Cantera, Alberto, *Studien zur Pahlavi-Übersetzung des Avesta*

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Michiel de Vaan

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Only rarely does a doctoral thesis acquire the status of a handbook that can be used as an introduction to an entire field of research. In even less instances can the introduction to a doctoral thesis lay claim to the same fame. Yet this is in principle what *SPÜ* is: the reviewed introduction to the author’s PhD-thesis, which entails a commented edition of the four first chapters of the Avestan and Pahlavi Vidēvdād. By expanding the preliminary studies which he needed to undertake to study the Pahlavi translation (henceforth: PTr.) of the Avesta, Cantera has provided scholars of the language and culture of pre-Islamic and early Islamic Iran with a new research tool of wide scope and much detail. An equally positive judgement was passed by Mayrhofer ([2005](#)) in his review of *SPÜ*.

The book is divided into five chapters: an introductory chapter on the terminology used for the Avesta and its translation (p. 1–34), Chap. 2 on the history of Avestan studies, Chap. 3 on the oral and written transmission of the Avesta and some controversies surrounding this issue, Chap. 4 on dating the PTr. of the Avesta, and Chap. 5 on the translation technique which the Pahlavi translators used. A short epilogue summarizes the main results and puts them in a larger, Indo-Iranian framework. Indices on text passages and words discussed complementize the book.

In the preface, Cantera makes two important points. Firstly, he notes that serious studies of the “Technik, Wert, Alter und Rolle der P[ahlavi-]Ü[bersetzung] in der Avesta-Überlieferung” can hardly be carried out without having an integral text edition and a complete glossary of the whole PTr. at our disposal. Several scholars are now working on parts of such a project, but the final goal has not yet been reached. *SPÜ* is firmly based on an exhaustive study of the first half of the Vidēvdād (see

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M. de Vaan

Comparative Indo-European Linguistics (VIET), Leiden University, Postbus 9515, 2300 RA Leiden, The Netherlands

e-mail: m.a.c.de.vaan@let.leidenuniv.nl
on Chap. 5 below), and on other selections from the PTr. which the author does not precisely define (see on Chap. 4). Secondly, Cantera gives three reasons why the PTr. deserves scholarly attention as a subject in its own right: 1. The PTr. is our main witness for the transmission of the Avesta in Sasanian and post-Sasanian times; 2. Other important Pahlavi texts seem to have been heavily influenced by the PTr., making the PTr. one of the cornerstones of Pahlavi studies; 3. Depending on whether we view the PTr. as trustworthy (that is, directly continuing an old tradition) or not, we can decide whether to take it into account in the interpretation of the Avestan text itself.

The layered history of the Avesta and its PTr., the theological contents of the texts and the checkered history of Avestan studies since the 18th century usually do not make for easy reading; under the given circumstances, Cantera has done an excellent job of writing a fluent story. The presentation is clear, the German accessible and varied, and the line of argumentation usually easy to follow. SPÜ cautiously builds on previous studies by other scholars of Avestan and Pahlavi, and draws on his own research to arrive at new and insightful views. On the whole, it does not seem exaggerated to say that SPÜ has taken the study of the PTr. to a higher level. In addition to that, we will need to rethink some parts of the textual history of the Avesta itself. The main conclusions at which SPÜ arrives (p. 345–347) are:

– The PTr. of the different Avestan texts are chronologically stratified. This was always suspected, but SPÜ places this view on a much firmer footing. From older and better texts to younger and less reliable ones, Cantera distinguishes five categories: 1. Vidēvdād; 2. Nērangestān, Hērbadestān; 3. Yasna; 4. older Xwardag Abastāg (Ohrmazd Yašt, Āfrīnagān, Sīrōzqō, Niyaqīn); 5. younger Xwardag Abastāg (Gāh partly, Wištēsp Yašt, most other Yašts).
– The oldest PTr. show a surprisingly good understanding of the Avestan language. This suggests an uninterrupted tradition from at least the beginning of the CE, if not before.
– Linguistically, the oldest translations resemble the language of Manichean and Inscriptional Middle Persian (2nd–3rd c. AD) more than the later Book Pahlavi (600–900 AD).
– There is evidence for different oral and maybe written versions of PTr. of the same Avestan texts, probably from different exegetic schools. These versions can be dated to the 4th to 6th centuries.
– The final redaction of the PTr. of the oldest texts (Vidēvdād, Nērangestān, Hērbadestān) probably took place in the 6th century.

In the last part of Chap. 5, SPÜ dwells on the question whether the PTr. ultimately goes back to an Indo-Iranian tradition of orally transmitting sacred texts and providing them with a philological and grammatical analysis. Spiegel first raised this question in 1860 and tended to reject this explanation. Cantera is now in a position to be more optimistic about the possibility of a common source. The Avestan texts themselves show similarities to the padapātha version of the Rigveda, especially in the use of the separation point which separates first from second members of compounds, preverbs from verbs, suffixes from their base, and certain endings from nouns. As SPŪ rightly holds, many details of the analysis in Avestan are reminiscent of those in Rigvedic, to an extent that excludes coincidence. Since direct influence
from one tradition to the other seems unlikely, we are forced to assume a common Indo-Iranian inheritance. The fact that the sacred language was translated into the vernacular in Iran, whereas no such thing happened in India, is explained by SPÜ from the fact that Sanskrit was spread across India as the lingua franca of the priests, which ensured that Vedic remained understandable (p. 343). In Iran, the Avesta spread to different areas where it soon ceased to be understood. “Dies hatte zur Folge, daß man ab einem unbestimmten Datum anfing, die rudimentäre philologische Analyse des Textes, die wahrscheinlich meistens in der Rezitation einer samdhilosen Version des avestischen Textes bestand, mit einer weiteren Analyse des Textes zu ergänzen, nämlich der Übersetzung in die vernakularen Sprachen.”

In the remainder of this review I will concentrate on Chaps. 4 and 5. Chapter 4 deals with the date of the PTr. and distinguishes an ‘inner relative chronology’ of the PTr. from an ‘absolute chronology’. The inner chronology refers to the relative age of the PTr. of different parts of the Avesta. For instance, it has long been recognized that the PTr. of the Vīdēvdād and Nērangestān might stem from an earlier period than, say, the PTr. of the Yaśts (as far as they exist). Cantera rightly contends that only text-internal philological and linguistic criteria can serve to determine the relative age of a PTr. He starts by discussing the younger PTr. of the texts of the Xwardag Abastāg and the Yaśts (p. 166–194), followed by the older PTr. of the Vīdēvdād, Hērbadestān, Nērangestān, Yasna and Visparad (p. 194–201). The discussion of the younger PTr. centers around the evidence provided by so-called parallel passages, that is, Avestan passages from the Yasna or Vīdēvdād which are quoted literally in the Xwardag Abastag and the Yaśts. The PTr. belonging to the latter texts often shows considerable differences with regard to the PTr. of the Avestan passage in the Yasna or Vīdēvdād. Such differences allow conclusions as to the relative date of both PTr. versions. SPÜ gives examples from Hušbām 1 and 2, Niyāyišn 4.2, 5.2, Gāh 1.2, Wištāsp Yašt 20-21, 25, 35-36, Sīrōzāg 1.24, Āfrīnagān 1.5, and Yašt 1.10. These examples perfectly illustrate the kind of inconsistencies and translation errors found in the PTr., and the information they yield about the transmission history of a given passage. Unfortunately, Cantera leaves unclear whether the general conclusions he reaches are based on detailed scrutiny of the examples given above, on a larger sample of examples, or on an exhaustive reading and comparison of all the extant Pahlavi translations. The same goes for his discussion of the older PTr. He adduces three philological and linguistic arguments for the view that the PTr. of the Vīdēvdād is older than that of the Yasna (viz., the translation of the root vas-/us-, the translation of the 3pl. imperative ending -ntu, and the PTr. of Old Avestan xraod-), and only one argument (the same root vas-/us-) supporting the view that the PTr. of the Nērangestān also presupposes that of the Vīdēvdād. The case made here seems convincing and will be strengthened by other examples in Chap. 5—but one would have liked the author to state his research method more explicitly before extrapolating from a few examples to all of the Vīdēvdād, Nērangestān and Yasna.

The absolute chronology (p. 201–220) of the PTr. is based on three sources of information: historical persons mentioned in the PTr. (the most recent one of which was executed in 529 AD), historical facts mentioned in the PTr. (viz. the calendar reform in the early 6th century), and the various exegetes (pōryōtkēšān ‘who represent the old teachings’) mentioned by name in the PTr. of Vīdēvdād, Nērangestān
and Hērbdastān, as well as in the Pahlavi works Šāyest-nē-šāyest, Mādayān ī hazār dādēstān and the Pahlavi Rivāyat. This third category is the most elaborate part of this chapter and contains a real breakthrough. The PTr. often reports conflicting views on the interpretation of Avestan words by different exegetes, and several pairs of Zoroastrian scholars are repeatedly said to be in conflict over an issue. Now, the Pahlavi text Šīn. 1.4 explicitly distinguishes two schools of commentators, each of which contains three names standing in a teacher–pupil relationship: one being Ādūrohrmazd – Gōgušnasp – Mēdōmāh, the other Ādurfarbay-Narsē – Sōšyans – Abarag. SPÜ convincingly argues that the Sōšyans in these sequences is probably to be dated between 388 and 439 AD, right in the Sasanian era. Having adduced some further arguments, SPÜ concludes that all the exgetes mentioned by name can be dated to the Sasanian period, Sōšyans and Gōgušnasp belonging to one of the older layers (around 400 AD). Only Ādūrohrmazd and Ādurfarbay-Narsē are presumably older, but their date is uncertain. All these arguments taken together suggest for the final version of the PTr. of Vīdēvdād, Nērangestān and Hērdastān a date in the 6th century or shortly thereafter. The first version of a PTr. may have been centuries older (p. 228), since it is likely that several different ‘schools’ of Avesta-interpretation were already in existence in the 4th century.

Chapter 5 on the translation technique (p. 240–341) contains two parts: an introductory section on the external form of the PTr. (240–268) and a central section on the way in which Avestan morphological categories and words are rendered into Pahlavi (268–328). The first section briefly addresses syntax, and then discusses the different kinds of glosses and comments which were added to the text by Sasanian scholars. It provides a very useful survey of the main excursus found at the end of many PTr. paragraphs, which deal with several aspects of religion and law in Sasanian times. SPÜ provides a complete survey of all excursuses of more than 100 words.

The corpus on which the central part of Chap. 5 is based is only adduced in a footnote on p. 269: the first eight chapters of the Vīdēvdād plus all 576 Avestan entries in a glossary of Vīdēvdād 1 to 4, including all instances of those entries in other texts of which a PTr. exists. This selection seems big enough (nearly half of the Vīdēvdād, the PTr. of which has been argued in Chap. 4 to be the earliest of all) to yield a reliable picture of all the main aspects of this topic. Compare the only other recent investigation of this type (Josephson 1997), in which Yasna 9-11 were the subject of a similar investigation: this resulted in 30 pages of already quite substantial observations. The conclusion of SPÜ is that the Pahlavi translators were on the whole relatively capable and consistent in rendering the Avestan text, at least as far as the Vīdēvdād is concerned. In the noun, they recognized the dual. In the verb, they distinguished the middle from the active and were able to render its different semantic functions by semantically equivalent constructions in Pahlavi; they recognized the subjunctive, optative and imperative; they mostly recognized the injunctive as a verb form with preterital meaning. Only the aorist remained largely unrecognized, but this is hardly surprising in view of the receding frequency of the aorist in Young Avestan; the number of aorists in Cantera’s corpus is small (13), and 6 of those occur in quotations from OAv.

In the rendering of the Avestan vocabulary, SPÜ (p. 303) recognizes three main tendencies: all words which belong to one Avestan root are preferably translated by
the same Phl. word or by derivatives from one root; etymological translations are frequent; there is a tendency to translate every word rather than using Avestan loanwords. As for the first tendency, the most interesting cases are such where the PTr. is not consistent in rendering the same Avestan word. SPÚ offers several explanations: the different translations may be due to a misinterpretation of the Avestan text in one of the passages, they may reflect a correct comprehension of the polysemy already present in the Avestan word, or they can reflect their provenance from different ‘schools’ of transmission or different exegetes. The latter explanation has to my mind not been put forward in this connection, but it seems plausible in the light of the conclusions of Chap. 4. One of the examples given by SPÚ for the latter category is Av. támah- ‘darkness’ (p. 311), which is rendered as Phl. tom 5 times in Vidēvdād and Yasna, but as Phl. tārīgīh ‘darkness’ in Y 44.5 and H 3.33.

As for the etymological translations, Cantera calls the understanding by the Pahlavi translators of the etymological correspondence between Avestan words and their Phl. counterparts “häufig erstaunlich” (p. 320). He argues that this can only be due to an old tradition of interpreting and translating the Avesta which must considerably predate the 6th century, since subsequent phonetic changes have obscured the correspondences. This early date is confirmed by several Avestan loanwords in Pahlavi which show by their relative chronology that they were borrowed before the 3rd century AD (astwihād) or even before CE (māraspand) (p. 321). Incidentally, the forms fšuii as and driγuš, which SPÚ (p. 142) regards as Old Avestan loanwords into Young Avestan, and which were also borrowed into Pahlavi, seem genuine YAv. to me. For an explanation of the Av. ending -aqs next to -q, both from IIr. *-ants, see de Vaan (2003: 390f.); that driγu- can be regular in YAv. is admitted by Cantera himself in fn. 137; of course, the real OAv. form is drigu-.

The converse phenomenon, viz. the influence of the PTr. on the Avestan text, is not studied systematically in SPÚ. This is understandable since such influence would tell us more about the Avestan than about the PTr.; but it is an interesting question, and Cantera seems to me the best qualified person at the moment to investigate this topic. Indeed, in his review of my own study of Avestan (Cantera 2006) he addressed my claim that some Pahlavi words have found their way into Avestan in the course of the transmission. Rightly criticizing my haphazard approach to this phenomenon, he questions “wie und in welcher Zeit solche Einschübe möglich waren” and calls for a “Stellungnahme des Verf. zu dieser Problematik” (p. 238). Unfortunately, I am not yet able to clarify this issue, other than saying that the opportunities for and the scope of Pahlavi influence on Avestan will have been different in different periods of the transmission. I do note, however, that SPÚ on p. 85, footnote 93, invokes the influence of the PTr. frāz ānāmēd to explain the unexpected long root vowel in Avestan frānāmāite (Y. 57.18).

References