

Looking for Avestan manuscripts in Iran. Report of a short trip to Iran, March 2012

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Around 15 years ago, while working on the Pahlavi translation of the Avesta, I noticed that it would be very convenient to try to see the manuscripts of the Avesta and not to rely only on the edition of the Avesta made by the German scholar K. F. Geldner in the last quarter of the 19th century. I started visiting some of the Avestan manuscripts available in European libraries and ordering microfilms of some of them. In the year 1998 I made a first visit to the biggest collection of manuscripts available, the Cama Oriental Institute in Bombay, India.

These first contacts with the manuscripts were enough to understand the necessity and importance of a direct work with the manuscripts of the Avesta. But how could it be done? How would it be possible for the few researchers working on the Avesta to have a quick and continuous access to the Avestan manuscripts? The Avestan manuscripts are very numerous and spread all over the world. Making printed facsimiles of each single manuscript seemed to be a very expensive and not very operative enterprise. To do it only for a selection of good manuscripts could be a good decision, but to know which manuscripts are the best ones in order to select them for making facsimile editions implies first to locate them and second to know that these are the important ones. For these analyses access to a great number of manuscripts was indeed unavoidable.

I thought that in the digital era, the most convenient way to assure the preservation of all Avestan manuscripts still available and to grant access to them to all researchers was even the digitation of the manuscripts and their publication on the web. Thus I conceived the Avestan Digital Archive (ADA, <http://www.avesta-archive.com>), a web site in which ideally all still available manuscripts of the Avesta could be consulted. The first version of the Avestan Digital Archive was launched in the year 2008, after a first trip to India in which many Avestan manuscripts (especially from the Bombay University and the Meherji-rana Library, Navsari) were digitized.

Since then, the team of the Avestan Digital Archive in Salamanca (Spain) with collaborators in other institutions has been working in locating, digitizing, indexing and publishing Avestan manuscripts from all over the world. Three trips to India (Bombay, Navsari and Poone) and the collaboration with many European Libraries (like the Royal Library in Copenhagen, the British Library, the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, etc.) have allowed us to digitize more than 120 manuscripts and to have published on the web already 33 complete manuscripts and around 25000 pages of Avestan manuscripts.

Although most of the Avestan manuscripts available in Europe and of course most of the manuscripts extant in the Indian libraries are of Indian origin, a few manuscripts of Iranian origin are available in some European and Indian libraries. Despite the reduced number of Iranian manuscripts I have been using during these years, I have noticed in last years again and again that they are in many regards more conservative than the Indian ones. Therefore, to locate the available Iranian manuscripts of the Avesta has become one of the main focus of the Avestan Digital Archive in the last years.

The publication of Katayoun Mazdapour's paper (Čand dastnewis nou yäfte-ye Avestā." *Nāme-ye Irān-e Bāstān* 15-16 (2008-2009), pp. 3-19) in which Dr. Mazdapour made known 12 Avestan manuscripts in Iran encouraged me to strength the focus of ADA on the Iranian manuscripts of the Avesta. Accordingly I invited her to Salamanca in the spring of 2010 for starting cooperation for our common interest: locating the Iranian manuscripts of the Avesta, preserving them and making them known. A continuation of this cooperation is my recent trip to Kerman, Yazd and Kerman in the hope of seeing some of the Avestan manuscripts available in these places, knowing the people working with them and, when possible, digitizing some of them in order to be able to include them in the Avestan Digital Archive and to publish them online.

The first stop of my Iranian trip was Kerman. After arriving in Kohmeini International Airport March 10th at 4.00 h. in the morning I took a taxi to Mehrabad Airport where I met my student Mohammad Kangarani who had been organizing my trip together with Dr. Mazdapour and her team. Together we flied directly to Kerman. There we were picked up by the always friendly and kind Mobed Houman Farvarhari. After installing us I the hotel and having lunch we went to the Zoroastrian Museum of Kerman that is adjoining the Fire Temple. Immediately after entering the Museum we had the first agreeable surprise. In one of first showcases of the first floor was shown a wonderful manuscript of the Yašt-e Wisperad. It was open on a page that contains the beginning of Y28, that is, the beginning of the first Gāthā. Above the beginning, a nice picture of a three cypresses and four pomegranates trees was to be seen. I knew similar pictures only in two manuscripts of the Wendidad written by Mihrabān Anōšīrwān Wahromšāh, who wrote them in 1007 Y.E. and 1016 Y.E. They are today in the Majles Library and in the British Library. Both of them show a similar picture before the beginning of the ninth *fragard* of Wendidad. Unfortunately, it was not possible to take the manuscript out of the showcase and to leaf other pages. Therefore I could not realize whether there is a colophon or not and I don't knw either date or scribe. In any case, the manuscript seems to have a respectable antiquity.

Further Avestan manuscripts were stored in a cabinet in the first floor, but unfortunately the key of the cabinet was not found and I have not further

information about these two or three Avestan manuscripts in it. In the second floor a showcase contains some books belonging to the late Rashid-e Rostam. One of them is a manuscript of the Yasna, but it is not possible to determine whether it contains too the Wisperad and the Wendidad. The other one contains in the page I was able to see a text in Pāzand and might be a Xorde Awesta.

In the Fire Temple adjoining the Museum four manuscripts were shown kindly to me by Mobed Homan Farvarhari. This time I could leaf freely through the manuscripts and check their contents and colophons. Two manuscripts were written by the same scribe, Isfandyār Nušīrwān Isfandyār Ardešīr Ādur Sīstānīg. One of them is a Yasna Sāde and hence quite interesting since Yasna Sāde manuscripts are rare in Iran. The other one is a Yašt-e Wisperad. It has the late date of 1185 Y.E. that allows us to date too the Yasna of the same scribe. Both of them show a similar picture like the Yašt-e Wisperad in the Museum and like the manuscripts written by Mihrabān Anōšīrwān Wahromšāh, although the quality of the picture is this time clearly inferior to in the other three samples I know. We find further in the same Fire Temple one Yašt-e Wisperad (although the introduction presents it as a Yašt-e Wisperad Wendidad) and a big sized Wendidad that seems to be quite modern.

After a talk at University of Kerman where I was introduced by Bahman Moradian about the importance of the Iranian manuscripts for a new edition of the Avesta and other reasons why such edition is needed, Mohammad Kangarani and I drove finally to the impressive city of Yazd. There our guide was Shahbahram Dorost (also known as Vahid Zolfeghari). He has a magnificent knowledge of Yazd and its history and has been the best guide we could have in this city. Because of his love of the history of his city he collects documents and all kind of objects important for the history and traditions of Yazd. Trying to avoid that some important Avestan manuscripts leave his beloved city and perhaps go lost, he has bought himself some important Avestan manuscripts.

He has shown us some of the most important Zoroastrian places of Yazd, among them the very nice Gāhānbārxāne in which some works of restoration are being carried at this time. Nearby is the former house of the famous Dastur Nāmdār. In the evening we drove to the Pir-e Nārestān that is even more impressive in the dark. Furthermore, he introduced us to Mehrangiz, an old women speaking the Gabruni dialect and reciting by heart important parts of the Šāhnāme, in the Ghasem Abad of Yazd.

Through his assistance we have been able to digitize for ADA some important manuscripts. In the Kazemeini Museum in the complex of the Imamzāde he presented us an Avestan manuscript in a quite bad state of preservation. It contains the Yasna ceremony and, at the end, the Sīrōzag and the Afrīngān-e Nawzōd. But the most important results for the Avestan Digital Archive were got

in Dorost's home where he allowed us to take pictures of all manuscripts of his collection. He had kindly sent to me some time ago a complete set of the pictures of the very important Wendidad Sāde known as Ave977/978, written by Wahrom Marzbān, that I could now see life for the first time. This time we had occasion to digitize a second important Wendidad Sāde, dated in 1027 Y.E. and written by Wahromšāh Jāmasp Anōšīrwān Wahromšāh, the nephew of Mihrabān Anōšīrwān, the scribe of the Wendidad-e Atabak and the Wendidad of the British Library (RSPA 230).

He owns further two Yašt-e Wisperad, one of them is old and could be a very important exemplar of this ceremony, although unfortunately the colophon is lost together with the last pages of the manuscript. And last, we could photograph there a nice Xorde Avesta in small size that I don't think to be very old.

After this very pleasant and productive stay in Yazd we flied to Tehran where we were welcome in the airport by a committee lead by Dr. Mazdapour. Next day I attended the Gāhānbār in the Fire Temple and afterwards gave a talk to the community in the Tehran Zoroastrian Forum Building stressing the importance of the Iranian manuscripts of the Avesta and encouraging them for bringing their manuscripts out and granting access to them to the researchers of the Avesta. Afterwards we visited the Yagānegi Library, close to the Fire Temple, and I had the opportunity to see there a nice Xorde Avesta described by K. Mazdapour in the above mentioned paper. The scribe is Goštāsp Ardešīr Goštāsp and its date the 1072 Y.E. Its handwriting is fine and all the pages are surrounded by decorative lines. I got as present from the Library a CD of this manuscript.

In the afternoon we continued the meeting only with the people that are already working on the Avesta and I showed them the different functionalities of the Avestan Digital Archive. Furthermore, I taught them how to publish Avestan manuscripts in ADA and it was built up a group of collaborators that will collaborate with ADA in the publication of the Iranian manuscripts of the Avesta.

Summing up, it has been a very pleasant and productive trip. It remains only to hope that more Avestan manuscripts will continue to appear in Iran and that access will be granted to the people working in the Avesta for promoting a better knowledge and understanding of the Avesta in Iran and beyond.