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James Hope Moulton  
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## CHAPTER I

### THE ARYANS AND THEIR LANGUAGE

THE continent of Asia, apart from the tiny country of Palestine, has produced very little poetry that has made any impression upon the West. The vast literature of India is known at a respectful distance, and its philosophy has to some extent compelled recognition; but the genius is yet unborn who shall popularise Veda or Mahâbhârata in Europe. One Eastern country alone, beyond the fortieth parallel of longitude, has sung so as to make the West listen; and that is Persia, whose early religious poetry is the subject of this little book. We are not concerned with the times that gave us Firdausi or Hâfiz, Nizâmi and Omar Khayyâm. The poetry of our period is utterly unknown in Europe and America except to a handful of scholars. We compare our FitzGerald's Omar with the *Rubâiyât* in sober English prose, and we are inclined to see a sufficient reason in Horace's

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## 2 THE ARYANS AND THEIR LANGUAGE [CH.

*caerent quia vate sacro.* Of FitzGerald and Omar we are tempted to ask

Which is the Potter, pray, and which the Pot?

Would Omar have been heard of in English literary circles had (say) Carey translated him?

To answer that question is not our present business, nor does a similar question arise in connexion with the literature we are about to describe. There is no FitzGerald, to begin with, and if there had been, one must doubt whether he would have found a subject to his mind. Speaking generally, this early Persian religious poetry interests the thinker more than the man of letters. It has not a little beauty, and the student of religion lets his plummet down into its depths with increasing wonder. But there is no modernity about it, and no mirage of antiquity to quicken a poet's fancy. The oldest and most important parts of it are sermons in metre, and perhaps rather dull sermons too for those who are not seriously minded. Yet it may be hoped that before this little book comes to its last page the modern reader may be stirred to some interest in the doctrine of God and Man proclaimed perhaps thirty centuries since by the Prophet Zarathushtra (Zoroaster), whose dim figure through the mists of time looms large among the highest thinkers of humanity.

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1]            ARYAN AND INDO-EUROPEAN            3

At a period which in the hoary annals of Egypt or Babylonia might be counted as fairly recent, there lived together in Western Asia a people who called themselves Aryans<sup>1</sup>. They formed the easternmost branch of the great speech-family in which our Germanic tribes have held one of the most westerly positions since history began tardily to fling us a recognition. Linguistic science enables us to reconstruct a common language, spoken in prehistoric times by a closely linked assembly of tribes occupying central or northern Europe. We only infer this common language by the careful analysis of historical dialects that are derived from it: a Hindustani word is compared with an English, a French word with a Russian, a Welsh with an Armenian, and the linguistic changes which have carried them so far apart are recognised as we trace the history back to the earliest speech we know. The actual home of the original "Indo-Germanic" or "Indo-European" tribes we cannot determine with certainty, though "somewhere in Europe" is at present the reasoned and confident answer of science to a question which fifty years ago produced the merely instinctive but equally confident "somewhere in Asia." At the very dawn

<sup>1</sup> The term is generally used in England in the sense popularised by Max Müller, to denote what we call Indo-European or Indo-Germanic. In this book "Aryan" always has the narrower and more correct connotation of Indo-Iranian.

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#### 4 THE ARYANS AND THEIR LANGUAGE [CH.

of our historical knowledge one section of the family was some distance beyond the frontier of Europe towards the south-east, and it is this section with which we are concerned.

The unity of ancestry that binds together the Indian and the Persian languages is, like the larger unity, a scientific induction and not proved from actual monuments. The oldest relics we possess of these languages reveal dialects already as distinct as Dutch and English. But the most casual acquaintance soon shows that the application of a few simple sound-changes will suffice to turn the one language into the other. For instance, we find that an *s* at the beginning of a word before a vowel becomes *h* in the Iranian languages. *Seven* is *saptá* in Sanskrit, and retains its initial *s* in all the languages derived from Sanskrit. In Iranian it is *hapta*, as in Greek. Our familiar proper name *Indus* betrays by its initial, when contrasted with the native *Sindh*, the fact that it comes to us from a foreign source: the *h* that is still preserved in *Hindu* tells us that the source is Persian. The application of this and similar laws of change will enable us to turn whole pages of the oldest Iranian into the dialect of the Rigveda, and comparatively seldom find an independent variation of form. Thus Professor Geldner cites a line of the Gâthâs which he sets by the side of one from the Mahâbhârata, thus:—

1] THE IRANIAN BRANCH 5

(Gāth.) *kē mē nā θrātā vistō anyō [aśāt] θwaṭ[cā]?*  
 (M.bh.) *na nas trātā vidyatē [vai] tvad anyah.*

The latter is negative, and uses the finite verb instead of the participle. Otherwise, except for two words, they would become identical if we altered them thus (writing the Sanskrit without “sandhi”):—

- (1) *kē mōi nā θrātā vistō anyō θwaṭ?*  
 (2) *kas mē nā trātā vittas anyas tvat?*

In the application of this process on a larger scale we not seldom find the Iranian nearer the original when they disagree. We can best appreciate the significance of this if we take a stanza of verse in English and write under each word the cognate word in Dutch. We should have to try Scotch instead before we could reduce the differences to the level of our Aryan comparison. It has seemed worth while to present this affinity in a form which can be appreciated without knowledge of either language, because of the fundamental importance of the issue involved. The difference of pronunciation between such a passage as we have printed above and the Aryan form of it, as reconstructed by the comparative method, is no greater than that between the English of Chaucer and that of Tennyson. We are allowed to be content with a few centuries of separation between the two branches, lying behind our oldest representative literature. Then we come to the period of unity, in

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## 6 THE ARYANS AND THEIR LANGUAGE [CH.

which the line above quoted would run somewhat as follows, allowing for some uncertainties and a margin of small dialectic differences which we cannot detect to-day :—

(3) kas mai nā trātā vit\*tas anyas tvad ?

During this period we may picture the Aryan tribes living together in a fairly extended country perhaps round the south-west of the Caspian Sea. Their language would be homogeneous enough for mutual understanding, though we may presume dialectic differences much like those which distinguish the speech of different English counties. To their common religion we shall return later. The cleavage that ultimately scattered the Aryan tribes was very probably social in its character. Part of the population were settled on the land as agriculturists, another part were nomads. The latter behaved to the former much as the Kurds behave to the Armenians in the same regions still. But at last great hordes of nomads hived off to the south-east, seeking more productive fields for plunder; and establishing themselves in the Panjāb they ultimately became the masters of India and the authors of its intellectual wealth.

We are concerned here with the tribes that remained behind in Iran, as the country came to be called: it is *Airyānem Vaejō*, “the Aryan

1] BEHISTAN INSCRIPTIONS 7

country (?),” in the Avesta. How far their territory extended in prehistoric times we need not enquire at this point; but we may remind ourselves that Iranian languages to-day may be found in Persia, Afghanistan, Bokhara, Kurdistan, Baluchistan, and as far north-west as the Ossetes in the Caucasus. Iran, then, is the bridge between Europe and India; and Iranian languages still mark the road along which our own kith and kin migrated from Europe ages before history began to tell of the peoples they left behind. Antiquity preserves for us three dialects from Iran. The remarkable discoveries at Turfân within the last decade have added a fourth, in the Christian and Manichæan manuscripts in the Sogdianian dialect. These are of the highest interest to the linguist as well as the theologian, but do not concern us here. Nor must we do more than mention the Old Persian language, preserved for us upon the cliff at Behistan, where the servants of Darius and Xerxes smoothed the surface of the rock and cut the great cuneiform inscriptions which through twenty-three centuries have told of the victories of Persian kings to any travellers who risk their necks in the climb. But if Alexander passed that way, it is doubtful whether his Persian guides could have read to him the parts of the royal annals in which Marathon and Salamis were so unaccountably passed over. The Old Persian quickly lost its ancient flexions, and developed into

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## 8 THE ARYANS AND THEIR LANGUAGE [CH.

the Pahlavi of the Sassanian era and the almost uninflected Persian of the modern period. How Grotefend and Rawlinson recovered the key of this long-lost writing, and with it opened the door to the new science of Assyriology, is a long and fascinating story on which we may not enter—the story of one of the mightiest triumphs of human intellect. The records of the Behistan Rock are told in sober prose, or we might find excuse to linger before that wonderful relic of the past. We must be content to refer our readers to an intensely interesting book of travel by one of the greatest of Oriental scholars, *Persia Past and Present*, by Professor A. V. Williams Jackson, of Columbia University, who in 1903 climbed the Rock and read afresh some of the comparatively few characters which time had obscured to Rawlinson's penetrating eye.

We pass on to the two dialects in which are written the literature that forms the subject of this little book. They have the common name of *Avestan*, from the Avesta, the sacred library of the ancient Persian religion. The name *Zend* is often given to this language; and there really does not seem to be any very convincing reason why a short and convenient term should be discarded merely because it happens to be based on a misunderstanding of the (to most of us) unknown tongue to which it



belongs. However, as science has banned the word, we have no choice but to obey. We proceed to define the two varieties of Avestan. The older we call *Gâthic*, as the dialect of the Gâthâs or Hymns, the most ancient and by far the most important section of the Avesta, though scanty in bulk by comparison with the rest. The *Later Avestan* is a dialect closely akin to the Gâthic, but manifestly separated from it by many generations, if indeed we may not conjecture that its immediate parent was not the Gâthic itself but a contemporary dialect diverging from it in a few features of pronunciation.

NOTE.—The possibility of throwing light on the prehistoric period of Aryan unity has been raised lately by the Mitanian inscriptions discovered at Boghaz-keui by Winckler, dated in the fourteenth century B.C. Pending further researches by the discoverer, we must recognise results as tentative; but it seems clear that names of Aryan divinities have been found, the form of which antedates the phonetic change of *s* to *h* described above (p. 4). Whether their origin is Indian, Iranian (of a pre-Gâthic dialect), or proto-Aryan, is still debated. The *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* for 1909 and 1910 contains several interesting papers on the subject.

## CHAPTER II

### GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE AVESTA

THE Avesta was brought to the West in the year 1771. Manuscripts were before that date reposing in European libraries, notably the Bodleian, but no one could read them, and the little noticed Oriental curiosity was a book with seven seals. Fairly copious notices of ancient Persian religion, and even allusions to the Avesta, existed in classical authors; and they had been collected and examined with great wealth of learning by the Oxford scholar, Thomas Hyde, in a massive work published in 1700<sup>1</sup>. But the Parsi Dasturs of Bombay kept their secret to themselves until it was tempted from them by the Frenchman Anquetil du Perron. He had seen an Avestan manuscript and conceived the ambition to interpret it to the Western world. He reached Bombay in the face of manifold difficulties, gained the confidence of the

<sup>1</sup> *Historia Religionis veterum Persarum eorumque Magorum* (Oxford).