



TRANSLATIONAL DIVERGENCES IN THE GEOGRAPHY AND THEONYMY OF THE AVESTA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE FIRST FARGARD OF THE VIDEVDAT

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Table with 2 columns: ABSTRACT and KEYWORDS. The abstract discusses comparative philological and historical analysis of the first fargard of the Videvdat section of the Avesta. Keywords include Avesta, Videvdat, first fargard, Ahura Mazda, Angra Mainyu, Asqar Mahkam, James Darmesteter, Steblin-Kamensky, geographical localization, textual variance, and historical source criticism.

Introduction

Today, the profound contribution of the peoples inhabiting the region between the Amudarya and Syrdarya rivers (Transoxiana) to world civilization and the spiritual development of humankind is universally acknowledged. The sacred scripture "Avesta," representing the monumental intellectual and spiritual heritage of our ancient ancestors, stands as an irreplaceable primary source for illuminating the proto-history of Central Asia.

However, contemporary source criticism reveals significant problematic divergences between the original structure of the "Avesta" and its modern translations into Uzbek, Russian, and English. This paper critically examines these inconsistencies, specifically focusing on the macro-structure, geographic data, and theonymic variations within the first fargard of the Videvdat.

Discussion and results.

1. Chronological and Geographical Context of the Videvdat. The Videvdat, historically identified as the Vendidad and occasionally compiled within the Khorda Avesta ("Little Avesta"), possesses a distinct linguistic profile. Compared to the archaic layer of the Gathas, the Videvdat exhibits various lexical inconsistencies and younger grammatical structures. Based on these features, philologist I. Gershevich assigned the relative dating of this final redaction to the late Achaemenid period [1. p.24].

The first fargard of the Videvdad is predominantly geographic and cosmological, mapping sixteen sacred lands created by the supreme deity Ahura Mazda. This sequence begins with Airyanem Vaejah (the Aryan expanse) and concludes near the borders of the Rangha River. The political and geographic alignment of these sixteen lands remains highly contested:

- H.S. Nyberg and D. Monchi-Zadeh: Argued that while the majority of these regions were concentrated in Eastern Iran (Central Asia and Afghanistan), several locations spilled into Western Iran [2. p. 112-114; 3. p. 48].
- H. Humbach: Localized the core cluster of these states within the mountainous terrains between Parthia and Aria, identified by Ptolemy as the “Mosondro Oros” [4. p.32.]
- G. Gnoli: Countered both hypotheses, asserting that all sixteen lands belonged strictly to the Eastern Iranian world, deeply rooted in the Hindu Kush and Central Asian topography [5. p. 45-47].

These academic disagreements highlight that a unified consensus on Avestan geography has not yet been achieved, making the reliability of modern translations crucial for historical localization.

2. Structural and Theonymic Discrepancies. A comparative reading reveals sharp differences in how translators structured the first fargard. Asqar Mahkam’s Uzbek translation [6. p.126-130.] divides the first fargard into 21 sections, whereas James Darmesteter’s English version [7. p.1-10.] and I.M. Steblin-Kamensky’s Russian translation [8. p.56-62] present it in 20 sections. This structural shift is primarily due to the textual placement of the introductory dialogue between Ahura Mazda and Zoroaster. In the Western and Russian traditions, this dialogue is condensed within section 1, while Mahkam splits it across sections 1 and 2. Furthermore, the phonetic rendering and conceptual translation of divine names and legendary heroes vary across the editions, impacting comparative mythography:

Conceptual Identity	Uzbek Translation (A. Mahkam)	English Translation (J. Darmesteter)	Russian Translation (I.M. Steblin-Kamensky)
Supreme Deity	Ahura Mazda	Ahura Mazda	Ahura Mazda
The Destructive Spirit	Ahriman	Angra Mainyu	Zloy Dukh (Evil Spirit / Angra Mainyu)
Legendary Hero / Monarch	Faridun	Thraetaona	Thraetaona
Demonic / Witch Figure	Xnasatay	Xnatxaiti	Xnafaiti
Heroic Dragon-Slayer	Garshasp	Keresaspa	Kersaspa

3. Comparative Mapping of the Sacred Lands (Sections 1–14). The localization of the lands and the description of the counter-creations (adversarial plagues) introduced by the Evil Spirit differ substantially by section and terminology across the three translations. Below is a systematic comparative breakdown of the first fourteen lands as presented in the texts:

Land No.	Land Name/ Placement (A. Mahkam)	Land Name/ Placement (J.Darmesteter)	Land Name/ Placement (I. Steblin-Kamensky)	Textual Inconsistencies/ Adversarial Creations
1	Iyron Vij (Sec. 3–4)	Airyana Vaejah (Sec. 2–3)	Ariyskiy Prostor (Sec. 2–3)	Structural misalignment of the primordial homeland.
2	Sug'd (Sec. 5)	Sughdha (Sec. 4)	Sogd (Sec. 4)	Sogdiana. Textual alignment matches across all versions.
3	Marv (Sec. 6)	Margu (Sec. 5)	Margiana / Marv (Sec. 5)	Shifted by one section in the Uzbek translation.
4	Balkh (Sec. 7)	Bakhdhi (Sec. 6)	Bactria (Sec. 6)	Divergence: Mahkam states Ahriman created Bravarana. Darmesteter and Steblin-Kamensky state Ahriman created ants.
5	Nisoya (Sec. 8)	Nisaya (Sec. 7)	Nisu (Sec. 7)	Divergence: Mahkam notes the creation of hopelessness. Darmesteter and Steblin-Kamensky note the creation of doubt.
6	Hirod (Sec. 9)	Haroyu (Haria) (Sec. 8)	Haroyu (Sec. 8)	All agree that Ahriman afflicted this land with tears and bile.
7	Vaixa Girta (Sec. 10)	Vaekereta (Sec. 9)	Vekertu (Sec. 9)	Kabul region. Shifted by one section in Mahkam's text.
8	Avrava (Sec. 11)	Urva (Sec. 10)	Urva (Sec. 10)	Divergence: Mahkam states Ahriman created tyrannical decrees. Darmesteter notes pride, Steblin-Kamensky notes an evil ruler.
9	Xninta in Gurgan (Sec. 12)	Xnenta in Vehrkanas (Sec. 11)	Girkaniya (Sec. 11)	Hyrcania region. Language shifts from ancient toponym to classical Russian exonym.

Land No.	Land Name/ Placement (A. Mahkam)	Land Name/ Placement (J.Darmesteter)	Land Name/ Placement (I. Steblin-Kamensky)	Textual Inconsistencies/ Adversarial Creations
10	Harahvata (Sec. 13)	Harakhvaiti (Sec. 12)	Araxosiyu (Arachosia) (Sec. 12)	All versions agree Ahriman cursed the land with the sin of burying corpses.
11	Hiyrmant (Sec. 14–15)	Haetumant (Sec. 13–14)	Haetumant (Sec. 13–14)	Helmand region. Spans across two structural sections in all traditions.
12	Ray (Sec. 16)	Ragha (Sec. 15)	Raga (Sec. 15)	Divergence: Mahkam translates: "ruled by three heroes" (weak faith). Western/Russian versions translate: "ruled by three tribes" (disbelief).
13	Chakhra (Sec. 17)	Chakhra (Sec. 16)	Chakhra (Sec. 16)	All versions agree Ahriman introduced the forbidden sin of burning corpses.
14	Land of the dragon-slayer (Sec. 18)	Varena (Sec. 17)	Varena (Sec. 17)	Omission/Shift: Mahkam defines the land strictly by its mythological trait, altering the direct toponymic reading of Varena.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of the first fargard of the Videvdat demonstrates that reliance on a single modern translation introduces significant analytical risks for historians and source-critical researchers. The structural shifts in section numbering—most visible in Asqar Mahkam’s translation—disrupt systematic cross-referencing with international Avestan scholarship.

Furthermore, conceptual variations in translating adversarial creations (such as rendering "ants" as Bravarana, or "doubt" as hopelessness) alter our understanding of ancient Zoroastrian demonology and its socio-ecological anxieties. To historical conclusions regarding the geography, spiritual life, and material culture of ancient Central Asian societies, it is essential to utilize a rigorous, multi-tiered comparative approach that cross-examines regional translations with primary Pahlavi and Avestan linguistic data.

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