



THE ROLE AND HISTORICAL-CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE AVESTA IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract. This thesis examines the significance of the Avesta for studying the ancient history, religious beliefs, ethical standards, and cultural processes of Central Asia. It discusses the formation of this collection of texts, its geographical representations, attitudes toward nature and society, and possibilities for comparison with archaeological evidence. Particular emphasis is placed on the need to distinguish the different textual layers and historical periods represented in the Avesta when using it as a historical source.

Keywords: Avesta, Central Asia, Zoroastrianism, Zarathustra, Ahura Mazda, Bactria, Sogdia, Khorezm, historical source criticism, archaeology.

Introduction

The Avesta is a collection of sacred texts within the Zoroastrian tradition and is especially important for the study of the religious beliefs, worldviews, and social relations of ancient Iranian-speaking communities. It is not a single work composed at one time: its constituent texts differ in language, content, and historical development. Consequently, it is essential to distinguish religious tradition and mythological narrative from historical reality when interpreting the collection [1; 2].

Since antiquity, Central Asia has been a region where irrigated agriculture, pastoralism, trade, and cultural exchange intersected. References in the Avesta to land and water, livestock, work, purity, and order provide valuable comparative material for examining this historical environment. Nevertheless, it would be methodologically unsound to identify every place-name mentioned in the text unambiguously with a specific modern location.



The Composition of the Avesta and Its Value as a Historical Source

The Avesta includes the Yasna (including the ancient Gathas), the Yashts, the Visperad, the Videvdad (Vendidad), and other liturgical texts. The Gathas are traditionally associated with Zarathustra and represent the oldest linguistic stratum of the collection. Later sections contain more extensive accounts of rituals, divine figures, rules of purity, and conceptions of the structure of the world [1; 3].

These texts were transmitted orally across generations for a long period, while the surviving manuscripts belong to much later centuries. Thus, the Avesta is not a chronicle directly recording events in ancient Central Asia, but a complex source preserved through particular religious and cultural traditions.

The Avesta in the Study of Central Asian Historical Geography

The first fargard of the Videvdad lists a succession of lands created by Ahura Mazda. Scholars have compared these geographical representations with regions of the ancient Iranian world and Central Asia. Names such as Sughdha (Sogdia) and Bakhdi (Bactria) are particularly relevant to historical-geographical research. However, the religious and compositional character of this list prevents it from being treated as equivalent to a modern geographical map [3; 4].

There is no scholarly consensus regarding the location of Airyanəm Vaējah, a term often interpreted as the “expanse of the Aryans.” Although theories identifying it with Khorezm were once widespread, other studies have criticized this identification. It would therefore oversimplify the evidence to claim categorically that the Avesta originated specifically in Khorezm [4; 5].

The toponyms preserved in the texts can help reconstruct early conceptions of river basins, oases, and historical-cultural regions. Yet their interpretation





becomes more convincing only when tested against linguistics, other written sources, palaeogeography, and archaeological research.

Religious, Philosophical, and Ethical Ideas

In the Avesta, Ahura Mazda appears as the supreme divine figure associated with goodness, wisdom, and cosmic order. The concept of asha is connected with truth, justice, and order and is contrasted with falsehood and destruction. This opposition places particular emphasis on human moral choice and responsibility [1; 2].

The well-known triad “good thoughts, good words, good deeds” is a concise expression of Zoroastrian ethics. It elevates not only personal virtue but also responsibility toward the community, honesty, and diligence. These ideas should not, however, be confused with the unsupported claim that all later spiritual traditions of Central Asian peoples derive directly from the Avesta.

The texts give an important place to respect for fire, water, earth, and vegetation, together with religious rules concerning purity. These are not a ready-made system of modern environmental law; rather, they represent historically specific beliefs about sacred purity and order.

Socioeconomic Life and Cultural Values

Several sections of the Avesta commend agriculture, cultivation of the land, protection of livestock, and honest labor. These ideas offer comparative evidence for examining the historically complex relations between settled agricultural oases and pastoral communities. Nevertheless, these texts are neither economic statistics nor direct descriptions of social structures: they express religious norms and ideal conditions [1; 3].



In particular, ideas concerning the fertility of the land, the value of water, and the well-being of livestock may be compared thematically with ancient economic practices in the Amu Darya and Zarafshan basins. Such comparison contributes to an understanding of historical processes, but a particular irrigation structure or archaeological culture cannot be dated solely on the basis of an individual Avestan passage.

The texts also contain representations of communal rituals, religious duties, family life, and ethical standards. These elements illuminate the normative worldview of ancient societies. Before equating them with functioning legal institutions, however, differences between regions and historical periods must be taken into account.

Connections with Archaeological Research

Ancient places of worship, traces of fire-related rituals, ossuaries, and burial practices in Central Asia reveal the religious and cultural diversity of the region. In particular, some sites known from Khorezm and Sogdia are studied comparatively in relation to Zoroastrian traditions. Yet the presence of fire traces or a container for human bones does not, in itself, demonstrate that a site was associated with a particular ritual described in the Avesta [2; 5].

For historians and archaeologists, an effective approach is not to force material evidence to conform to textual details, but to compare them as independent sources. For example, the stratigraphy, dating, and local context of finds should first be established, after which they may be compared with textual ideas concerning purity or burial.

Moreover, religious traditions may persist in one region for long periods, change in form, or coexist with other beliefs. Therefore, grouping the entire archaeological record of Central Asia under a single “Zoroastrian culture” risks obscuring its historical diversity.





The Contemporary Scholarly and Cultural Significance of the Avesta

The Avesta represents a distinctive textual tradition that contributes to international scholarship on the ancient cultural heritage of Central Asia. Linguistic analysis helps illuminate the history of ancient Iranian languages, while historical-geographical research sheds light on early understandings of the oases and the wider Iranian cultural sphere. Religious studies also explore the historical development of ideas concerning human choice, truth, ritual, and sacredness [1; 4].

In education, working with this source teaches students to read texts critically, distinguish historical evidence from religious narrative, and compare competing scholarly interpretations. Debates over the place and date of the Avesta's formation demonstrate especially clearly that historical research requires comparison of evidence rather than mere repetition of one widely accepted view.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Avesta is a significant religious, linguistic, and cultural source for the study of ancient Central Asian history. Its geographical names, ethical teachings, and ideas about labor and nature raise numerous scholarly questions about early regional worldviews. At the same time, scholars must remain attentive to its multiple textual layers, predominantly religious character, and disputed geographical interpretations.

Accordingly, the most defensible scholarly approach to assessing the role of the Avesta in Central Asia is to study it not as a straightforward historical chronicle but as a rich cultural heritage to be examined alongside archaeology, linguistics, and other written evidence.





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