Regarding the use of red ink in Avestan manuscripts

Antonio Panaino

Abstract

While Avestan manuscripts are consistently written with black ink, sometimes they present us with red scripts used for titles or for some special signs of interpunction; however, it seems that in certain circumstances, bilingual manuscripts (see for instance J9) distinguished the sacred language (i.e. the Avestan text) by writing its version with a red ink. To the contrary, the extant manuscripts do not attest any consistent use of real rubricae in order to mark the beginning of an Avestan text, as it was done in the standard Geldner’s edition. In any case the documented use of the red ink, although limited in the mss, cannot be the fruit of a later ornamental trend, but it should probably date back - through the Basic Manuscript of the IXth-Xth century A.D. - to the Sasanian Achetype. The present tradition attributing a special function to the red colour results to have been not isolated, but it was paralleled by various traditions: in the Pahlavi Psalter, in the Manichaean documents (where we find texts written in different colours but frequently in red, and with flowers and points like signs of punctuation according to a tradition partly paralleled in the Avestan mss), and more generally in Late Antiquity, for instance, in Byzantium, where such a colour was considered an emanation of the King (sacrum encaustum). An very useful Appendix by Werner Sundermann about the use of red ink in Turfan Texts is appended at the end of this contribution.
Red ink in manuscripts goes back at least to the fifth century and flourished until the fifteenth. It must have been the spread of printed books, in which producing coloured text is very complicated, which eroded the doubtless standard medieval assumption that books were black and red. Printed books are just black, which is duller. Vermilion is mercuric sulphide, and is turned into red ink by grinding up and mixing it with white of egg and gum arabic. Red ink can also be made from brazilwood chips which were infused in vinegar and mixed with gum arabic. Brazilwood, one should explain, is not a Why red ink? No one really knows. This phrase conjures up images of inky-fingered clerks in Dickensian offices scratching in ledgers with quill pens. In fact, the term is much more recent than that. The first known citation of it is in 1907 in Montgomery Rollins’ exhaustingly titled Money and investments: a reference book for the use of those desiring information in the handling of money or the investment thereof: Formerly it was customary, and is now with some bookkeepers, to make an entry of a loss in red ink, from whence arose the term ‘in the red’, always indicating a loss. Why red wa The direction of writing using the Avestan (the Old Iranian language) and Pahlavi (the later, Middle Persian language and predecessor of Modern Persian) is right to left, and the shape of the letters are cursive. For an example of the Avestan alphabet see below. The range of vowel and consonant sounds in Avestan is wide in a manner similar to Sanskrit and greater than the range in Pahlavi. Some of the earliest known surviving examples of both languages date to the 3rd century CE to 4th century CE from the Sassanid era (226-651 CE). (Also see Written Avestan Texts section in our page on Zoroast