

Schools of Avestan Studies and their Scholarly Activities (Based on the Example of the Usa and Iran)

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Abstract: This article examines the scholarly schools engaged in Avestan studies, their main orientations, research outcomes, and the criteria that distinguish these schools. It analyses the works on the Avesta by scholars such as Prods Oktor Skjærvø and William Jackson. The paper also treats Avestan studies carried out in Iran, particularly the works of historians Ibrahim Purdavud and Ahmad Tafazzoli. In addition, it offers an analytical comparison between the Iranian school of Avestan studies and Western academic traditions.

Keywords: Schools of Avestan Studies; SOAS; Prods Oktor Skjærvø; Iranian School of Avestan Studies; Khordeh Avesta



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Avestan studies (i.e., the study of the Avesta and related ancient Zoroastrian texts) is primarily developed within the fields of philology, religious studies, history, and cultural studies. Below is a brief overview of the major academic centres engaged in Avestan studies and their specialisations.

Harvard University (USA) Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations: Comparative analysis of Western and Eastern Avesta traditions; ancient Iranian languages; philological foundations of Zoroastrianism. (Notable work: Prods Oktor Skjærvø *An Introduction to Old Avestan*; studies on Avesta phonology and morphology.)

SOAS, University of London (UK) - Department for the Study of Religions: Comparative study of ancient Iranian religious texts in their religious contexts. (Mary Boyce played an important role in twentieth-century Avestan studies.)

University of Hamburg (Germany) - Iranistics Institute: Source-critical study of Avesta texts; philological analysis of the Vendidad and Videvdad. (Karl Hoffmann, Rüdiger Schmitt.)

Collège de France (France) - Chair of the Religions of Ancient Iran: Poetic analysis of the Gāthās and Yashts; detailed grammar of Old Avestan. (Jean Kellens.)

Leiden University (Netherlands) - Institute for Iranian Studies: Iranian philology; study of ancient witnesses of Zoroastrian texts; differences between Pahlavi and Avesta corpora.

University of Mumbai (India) - Department of Ancient Indian Culture: Influences of Zoroastrianism in India and the Parsi preservation of the Avesta. (Fieldwork on Avesta manuscripts preserved by the Parsi community in India.)

As these centres developed, distinct “schools of Avestan studies” emerged. By “schools of Avestan studies” we mean scholarly approaches, methodologies and traditions that form around a particular geographic region or a circle of scholars. When analysing these schools we should apply the following criteria (see Figure 1):

Avestan studies schools are scholarly directions specialised in the study of Avesta texts, their language, religious content and historical foundations. These schools are generally divided into two broad groups - Western (European and American) and Iranian (Eastern) schools.

Western schools formed mainly in the second half of the nineteenth century and relied largely on philological, comparative and historical methods. Important figures in this tradition include F. Max Müller, James Darmesteter, Christian Bartholomae, Helmut Humbach, William Jackson and Prods Oktor Skjærvø. They compared Avesta texts with Sanskrit, Old Persian and other Indo-European languages, and explained them on philological and religious-philosophical grounds.

The Iranian school of Avestan studies developed from the early twentieth century and focused primarily on studying the Avesta from a national-cultural perspective. Representatives of this school - Ibrahim Purdavud, Ahmad Tafazzoli, Jalol Durandish, Mahmud Omid-Salor and others - analysed Avesta texts in close connection with Iranian historical sources, religious traditions and Zoroastrian rituals.

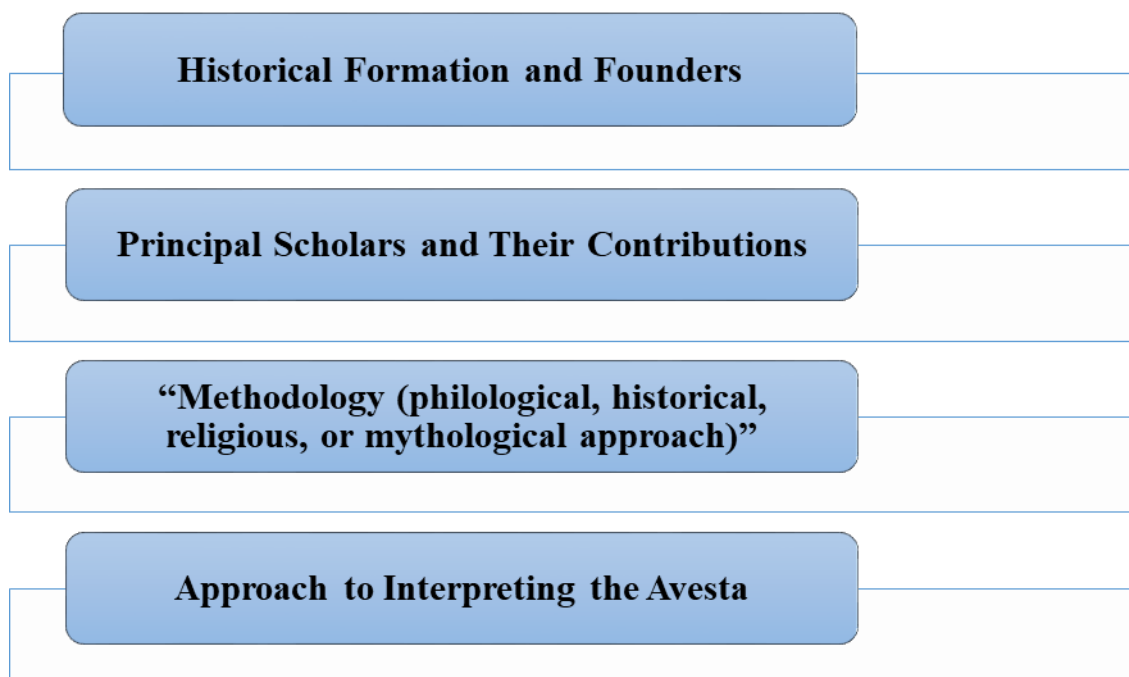


Figure 1. Main criteria for analysing schools of Avestan studies (illustrative)

The American School of Avestan Studies

Alongside European centres, American institutions played an important role in researching, translating and deeply studying the history of Zoroastrianism.

William Jackson, who worked at Columbia University, is regarded as one of the founders of Avestan studies in the USA. His *An Avesta Grammar in Comparison with Sanskrit* (1892) and *Avesta Reader* remain important resources for learning the Avestan language.

Prods Oktor Skjærvø - a prominent American Iranist and linguist - has produced major works on Zoroastrianism and Iranian culture. Key contributions include:

The Spirit of Zoroastrianism (2012) - an exposition of Zoroastrian ideas and history; English translations and analyses of Avesta texts, with attention to their religious and philosophical content.

”Deep philological analysis of Avesta texts.”

- Traces the evolution of religion from early religious concepts to later socio-historical formations.
- Interprets Zoroastrianism not only as a historical object but as a living tradition.
- ✓ “An Introduction to Old Persian (2016)” - a manual for studying Old Persian: grammar, syntax and textual analyses.
- ✓ “The Sassanian Inscription of Paikuli (1983)” - a study of the Paikuli inscriptions to explore Sasanian political history and religious ideology.
- Examines political events in Narseh’s reign.
- Shows relations between religion and politics (the role of Zoroastrian clergy in the state).
- Provides philological, historical and conceptual analysis of the text.
- ✓ “Essays on Zarathustra and Zoroastrianism (2000)” - a collected volume assessing various theories about Zoroaster and his teachings.
- Analyses the evolution of ideas from early dualism to more elaborate cosmologies.
- Offers textual and spiritual interpretations of the Gāthās.
- Highlights continuities and changes in modern Zoroastrian practice.
- ✓ “Three Studies on Eastern Iranian” Epic Traditions-examines epic narratives formed in eastern Iranian regions (Sogdiana, Bactria), e.g. the Siyāvash legend.
- Compares oral and written traditions.
- Explores links between local epic culture and Zoroastrianism.
- Attempts to trace the historical roots of epic narratives.

A synthetic overview of Skjærvø’s works can be presented in the following table.

Title	Main Content	Notable Features	Methodology
<i>The Spirit of Zoroastrianism (2012)</i>	Historical development of Zoroastrian ideas and religious-philosophical interpretation	Modern analyses of Avesta texts; evolution of religious concepts	Philological and historical-contextual analysis
<i>An Introduction to Old Persian (2016)</i>	Grammar of Old Persian and study of epigraphic texts	Foundation for Old Persian and Achaemenid philology	Comparative linguistics and textological analysis
<i>The Sassanian Inscription of Paikuli (1983)</i>	Political and religious history of the Sasanian period based on the Paikuli inscription	Demonstrates links between religion and politics	Epigraphic and historical-reconstructive analysis
<i>Essays on Zarathustra and Zoroastrianism (2000)</i>	Collection on various theories about Zoroaster and Zoroastrian thought	Textual and philosophical examinations of Zoroaster	Textological and religious-philosophical analysis
<i>Three Studies on</i>	Studies of eastern	Analyses of epic	Cultural studies and

<i>Eastern Iranian Epic Traditions</i>	Iranian epic traditions and cultural values	narratives and their ties to Zoroastrianism	historical-linguistic analysis
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Table 1. General analysis of Prods Oktor Skjærvø’s major works

The Iranian School of Avestan Studies

The Iranian school represents a local, national and religious approach to Avesta studies. Its scholars treat the Avesta not merely as a philological or historical document, but as a living religious text and a source of national and cultural identity. Research in this school is often permeated with religious reverence and cultural pride. The main characteristics of this school are summarised in Table 2.

Characteristic	Description
Source approach	Interprets the Avesta primarily within its religious context; regards it as the basis of Zoroastrian belief.
Textual scholarship	Emphasises religious exegesis and spiritual interpretation in text analysis.
Linguistics	Studies Avesta through middle Iranian languages.
Comparative research	Compares Avesta with other ancient Iranian texts.

Table 2. Characteristics of Avestan studies in Iran

Ibrahim Purdavud (Ibrahim Purdavoud) is considered a founder of the Iranian Avestan studies school. He translated Avesta and Pahlavi texts and offered religious commentaries. Purdavud extensively studied the Avesta as Iran’s oldest religious text; his works have played an important role in the development of Avestan studies.

“Khordeh Avesta” (1949) - Purdavud’s most famous work; a rendition of the Khordeh Avesta section, which contains short but significant liturgical passages read in Zoroastrian rituals. Purdavud translated the text into a modern language and explored its meanings. He also authored works on the religious-philosophical aspects of the Avesta, analysing core concepts and Zoroastrian ethical and metaphysical thought.

“Zoroastrianism: An Introduction to the Ancient Religion” (1969) - Purdavud examines Zoroastrianism in its historical, religious and cultural contexts, describing beliefs, rituals and ancient Iranian social systems, and shows how Zoroastrianism influenced life and belief practices worldwide.

Purdavud’s scholarly legacy has had a great impact on Avestan studies and Zoroastrian research; his writings remain important resources for contemporary researchers.

Ahmad Tafazzoli - a renowned Iranian Orientalist and Avestan scholar - was an expert in ancient Iranian languages and literature, especially Avesta and Pahlavi texts. He contributed greatly to historical linguistics and cultural studies of Iran. His main scholarly approaches included:

- Philological, historical and cultural study of Iran’s ancient literature and religious texts.
- Critical textual analysis to identify lexical and syntactic developments.
- Comparative study of Avesta and Pahlavi texts to illuminate ancient Iranian mentality and the development of religious thought.

Notable works by Tafazzoli include:

“Sasanian Society: Aspects of Iranian History in Late Antiquity” - examines Sasanian social, political, and religious structures (224–651 CE). Using Avesta and other ancient documents, Tafazzoli discusses social stratification (priests, soldiers, peasants, artisans) and how Zoroastrianism functioned as a state religion. The book analyses legal, landholding and taxation

systems, arguing that Sasanian Iranian social and political order was shaped by Avesta-based religious values.

“Zoroastrian Mythology” - studies the formation and development of Zoroastrian mythology. Tafazzoli analyses Avesta legends (e.g., Yima, Jamshid, Anahita, Angra Mainyu and Spenta Mainyu) and treats mythology as an expression of religious thought and human–cosmos relations. He views Zoroastrian mythology as a high expression of ancient humanity’s moral dualism (the struggle between good and evil).

“Studies in Sasanian History” - a collection examining political order, religious policy, economy and foreign relations of the Sasanian period, using Avesta and Pahlavi sources to reveal how rulers merged religion and state.

The Iranian Avestan schools differ from Western European approaches in several respects. These differences are shown in Table 3

Main Difference	Iranian School	Western Schools
Attitude toward the Avesta	Studied as a sacred text; approached with reverence and religious loyalty	Studied as a scientific, historical-philological object
Research aim	Strengthening cultural and religious identity	Scientific study of historical, linguistic and cultural evolution
Methodological approach	Religious interpretation and national perspective	Critical and comparative methods

Table 3. Differences between Iranian Avestan studies and Western schools

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