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Sasanian Exegesis of Avestan Textile Terms

Miguel Ángel Andrés-Toledo

The Zoroastrian religion, taking its name from the prophet Zoroaster, Greek version of the Avestan name *Zaraθuštra*, developed in South and Central Asia out of the Indo-Iranian religious practices going back to the 2nd millennium BC, and is one of the few ancient Indo-European religions that still survive, concretely in some communities in Iran, India and the diaspora. The most ancient Zoroastrian sacred texts, commonly designated as the Avesta, were orally composed and transmitted during the 2nd and 1st millennia BC in the most archaic Iranian language preserved, known as Avestan, until they were eventually put down to writing in manuscripts going back to the beginning of the 2nd millennium AD. The difficulties of understanding this language, no longer spoken but still needed for the ritual recitations, motivated that several priests rendered the Avestan texts into Pahlavi, the Middle Iranian language of the Sasanian dynasty (AD 224 - 651), from which they were eventually translated into New Persian in Iran, and into Sanskrit and Gujarati in India.

Although Avestan was and still is used by Zoroastrians for ritual purposes, it was no longer a living language since the 1st millennium AD, when Middle Iranian languages had already emerged from the linguistic pool of the ancient period. Of these Middle Iranian languages, Pahlavi acquired special relevance, insofar as it was the language spoken by the Sasanian kings, under the rule of which Zoroastrianism was the main state religion. Pahlavi was spoken in the Southwestern Iranian province of Fārs after the fall of the Achaemenid Empire in BC 330, during which Old Persian was the language of the ruling class, and before the first written documents in New Persian or Fārsi, dating back to the 8th century AD.¹ Since the Sasanian kings, whose creed was Zoroastrian, established the center of their political power in Fārs, this province became a stronghold for Zoroastrianism, and Pahlavi, the language spoken there and used by the Sasanian administration, also became the language of culture for most of the Zoroastrian communities. Indeed, some centuries after Iran was conquered by

1. The most recent descriptions of the Middle Persian language and writing systems are found in Sundermann 1989 and Skjærvø 2009. According to Lazard 1963, 31, the first preserved texts written in New Persian would be the fragmentary inscriptions in Hebrew alphabet found in Afghanistan and dating back to AD 752-753.

the Muslims, Pahlavi was still in use as one of the sacred languages of these religious communities but also for literary compositions, being brief texts composed in Pahlavi by Zoroastrian priests as late as the 19th century AD.

The exegetical schools of Pahlavi-speaking priests during the Sasanian period rendered into their vernacular language most of the Avestan texts that had reached to them, and provided their Pahlavi translations with several commentaries, which reflected the different interpretations of the Avestan texts by the leading priests of each school. When rendering the Avestan texts into Pahlavi, these priests applied diverse techniques, but they mostly tried to accurately reproduce the Avestan originals by means of word-for-word literal translations that mirrored the Avestan syntax.² Nevertheless, they sometimes deviated from their models when challenged by terms no longer understood, or customs and regulations that had changed in their contemporary society. How the Pahlavi translators and commentators tried to bridge the exegetical gap between the Avestan and Pahlavi languages and contexts highly determined their (and subsequently our) understanding of the Avestan and Pahlavi texts. In this paper I will show by some examples how this problem affects our interpretation of Avestan textile terms and their Pahlavi translations.

Avestan textile terms were rendered into Pahlavi by means of the following different techniques:

1. As loanwords.
2. By etymological translations based on phonetic similarity.
3. By synonymic translations.
4. By another word from the same semantic field.
5. By reinterpretations.

Avestan technical terms and words no longer understood were sometimes incorporated into Pahlavi as loanwords. This is the case, for instance, of Av. *aḍka-* / *aṭka-* “mantle, cloak,”³ rendered into Phl. *adag* <’tk’> in N 74.2:⁴

Av. *aḍkā-sca*.⁵ *frazušō. varjhasca.*
+*upasmaēni*.⁶

pleasing⁷ cloaks and garments made of
land animals,

Phl. [PWN ’w’ zwt’n’ t’pyt’] ’tk’-c⁸
<y> pr’c⁹ hw’stk’ kp’h-HD [’y’ ywt’k]
QDM nyh’n’-c [y’+KZY⁹ lwtk HWE-
t AMT mwd <y> +’ywt’k¹⁰ QDM ZK y
'nd gyw’k ’ytwn’ YHWWN-yt’ cygwn
gwn’k HWE-yh

[*pad ō zōtān tābīd*] *adag-iz* <ī> *frāz*
xwāstag kabāh-ē [*ay ēw-tāg*] <ī> *abar*
nihān-iz [*ī’+ahy rūdag hād ka mōy* <ī>
+*ēw-tāg abar ān ī and gyāg ēdōn bawēd*
cīyōn gōnāg hē]

[spun for the *zōt* (priests)] and pleasing
cloaks (or) an overcoat [that is, in
one piece] that is also hidden [of the first
shearing, that is, when the hair (is) in one
piece over that much place, it is as if it
were dyed]

The fact that Phl. *adag* has no other parallel out of the Pahlavi translation of the preceding passage and is not continued in New Persian indicates that it has to be taken as a loanword, which translated a term scarcely attested in Avestan and probably unknown to the Pahlavi translators.

2. See Cantera 2004, 240-328. On the techniques of the Pahlavi translators see also Josephson 1997 and Buyaner 2010.

3. Attested in Yt 5.126, N 74.2 (Bartholomae 1904, 61). cf. Ved. *átka-* “mantle” (Mayrhofer 1992-2001, 1.58; Andrés-Toledo 2010, 439).

4. All the Avestan and Pahlavi texts quoted are edited by me according to the oldest manuscripts preserved of each text, the different readings of which I include as footnotes. The English translations are also mine.

5. HJ *aṭ.kā-sca*.

6. HJ *uparsmanāi*.

7. Regarding Av. *frazuš-* “pleasing,” see Kellens 1974, 86.

8. HJ y add.

9. HJ KZY-yh.

10. HJ t’k.

The second technique, based on phonetic similarity but perhaps also on a basic etymological knowledge, finds some good examples in the Pahlavi translations of Av. *vastra-*, *drafša-* and *barəziš-*. The first,¹¹ generally applied to clothing and derived from the Proto-Indo-European root **yēs-* “to wear,”¹² was systematically rendered into Phl. *wastarag*, also a general term for clothing derived from the same Proto-Indo-European root. Although the Pahlavi translators could have chosen other synonyms for clothing like Phl. *jāmag* and *paymōg*, they preferred to render Av. *vastra-* into its etymological and phonetically related equivalent in Phl. *wastarag*. The same applies to Av. *drafša-* “standard, banner,”¹³ rendered into Phl. *drafš* “banner,” both deriving from Proto-Indo-European **drep-* “to cut off,”¹⁴ and to Av. *barəziš-* “cushion,”¹⁵ systematically rendered into Phl. *bāliš* “cushion,” both deriving from the same Proto-Indo-European root **b^helǵ^h-* “to swell.”¹⁶ Phl. *drafš* and *bāliš* are also attested in other passages apart from the Pahlavi translations and continue as NP. *derafš* and *bāliš* respectively with the same meaning as in Pahlavi.

Etymological Pahlavi translations also help correctly interpreting Avestan textile terms, as demonstrated by the Pahlavi translation of Av. *naḍa-* in N 77.4:

Av. *+yōi*.¹⁷ *+vaṇhənti*.¹⁸ *naḍəšca*.
+sāḍaiiantīšca.¹⁹ *carəmaṇca*. *+hiku*.²⁰

11. Attested in Y 10.20, 55.2, V 3.18-19, 4.46, 5.38, 5.49, 5.54-58, 6.27, 7.11-13, 7.17-18, 7.64, 7.69, 8.23-25, 9.32-35, 9.49, 12.2, 12.4, 12.6, 12.8, 12.10, 12.12, 12.14, 12.16, 12.18, 12.20, 12.22, 16.16, 17.3, 18.19, 18.21, VN 13, N 68.1, 69.2, 73.3, 75.1, 78.2, Yt 5.129, 10.126, 14.61, 17.14, 19.56, 19.59, 19.62, Vyt 7.45, ViD 2, 12 and 20 (Bartholomae 1904, 1385).

12. Present, for instance, in Ved. *vāstra-*, Gr. *heimata* and Lat. *vestis* (Mayrhofer 1992-2001, 2.529).

13. Attested in Y 10.14a, 57.25d, Yt 1.11, 4.3, 8.56, 10.93, 13.136 and 14.48 (Bartholomae 1904, 771-772), and rendered into Phl. *drafš* <dlpš> in Y 10.14a and 57.25d.

14. Present, for instance, in Ved. *drāpi-* “mantel, cloak” and Gr. *drépō* “I cut off” (Mayrhofer 1992-2001, 1.758).

15. Attested in V 5.27b, 5.59c, 7.8e, 7.9, 14.14d and 18.26a (Bartholomae 1904, 950). This word was also identified in the Avestan compound Av. *x^wābarəziš-* “own cushion” (Bartholomae 1904, 1878), rendered into Phl. *xwad-bāliš* <BNPŠE b’lš’> in V 6.51. Phl. *bāliš(n)* <b’lš(n)> was wrongly written <w’lš(n)> in the manuscript L4 (f. 247r, l. 11) in V 18.26.

16. cf. Ved. *barhiṣ-* “grass bedding spread for the offerings” (Mayrhofer 1992-2001, 2.213-214).

17. HJ *yō*.

18. HJ *vaṇhaiti*.

19. HJ *sāḍaiiantīšca*.

20. HJ *huki*.

21. HJ *hwmb’ynd*.

22. HJ *dyyw’k-HD* **دځو ک**.

23. HJ *lyp’*.

24. Mayrhofer 1992-2001, 2.7.

Who wear reeds, *sāḍaiiantī-* and dry furs

Phl. OLE-š’ n’ MNW *+nhwmbynd*²¹
 KNYA W *+dyp’k-HD*²² [krc] <W>
*+clm*²³ y hwšk

awēšān kē +nihumbēnd nāy ud +dēbāg-ē
[karz] <ud> *+carm ī hušk*

Those who wear reeds, a [silk] brocade
 (and) dry furs

Insofar as Av. *naḍa-* is the object of the verb *vah-* “to wear,” it is very likely that it designates a sort of clothing, “Name eines Kleidungsstücks” according to Bartholomae 1904, 1038. Waag 1941, 137 and 140, followed by Kotwal & Kreyenbroek 2009, 48-51, went a step further and proposed a highly hypothetical translation as “cap.” Av. *naḍa-* is actually related to Ved. *nadā-* and *naḍā-* “cane, reed,”²⁴ and was rightly understood by the Pahlavi translators, who rendered it into Phl. *nāy* “reed,” being impossible to know what kind of clothing made of reeds (or similar vegetal fibres) the Avestan term *naḍa-* referred to.

Some examples of the third technique, the synonymic translation, also reveal the Pahlavi translators’ skills to rightly interpreting and translating Avestan words, and are the key to correctly editing them. This is the case of Av. *aoḍrauuan-* “footwear,” attested in V 8.23a and N 68.2:

V 8.23a. Av. |a| *dātarə. gaēθanqm.*
astuuaitinqm. ašāum. yō. vastrəm.
uparharəzaiti. upairi. aētəm. iristəm.
ubdaēnəm. vā. izaēnəm. vā. auuuauaṭ.
aipi. yaθa. narš. aoθrauuana. |b| kā. hē.
asti. ciθa. |c| āaṭ. mraoṭ. ahurō. mazdā.
caθβārō. sata. upāzananqm. upāzōiṭ. as-
pahe. aštraia. caθβārō. sata. sraošō.
caranaia.

|a| Maker of the material creatures, Righteous one, whoever casts clothes upon this dead, woven or made of goat's leather), in as much as man's footwear, |b| what is the atonement for it? |c| And Ahura Mazda said: "four hundred lashes with the horse's whip one must decree (for him), four hundred with the Sraoša's lash."

Phl. |a| d't'l MNW wstlg QDM
 ŠBKWN-yt' QDM 'w' ZK lyst' ttk
 'ywp pwstyn' ZK y 'nd cnd GBRA
 +LGLP-p'nk |b| kt'l OLE AYT' twcšn'
 |c| AP-š gwpt 'whrmzd AYK 400 PWN
 QDM znšnyh QDM znšn' 'sp' 'štl 400
 slwšcln'm

|a| *dādār kē wastarag abar hilēd abar ō*
ān rist tadag ayāb pōstēn ān ī and cand
mard +pāybānag |b| kadār ōy ast tōzišn |c|
u-š guft ohrmazd kū cahār sad pad abar
zanišnīh abar zanišn asp aštar čahār sad
srōšōcarnām

|a| Maker, whoever casts clothes upon the dead, spun or leathern, in as much as man's footwear, |b| what is the atonement for it? |c| And Ahura Mazda said: "one

must beat him with four hundred lashes of the horse's whip, four hundred of the Sraoša's lash."

N 68.2. Av. *yaθa. +aoθrauuano. 25 biš.*
paiti. 26 maidiioi. +paitištāne. 27

When wearing footwear, twice to the middle of the leg²⁸

Phl. cnd 2²⁹ p'dyp'nk³⁰ [GBRA³¹ pr'c
 hwmbyt'] OD OL nymk +ptyšt'n³²
cand dō pāybānag [mard frāz humbēd]
tā ō nēmag +padištān

As much as [a man wears] two footwear, to the middle of the leg

In the first passage Av. *aoθrauuana-* is written as *aoθrauuana* in the Iranian manuscripts 4000, 4045, 4050 and 4055. In the passage of the Nērangestān, *āθrauuano* (with *ā-* instead of the diphthong *ao-*) is the common variant of the manuscripts TD and HJ, the oldest preserving this text. Ch. Bartholomae 1900, 125-127 and 1904, 323 preferred the latter variant and translated it as "Strumpf," following its Pahlavi translation *pāybānag* "protecting the feet," but did not explain it etymologically. Kotwal & Kreyenbroek 2009, 31 also edited Bartholomae's form *āθrauuano* and translated it as "stockings," but they were also unable to explain its etymology. Thanks to the Pahlavi translation *pāybānag* "protecting the feet" we can confirm that the variant *aoθrauuana* of V 8.23a is the right one, and that *āθrauuano* of N 68.2 is merely a corrupted form out of the former, probably introduced during the written transmission by contamination of the usual word for priest in Avestan: *āθrauuana-*. That Av. *aoθrauuana-* "having shoes," a noun deriving from *aoθra-* "shoe"³³ and going back to

25. TD HJ *āθrauuano*.

26. TD HJ *pai.i. biš*.

27. TD *paitištāno*; HJ *paiti.štāno*.

28. That is, the sacred girdle can reach up to the middle of the leg in both legs.

29. TD y 1.

30. TD p'dyp'n'.

31. HJ GRRA.

32. TD HJ *ptyšt'n'*.

33. Attested in Yt 5.64, 78 and V 6.27.

Proto-Indo-European **h₂eu-* “to weave,”³⁴ was identified and rightly translated by the Pahlavi translators is just another proof of their competence.

In other instances the Pahlavi translators did not choose a Pahlavi synonym of the Avestan textile term, but another word from the same semantic field. This is the case of the Pahlavi translations of Av. *ubdaēni*-³⁵ and *ubdaēna*-³⁶ “woven, made of textile,” rendered into Phl. *tadag* <ttk> “spun.” Although the Avestan verbal root *vaf-* “to weave,”³⁷ from which the preceding Avestan adjectives are formed, also existed in Pahlavi as *waf-* “to weave,” the Pahlavi translators preferred the verbal root *tadan, tan-* “to spin,” from which *tadag* “spun” derives, to render these adjectives into Pahlavi. Although spinning is certainly not the same as weaving, the Pahlavi translators simply picked up another term from the common semantic field of verbal roots related to textile production.

Finally there are also examples in which the Pahlavi translators reinterpreted the Avestan terms, either because they did no longer understand them or because they were trying to update them to make them fit into their own contemporary context. This is the case, for instance, of the *hápax legómenon* Av. *sādaiaiantī-* in N 77.4, rendered into Phl. *dēbāg-ē [karz]* “a [silk] brocade.” Although Bartholomae 1904, 1570 was again very cautious and just identified this Avestan word as a sort of clothing, “Name eines Kleidungsstücks,” A. Waag 1941, 137 and 140, followed by Kotwal & Kreyenbroek 2009, 48-51, was more imaginative and translated it as “Hose,” that is, trousers. Actually, the only thing we can guess from this word is that it derives from Ilr. **scad-* “to cover,”

present in Ved. *chad-* “to cover,”³⁸ and that it would designate something covering the body. Although several Iranian words related to clothing and outfit, like Phl. *cādur* “sheet, veil” (actually a loanword from Late Sanskrit), its New Persian form *cādor* “veil” and Paštō *psōl* “necklace, belt,”³⁹ go back to this Indo-Iranian root, it is not possible to precise the meaning of Av. *sādaiaiantī-*, which therefore remains unknown. Many centuries ago the Pahlavi translators of the Sasanian period were challenged by the same problem, which they solved by choosing the contemporary terms *dēbāg-ē [karz]* “a [silk] brocade” for translating this Avestan *hápax legómenon*. The reason for this choice might be found in a parallel passage of N 73.1, in which another Avestan textile *hápax legómenon*, Av. *kərəti-*, is mentioned:

Av. ^{+yōi.}⁴⁰ ^{+vanhənti.}⁴¹ *kərətīšca.*

(Those) who wear *kərəti-*

Phl. OLE-š' n' MNW ^{+nhwmbynd}⁴²
ZK-cy klynytk' [cygwn twp <y> gy-
tyg hm nmtk cygwn krc ^{+dyp}'k-HD⁴³
AYT' MNW 'ytwn' YMRRWN-yt' 'y
HD MNW hm hdyb' l OL hm' mynyt'
YKOYMWN-yt']

awēšān kē +nihumbēnd ān-iz kīrrēnīdag
[cīyōn tōf <ī> gētīg ham namadag cīyōn
karz ^{+dēbāg-ē} ast kē ēdōn gōwēd ay ēw
kē ham ayār ō ham menīd ēstēd]

Those who wear the *kīrrēnīdag* (= cut)
[like spun wool of flock together with
felt;⁴⁴ like a silk brocade. There is (a

34. Mayrhofer 1992-2001, 1.754-755 and 1.758; Andrés-Toledo 2010, 439. Av. *aōθra-* is also the second element of the compound *x'ā.aōθra-* “having its own shoes,” attested in V 13.39 and VN 53, 62 (Bartholomae 1904, 1875).

35. Attested in V 7.15a.

36. Attested in V 8.23a, 8.24a and 8.25a.

37. Bartholomae 1904, 1346; Mayrhofer 1992-2001, 2.506; Andrés-Toledo 2010, 437-438.

38. Bartholomae 1904, 1570; Mayrhofer 1992-2001, 1.554-555.

39. Morgenstierne 2003, 60; Cheung 2007, 341-342.

40. HJ *yō.*

41. HJ *vanhənti.*

42. HJ HWE-d.

43. HJ *dypk-HD.*

44. cf. NP. *namad* “felt; a garment of coarse cloth; cloak worn during rain; a rug or coarse carpet on which people sit; a thick veil” and *namad dar bar* “with a coarse cloak or garment over the shoulders” (Steingass 1930, 1425-1426). Or maybe “wild plum” used as a dye; cf. NP. *namatk* “wild plum” (Steingass 1930, 1425).

commentator) who says: “all have agreed that (it is) one that helps for everything.”]

It is noteworthy that the Pahlavi translators of this passage were still able to identify that Av. *kərāti-* was related to the verbal root **kart-* “to cut,”⁴⁵ as their Pahlavi translation *kirrēnīdag* “cut” suggests. However, it seems that the exact meaning of both Av. *kərāti-* and Phl. *kirrēnīdag* was not clear enough to them, because they added a short explanation to it in Pahlavi, according to which this textile term was like a silk brocade. As we observe, the Pahlavi translators and commentators of N 77.4 and 73.1 reached the same conclusion when trying to identify the Avestan *hápax legómena sādaiiaṇtī-* and *kərāti-*, which according to them might have been silk brocades. Obviously none of these translators regarded whether or not these types of textiles were used by the Avestan-speaking population of South-western and Central Asia during the 2nd and 1st millennia BC, when the Avestan text of the *Nērangestān* was probably composed. They were simply interested in finding an equivalent in the Sasanian period for these ancient textile terms. The use of this technique, together with the rest they resorted to, demonstrates that the Pahlavi translations of Avestan texts, in spite of their many inaccuracies, were the product of learned and skilled translators who still were able not only to mechanically render one language into another, but also to reflect on the meanings of the very difficult texts they were confronting, and to provide the best possible contributions to their interpretation.

Abbreviations

Av.	Avestan
Gr.	Greek
IIr.	Indo-Iranian
Lat.	Latin
N	<i>Nērangestān</i>
NP.	New Persian
Phl.	Pahlavi
V	<i>Wīdēwdād</i>
Ved.	Vedic
ViD	<i>Wizargard ī dēnīg</i>
VN	<i>Vaēθā Nask</i>
Vyt	<i>Wištāsp Yašt</i>
Y	<i>Yasna</i>
Yt	<i>Yašt</i>

45. Present for instance in Ved. *kart-* “to cut,” going back to Proto-Indo-European **(s)kert-* “to cut” (Mayrhofer 1992-2001, 1.315-316; Cheung 2007, 243-244).

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