THE AVESTA AND ITS TRANSLATION

PRODS OKTOR SKJÆRVØ

THE TERM Avesta refers to a relatively small group of orally composed and transmitted texts written down only in the Islamic period, some of them perhaps around the year 600. We have no evidence that all the known texts were written down at the same time, however. The texts are in Avestan, an Iranian language related to Old Persian (the ancestor of modern Persian or Farsi), which was spoken in the northeast of the later Persian (Achaemenid) empire (550-330 BCE), in the areas of modern Afghanistan and the Central Asian republics. The language is known in two linguistic forms: an older form, similar to the oldest Indic language of the Rigveda, and a younger form, slightly antedating that of Old Persian (known from about 520 BCE). The extant texts were therefore probably committed to memory sometime in the second half of the second millennium and the first half of the first millennium BCE, respectively. We have considerable archeological evidence from these areas dating to these periods, but with lack of written evidence it is impossible to correlate this evidence with the Avestan texts. This means that we do not know their precise historical contexts.

The Old Avesta contains the "Gāthās of Zarathustra," five hymns ascribed to the (mythical) prophet of Zoroastrianism, and the Young(er) Avesta, miscellaneous ritual texts, among them the Yasna, the text that accompanies the morning ritual (*yasna*); the Yashts, hymns to individual deities; and the Videvdad, rules for keeping the *daēwa*s, demons, away, a text inserted in the Yasna and recited at important purification ceremonies.

The texts are known from manuscripts dating from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries, all of which apparently go back to individual prototypes written around the year 1000 (known from colophons), which means that there is a considerable gap in the written tradition between the time the texts were first committed to writing and the earliest known and extant manuscripts. It should be noted that the Avesta is not a single "book" like the Bible,

but individual texts transmitted in separate manuscripts. These became a book only in Western editions during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

That the translation of these texts presents problems should be apparent. The translations in this book have been smoothed by leaving out discussions of problematic translations and marking uncertain or conjectural ones by a bracketed query: [?]. Hopelessly corrupt or incomprehensible passages have been left out, sometimes marked by ellipses.