahlavi translations differ substantially from other Pahlavi writings and are “awkward.” Following a comparison with Aramaic translations of the Bible (pp. 243–44), the author then discusses at length the translation techniques in terms of grammar (pp. 268–329), that is, morphological categories and semantics. The chapter concludes with the proposition or discussion of an indigenous Iranian philological tradition (“eine inindische iranische Philologie”) (pp. 329–36). The author submits that the surprisingly close Pahlavi translation of the Avestan texts presupposes a philological tradition in Iran, which, although not as advanced as in India, was nonetheless able adequately to deal with grammatical categories. This tradition, according to the author, must have gone back to the Indo-Iranian period, since Iranians certainly were not inspired by the Vedic tradition. The translation of the Avesta, he concludes, was heralded by the diminishing ability to understand the Avestan language: (p. 333) “Als die Avesta-Sprache nicht mehr richtig verstanden wurde, fing man an, bei der Erlehnung der heiligen Texte und ihrer rudimentären philologischen Auslegung die Wort-für-Wort Übersetzung dem Erleemten hinzuzufügen” (as the Avestan language was no longer understood, they began, while the sacred texts and their elementary philological explanation were being learned (by heart), to place next to the learned (passage) also its word-for-word translation). A further token for his assumption of a philological tradition is the presence of the Avestan-Pahlavi glossary the Frāhāng tāsim, which may well have represented the remains of an Avestan grammar under the Sasanids (pp. 340–41).

In conclusion, we may say that the author has produced an extraordinarily learned, competent, and novel account of many aspects of Sasanian intellectual history, in particular as pertains to the hermeneutics of sacred scriptures, their reception, and finally interpretative translations. Not only is the author

This useful, beautiful book is a clearly organized and impressive synthesis of every visual, literary, religious, and political source the author could find—and her search was prodigious—that might have informed the grand reliefs on temples built around the eighth century in what is now northern Tamilnadu in southern India. That was the most vigorous period of temple construction during the reign of the Pallava dynasty and it set architectural paradigms that would dominate Tamil temple design for over a millennium. The monuments at the heart of Valérie Gillet’s study are concentrated in Kanchipuram and Mahabalipuram (or Mamallapuram), the Pallavas’ capital city and seaport respectively.

Gillet appropriately gives most of her attention to the Kailasanatha temple in Kanchipuram, the oldest, grandest, and most lavishly ornamented of them all, a nested cluster of four structures sponsored by at least three members of the royal family at the beginning of the eighth century. Gillet also gives unprecedented attention to Pallava cities’ eight other “temples construits,” that is, structures assembled from separate blocks of stone. (Earlier monuments from the Pallava period were hallowed out of granite monoliths.) She compares all these structures closely to each other, rendering her the first study to embed the Kailasanatha temple so thoroughly in this visual lineage.

This important move reveals the powerful impress of the Kailasanatha temple’s sculptural paradigms on later monuments, and the significant shifts over the course of the eighth century that become defining characteristics of temples of the Cola period a century later in the central Tamil region. I have long been a skeptic of the concept of a “Pallava-Cola Transition” but Gillet uses her thick web of material to demonstrate such missing links. There is Ganeśa’s gradual emergence, for example, from a dark corner at the Kailasanatha to his starring role a century later on the south-facing exteriors of temple porches (arthaunayaka) (p. 59). During the same years, Śiva in his mendicant form rotates out of a complex double twist into the relaxed stroll he adopts in the tenth century, displaying his beautiful nudity to the figure within his narrative world and to the relief’s viewers (chap. 2).

Gillet devotes one chapter each to eight forms of Śiva: seated under the banyan tree, as a mendicant, dancing, manifesting in the columnar Śiva, triumphing over Kāla (Death), slaying the demon Jalandhara, destroying the Three Cities, and catching the Ganges as she falls from the heavens. One might cavil at what this list omits, but these temples are so thickly cloaked in sculptures to analyze them all in a single volume, and one must begin somewhere. Gillet’s selection is an intelligent one, rationalized by the visual prominence of these eight subjects on Pallava temples and by her focus on intensely narrative imagery.

Gillet’s method sits firmly within the disciplined structure of French archaeology. The broad survey of first written and then visual sources, in chronological order, seeking correspondences, inconsistencies, and explanations, recalls the important work of Marguerite Adicem and Françoise l’Hermant among others. The resulting book is a handy compendium that makes these vast swaths of information readily accessible. The table of contents identifies Gillet’s specific findings in the subheadings of each chapter’s sections. Even if your French is rusty, many of her points emerge from the superb photos (all taken by Gillet) that the book clusters by iconographic type, orders from the most similar to the widest variations, and integrates into the text at just the places where the author analyzes them. A foldout ground plan of the Kailasanatha and full-page ground plans of the later temples label the locations of each major sculpture. A second index distinguishes place names from other material.