

Re-evaluation of Authenticity and Conservation from the Perspective of Ancient Iranian Philosophy (Zoroastrianism)

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Abstract: The notion of authenticity represents a dynamic and context-dependent construct, shaped by temporal, spatial, and cultural conditions, as well as by social needs, cultural diversity, indigenous heritage, local communities, and relevant stakeholders. It is intrinsically linked to the safeguarding and preservation of cultural heritage. Re-examining this concept through the lens of Iranian-Islamic culture—particularly in the context of interventions and restoration of historical and artistic works—can play a pivotal role in formulating an indigenous approach to heritage conservation. This study seeks to articulate the key components of authenticity and conservation from the perspective of Zoroastrian doctrine, with the intention that the principles derived from this ancient faith may serve as a conceptual foundation for revitalizing authenticity within conservation and restoration practices. Adopting an inductive research methodology, the study conducts a textual analysis of Zoroastrian scriptures, with particular emphasis on the Gathas (the sacred hymns attributed to Zoroaster). The findings indicate that, although the term “authenticity” is not explicitly mentioned in Zoroastrian texts, its conceptual essence can be inferred through the underlying teachings. Based on this interpretation, the dimensions of authenticity in Zoroastrianism may be identified as follows: authenticity and continuity (the evolutionary process), authenticity in tangible and intangible values, authenticity of origin, authenticity and integrity, authenticity and order, authenticity of craftsmanship, authenticity of transformation, and authenticity of idea and creativity. In contrast, the concept of conservation is explicitly addressed in the Avesta, articulated through terms such as protection, guardianship, care, and preservation. These texts also provide detailed injunctions concerning purification, the safeguarding of natural elements, and the protection of metals from contamination and corrosion, all of which reflect the profound Zoroastrian view of conservation as a moral and religious duty. Ultimately, the findings of this research establish a theoretical foundation for developing a culturally grounded framework for the conservation and restoration of Iranian-Islamic heritage, one that is informed by the ethical and spiritual principles of Zoroastrianism.

Keywords:

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1. Introduction

Modern heritage conservation theory and practice are predominantly shaped by Western philosophical frameworks. While invaluable, this intellectual dominance underscores the strategic importance of developing indigenous models of conservation rooted in a region's own intellectual and cultural history. In Iran, despite a profound philosophical legacy extending back to antiquity, no structured theoretical framework for defining "authenticity" and "conservation" has been systematically developed from its pre-Islamic heritage. This research aims to address this scholarly gap by exploring the principles of Zoroastrianism as a foundation for a culturally resonant

approach to heritage management. This study moves beyond simply identifying this gap to construct a multi-component, actionable framework derived from primary philosophical principles.

2. Research Background

The influence of ancient Iranian philosophy, particularly Zoroastrian teachings, on the formation of Iran's cultural and artistic value systems has long attracted scholarly attention. According to the Oxford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, the origins of philosophical thought can be traced back to the Indo-Aryans around 1500 BCE, with Zoroaster recognized as the first known philosopher in human history. These ideas were later transmitted through Judaism into Western thought and eventually influenced Platonic philosophy. This perspective has been affirmed by scholars such as Martin Haug (1827–1876) and Ashk Peter Dahlén, the latter emphasizing the philosophical substance of the Gathas and identifying Zoroaster as the founder of a rational and ethical worldview in which Asha (truth and divine order) constitutes the central axis of philosophy (Dinparast, 2023a: 48–49).

In the field of cultural heritage, the concept of authenticity has been defined in international charters, such as the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994), as a dynamic and context-dependent principle. However, most of these studies have focused primarily on architecture and tangible heritage, with limited attention paid to the philosophical roots of authenticity within the Iranian–Islamic intellectual tradition.

In contrast, Zoroastrian texts, particularly the Avesta and the Gathas, explicitly address the notion of conservation. Oroojnia and Houshang (2016) analyzed these scriptures and demonstrated that concepts such as purification, care, guardianship, and the rejuvenation of the world (Frashokereti) are presented as both moral and religious duties in Zoroastrianism. In this worldview, matter, unlike in many Abrahamic traditions, which often regard the material world as transient and potentially sinful, is considered sacred, as it is created by Ahura Mazda.

Despite this rich philosophical foundation, no comprehensive research to date has systematically examined the concepts of authenticity and conservation through the lens of ancient Iranian philosophy. Previous studies, such as those by Mehr (2008) and Dinparast (2023b), have explored certain aspects of this topic, yet the integration of Zoroastrian philosophical principles with heritage-oriented concepts of conservation and restoration remains an unaddressed research gap. Addressing this gap defines the rationale of the present study: to develop a culturally grounded framework for the conservation and restoration of Iran's historical monuments, rooted in Zoroastrian philosophical principles, one that harmonizes with Iranian identity while maintaining validity within the global discourse on cultural heritage.

3. Materials and Methods

The interpretation of ancient philosophical texts for application to modern disciplines requires a carefully selected methodology capable of deriving overarching principles from specific textual evidence. The objective is not merely to translate words, but to distill the underlying ethical and conceptual structure of a worldview. For this purpose, this research utilizes an inductive reasoning approach.

Inductive reasoning is an analytical process that moves from specific observations to broader generalizations and theories. As described by Flick (2006) and Thomas (1997), the researcher begins by closely examining individual data points, in this case, passages, concepts, and mandates within Zoroastrian texts, particularly the Gathas. Through a process of systematic analysis and abstraction, recurring patterns and underlying themes related to the concepts of authenticity and conservation are identified. This method allows the researcher to move beyond surface-level interpretations to construct a coherent theoretical framework that is grounded in the source material. By starting with the specific tenets and statements within the texts and building upwards, this study ensures that the resulting framework for heritage is not imposed upon the

philosophy but emerges directly from it. This approach is particularly suitable for extracting implicit concepts, such as authenticity, by identifying the core values from which its components can be logically derived. The following discussion applies this methodology to analyze the foundational tenets of Zoroastrian philosophy.

4. Discussion

This section deconstructs the core tenets of Zoroastrianism to construct a coherent, indigenous framework for understanding and managing cultural heritage. By examining the central philosophical principles of this ancient worldview, it is possible to derive a robust concept of authenticity, even where the term itself is not explicit, and to understand the explicit religious and ethical mandates for conservation. This analysis demonstrates that these two concepts are not separate but are deeply intertwined aspects of a single, holistic philosophy grounded in the cosmic principle of Asha.

4.1 Foundational Principles: The Concept of Asha

The central pillar of Zoroastrian philosophy, around which all ethical and cosmological understanding revolves, is the concept of Asha. This term, often translated simply as "truth" or "righteousness," represents a far more profound and multifaceted principle. Asha is the divine, cosmic order; it is the universal law of truth, righteousness, causality, and dynamic, purposeful evolution. It functions as the ultimate benchmark against which all thoughts, words, and deeds are measured. As the texts assert, "no action is right unless it is compatible with the law of Asha".

This principle is not static but inherently dynamic. Zoroastrian philosophy views the universe as being in a constant state of progression towards an ultimate state of perfection. Asha is the engine of this progress, a "dynamic and progressive movement" that unifies all of existence in its journey (Mehr, 2008). It is the law of cause and effect that governs the moral, social, and physical order of creation (Dinparast, 2023b). The pervasive presence of order and geometric patterns in ancient and later Iranian art can be seen as a direct reflection of this foundational belief in a divinely ordered and rational cosmos. Understanding Asha is therefore essential, as it provides the philosophical basis from which all principles of authenticity and conservation are derived.

4.2 Deconstructing Authenticity from Zoroastrian Thought

While the modern term "authenticity" does not appear explicitly in the Gathas, its constituent components can be rigorously derived from the philosophical framework established by Asha. This framework defines authenticity not as a static state of being, but as a condition of alignment with divine order, creative purpose, and cosmic progression.

- Authenticity and Continuity (Teleological Evolution): Zoroastrianism posits a world in constant motion towards a final perfection known as Frashokereti (the final renovation of the world). This teleological journey is governed by Asha. Therefore, an object possesses authenticity when its existence is in alignment with this law of progress, ensuring its continuity within this purposeful cosmic narrative.

- Authenticity and Integrity/Wholeness: The etymological root of Asha is the verb "ar" (ar), meaning "to unify" or "to fit together" (Dinparast, 2023b). Asha is the force that integrates all parts into a coherent whole. Consequently, authenticity in an object is synonymous with its integrity—the harmonious relationship of its constituent parts, reflecting the unifying order of the cosmos.

- Authenticity of Order and Construction Method: As the divine law, Asha is the source of all order. An artifact is authentic when its form, structure, and method of construction reflect this inherent, rational order. This includes not only its geometric and formal properties but also the way it was made, as the act of making (sākhtan) is a manifestation of bringing order to matter.

- Authenticity of Origin, Creativity, and Intent: Humanity is viewed as a co-worker (hamkār) with Ahura Mazda. The act of creation (khalq), when guided by a constructive intent aligned with Asha,

is a divine-like act. The origin of an artifact is authentic when its creative idea and intent are constructive and contribute to the flourishing of the world. Destruction, conversely, is an act contrary to Asha and is condemned.

- Authenticity of Beauty: In Zoroastrian thought, beauty is intrinsically linked to goodness and utility. The texts command the praise of "every good, beautiful, and useful thing." An object is therefore authentic when its aesthetic qualities align with this triad of values, reflecting the inherent beauty of Ahura Mazda's well-ordered creation.

- Authenticity of Change: Change is not inherently a threat to authenticity. Because Asha is a dynamic principle and the world is in a constant state of renewal, change that is part of this progressive evolution is considered authentic. The philosophy distinguishes between the eternal, spiritual idea (*menog*) and its transient material form (*getig*). Interventions that respect and perpetuate the essential idea of a work can be considered authentic.

- Authenticity of Tangible and Intangible Values: Zoroastrian thought is built on a dualism between the spiritual/ideational world (*menog*) and the material/physical world (*getig*). Every material object is a manifestation of a spiritual counterpart, with the idea preceding the form. Authenticity resides in both dimensions; the material form is sacred, but its ultimate value is derived from the intangible idea, spirit, and purpose it embodies.

4.3 The Mandate for Conservation as a Religious Duty

In stark contrast to the implicit nature of authenticity, the concept of conservation is an explicit and central tenet of Zoroastrianism. Terms such as *ḥifāzat* (protection), *pāsdāri* (guardianship), and *morāqebat* (care) appear repeatedly in the sacred texts, framing conservation not as a technical choice but as a profound religious and ethical duty.

- Guardianship through Divine Beings: The divine entities known as Amesha Spentas are tasked with the guardianship of specific elements of creation. For example, Shahrivar is the guardian of metals. This belief institutionalizes conservation at a cosmic level, framing human acts of protection as participation in a divine responsibility.

- Purification and Maintenance: The texts contain explicit commands to maintain the purity of the world. There are specific injunctions to cleanse pollution and to keep objects, particularly metals, free from rust, decay, and contamination. The *Bundahishn* and *Dēnkard* directly link the proper care of metals—keeping them polished and free of corrosion—to pleasing their divine guardian. This practical maintenance is a manifestation of the cosmic struggle against the forces of decay (*Angra Mainyu*).

- Development (*Ābādāni*) as Conservation: The Zoroastrian concept of conservation extends beyond mere preservation to include *ābādāni*, which means "to make flourish." Humans have a religious duty to actively improve the world, protect it from ruin, and contribute to its vitality. This active, developmental approach sees conservation not as preventing change, but as guiding it towards a more perfected state.

- Avoidance of Waste: The mandate for conservation includes a strong ethical command to avoid waste and practice frugality. This is rooted in the belief that all useful things are valuable gifts from creation. The source texts note that Ahura Mazda does not approve of wasting anything of value, "even if it be as little as the thread that a girl spins." This principle frames wastefulness as a form of irreverence.

This Zoroastrian model resolves a key tension in modern conservation: it provides a philosophical basis for change and intervention (via the dynamic nature of Asha and *ābādāni*) that is ethically grounded in a mandate for purification and guardianship, thus creating a holistic system where authenticity and conservation are two sides of the same coin.

5. Conclusion

The reexamination of authenticity and conservation from the perspective of ancient Iranian philosophy, specifically within the Zoroastrian tradition, reveals several noteworthy insights. This philosophical framework places particular emphasis on continuity and the evolutionary process of perfection. Within this approach, tangible and intangible values are clearly identified and differentiated, with intangible values regarded as superior to tangible ones. Although matter, in Zoroastrianism, is considered sacred as a creation of Ahura Mazda, this sanctity does not signify material worship; rather, it denotes the inherent purity of matter, which is not deemed impure or defiled.

With respect to integrity, Zoroastrian thought envisions wholeness as the inseparable unity of body and soul. This unity is grounded in Asha, the cosmic order and unifying principle, through which the integrity of an artifact or phenomenon reflects its alignment with truth and righteousness. Furthermore, the act of creation and craftsmanship is regarded as divinely ordained (sacred tradition) and inherently authentic.

Among the fundamental aspects of this philosophical outlook is its profound concern with the concept of protection. In Zoroastrian doctrine, the Amesha Spentas (divine entities) serve as guardians, and explicit injunctions are provided for purification, safeguarding, maintenance, and care. The texts also contain specific prescriptions regarding purification rituals and methods of preservation, emphasizing the sacred duty of vigilance over objects and phenomena to prevent harm and ensure continuity.

Notably, Zoroastrian philosophy also embodies advanced notions of environmental protection that resonate with contemporary ecological ethics. It advocates for the safeguarding of natural elements as an integral part of moral and spiritual responsibility, demonstrating a remarkably progressive perspective on sustainability and environmental stewardship.

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Conflict of Interest

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