This is a — historical — grammar of Gatha Avestan. This language is the oldest form of Iranian; it is as archaic as Sanskrit, and therefore of great interest to Indo-European linguistics. It is even more archaic than Sanskrit in that it preserves systematically the PIE laryngeals. The Gathic texts are extremely difficult to understand. Therefore many problems remain, but enough is certain to write a grammar of the language. This seems a good moment to do so, after the thorough commentaries of Humbach and Insler, and Mrs. Monna's study of the metrics.

This book was designed as a short grammar, not as a handbook. But, as the corpus is relatively small, it was in many cases obvious to give all the relevant forms. In those cases, then, it got the character of a handbook, but it is not meant to be so.

Then, this is a book about what we know, not about all the problems of interpretation that remain. This is not a new commentary on the (language of the) Gatha's: the only aim is to present in a systematic way what seems certain at present. In problematic cases I have sometimes made my own choice, sometimes I have given different views presented, sometimes I have given only one interpretation with a question mark, sometimes I have just mentioned that the form is of uncertain interpretation. Everybody who knows the situation will recognize that this is unavoidable, but everybody will take other decisions. I want to stress that these problematic cases hardly ever are of decisive importance for establishing morphological categories. That is why I have not given too much attention to these cases. Who wants to study them, must turn to the commentaries and other studies, not to this grammar. It may be added that writing a book about a text which is in so many places ununderstandable is an ungratifying task.

I have used a phonological transcription throughout. A chapter has been devoted to establishing the phonemic system, where all problems regarding the spelling, which are often rather complicated, are discussed. The advantage is, of course, that the linguistic problems are not hampered by spelling questions. Here again others may decide slightly differently, but I think that such differences will not affect the usefulness of the grammar. A disadvantage is that the forms are not found in the traditional spelling. However, it is mostly not difficult to get from the spelling of the manuscripts to the phonemic notation. (A ‘conversion’-list is given on p. 223)
This grammar is written primarily for Indo-Europeanists, and it is therefore a historical grammar. However, as Gathic is so close to Sanskrit, it seemed not useful to discuss all those questions which are treated in historical grammars of Sanskrit. Therefore, the historical part consists of a complete historical phonology, but of the morphology only those points are discussed where the language differs from Sanskrit. There is a rather extensive comparison of the verbal system with that of Sanskrit. This is done because the Indo-European verbal system—the emphasis is on system—still presents many problems and because the Sanskrit and Gathic systems, which are obviously the same system, without a doubt present the most archaic system. The verbal system of Late Avestan has completely changed, so the comparison of Gathic with Sanskrit gives all the Iranian evidence (the Old Persian system too being much simplified). A drawback was that there is no up to date treatment of the Sanskrit system, so it will need correction in many instances on this side.

I have not given a full treatment of the word-formation. On the one hand this would have meant a considerable amount of work, and on the other hand it seems not useful in this case to study only the Gathic material. Here all Avestan material should be taken together, which would take a full volume. I have given retrograde lists of all nouns, so that the material is in any case easily accessible. I have given a full description of the formation of the compounds, partly because it is a good example—with not too extensive material—of all Indo-Iranian types of compound.

After I had a first draft ready, I was able to use Kellens's study of the Avestan verb, because the author was so kind as to send me the proofs of his book. In cases where I doubted, I have mostly adopted Kellens's view.

The manuscript was finished in December 1984.

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