

.Old Persian (Aryan)

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Linguistically, Old Persian is the oldest attested *Persid* language, which is classified in the group of Western Iranian languages. The Middle-Persian (Pahlavi) and New New Persian, are the direct continuation of the Old Persian evolution.

Old Persian was the vernacular tongue of the Achaemenid monarchs²[1], but had already been spoken for a few centuries prior to the rise of the Achaemenid dynasty³[2].

Old Persian script was called Aryan (OP. *ariyā*) by the Achaemenids. It is largely known from an extensive body of cuneiform inscriptions – especially from the time of Darius the Great (r. 522-486 BCE) and his son Xerxes (r. 486-465 BCE)⁴[3]. However, some scholars believe that Aryan was invented by the first Iranian dynasty, the Medes (728-550 BCE), and then adopted by the Achaemenids as the imperial script⁵[4]. Old Persian script continued to survive, though in a corrupt form described by Skjærvø as ‘post-Old-Persian’, as late as the first century BCE⁶[5].

Old Persian like Avestan and Sanskrit and all ancient Indo-European languages, are highly inflected language. Old Persian phonetics represented three pair of monophthongs: long and short *a, i, u*, diphthongs *ai, au*, 23 consonant phonemes. The morphology shows eight cases, three numbers, three genders, verbs had very complicated structure. The vocabulary borrowed plenty of words from other ancient Iranian languages, and also from non-Indo-European tongues, e.g. from Aramaic. As a whole, we can say that Old Persian was the beginning of those significant processes which led the language to its modern stage.

Old Persian (Aryan) Alphabet

Old Persian texts (including inscriptions, tablets and seals) have been found in Iran, Turkey and Egypt. It evolved into the Middle Persian language known as Pahlavi of Parthian and Sasanid Iran, and eventually into modern Persian language. Its journey began around 6th century BCE, when the Emperor Darius I the Great (522-486) ordered the Behistun inscription to be made, he also ordered the making of a special, Persian alphabet, which he called 'the Old Persian script' after the name of official language.

While the shapes of some Old Persian letters may look similar to signs in Sumero-Akkadian Cuneiform script, only one of them, *LA*, is a borrowing from that script, and that because *LA* represents a sound not occurring in the Old Persian language and is used in foreign names only.

Based on a logo-syllabic prototype, the system is essentially alphabetic in character. 13 out of 22 consonants are invariant, regardless of the following vowel (that is, they are alphabetic), while only 6

1[1] See *idem, Old Persian Grammar, Texts, Lexicon*, 2nd rev. ed., American Oriental Society, New Haven, (1953). P. 6.

3[2] See *idem, An Introduction to Old Persian* (2005), <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~iranian/OldPersian/opcomplete.pdf>; retrieved June 28, 2007.

4[3] See *idem Old Persian Grammar, Texts, Lexicon*, 2nd rev. ed., American Oriental Society, New Haven, (1953). p.6.

5[4] M. Dandamayev and I. Medvedskaya, “Media”, *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online*, (January 6, 2006), http://www.iranica.com/newsite/artides/ot_grp10/ot_media_20060106.html; retrieved June 28, 2007.

5[55] See *idem, An Introduction to Old Persian* (2005), <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~iranian/OldPersian/opcomplete.pdf>; retrieved June 28, 2007.

have a distinct form for each consonant-vowel combination (that is, they are syllabic), and among these, only *d* and *m* occur in three forms for all three vowels. (*k, g, j, v* only occur before two of the vowels, and so only have two forms.) In addition, 3 consonants, *t, n, r*, are partially syllabic, having the same form before *a* and *i*, and a distinct form only before *u*. For instance, =< could be *na* or *ni*, whereas <<= is specifically *nu*. Ambiguous syllables such as =< *na/ni* must be followed by a vowel for clarification, but in practice even unambiguous syllables such as <<= *nu*, or fully syllabic *ma, mi, mu*, are followed by explicit vowels.

The effect is not unlike the English [dʒ] sound, which is typically written *g* before *i* or *e*, but *j* before other vowels (*gem, jam*), or the Castillian Spanish [θ] sound, which is written *c* before *i* or *e* and *z* before other vowels (*cinco, zapato*). It is more accurate to say that some of the Old Persian consonants are written by different letters depending on the following vowel, rather than classifying the script as syllabic. This situation had its origin in the Assyrian cuneiform syllabary, where several syllabic distinctions had been lost and were often clarified with explicit vowels. However, in the case of Assyrian, the vowel was not always used, and was never used where not needed, so the system remained (logo-)syllabic.

Scholars today agree that the character inventory of Old Persian was newly-invented for the purpose of providing monumental inscriptions of the Achaemenid King of Kings, Darius I the Great, by about 525 BC. However, Old Persian only kept the cuneiform appearance of its character simply out of tradition, and the actual shape of the signs were completely original.

The following is the Old Persian syllabary. Notice that this is a very skeletal syllabary, in that sounds like *pu* is written with the signs *pa* and *u*. In fact, consonants are written with the signs of the form C-*a*, where C is consonant that we want to represent.

Old Persian alphabet was written from left to right in a kind of Cuneiform script. Old Persian cuneiform contains 36 signs which represent consonants, vowels or sequences of single consonants plus vowels, a set of five numbers, one word divider, and eight ideograms for the words 'king', 'country' (2x) 'good', 'god', 'earth', and 'Ahuramazda' (3x). A slanting wedge (∧) is used as a word divider. This alphabet was mainly used for Imperial inscriptions; the last text in the 'Old Persian script' can be dated to the fourth century BCE.

Note on pronunciation:

- The symbol /ç/ is the alternate way of writing the sound /ʃ/, or apico-palatal voiceless fricative, much like /ch/ in German "ich".

This is the Old Persian syllabary:



These are the eight logograms used in Old Persian script:



And these are numbers in Old Persian:



Inscription on the doorposts of the inner room of the Palace of Darius I the Great in Persepolis, above figures of the king and attendants.



da-a-ra-ya-va-u-ša \ xa-ša-a-ya-tha-i-ya \
 va-za-ra-ka \ xa-ša-a-ya-tha-i-ya \ xa-ša-a-
 ya-tha-i-ya-a-na-a-ma \ xa-ša-a-ya-tha-i-ya \
 da-ha-ya-u-na-a-ma \ vi-i-ša-ta-a-sa-pa-ha-ya-
 a \ pa-u-ça \ ha-xa-a-ma-na-i-ša-i-ya \ ha-
 ya \ i-ma-ma \ ta-ça-ra-ma \ a-ku-u-na-u-ša

Dârayavauš xšâyathiya
vazraka xšâyathiya xšâ-
yâthiânâm xšâyathiya
dahyunâm Vištâspahy-
a puça Haxâm anišiya
hya imam taçaram akunauš

Darius, the king
great, king of ki-
ngs, king of
countries, Hystasp-
es' son, an Achaemenid,
who built this palace.
Darius, the great king, king of kings, king of countries, Hystaspes' son, an Achaemenid, built this palace.

Notes:

Further readings:

Dictionaries

1. Bartholomae, Christian, 1855-1925. *Altiranisches Wörterbuch*. Berlin, W. de Gruyter, 1961.
2. Hinz, Walther, 1906-. *Altpersischer Wortschatz*. Nendeln, Liechtenstein : Kraus Reprint, 1966.
3. Tolman, Herbert Cushing, b. 1865. *Ancient Persian lexicon and the texts of the Achaemenidan inscriptions transliterated and translated with special reference to their recent re-examination*. New York, Cincinnati [etc.] American Book Company [1908].

Grammars

1. Bartholomae, Christian, 1855-1925. *Handbuch der altiranischen Dialekte*. Wiesbaden, M. Sandig (1968).
2. Brandenstein, Wilhelm. *Handbuch des Altpersischen*. Wiesbaden, O. Harrassowitz 1964.
3. Kent, Roland G. (Roland Grubb), 1877-1952. *Old Persian : grammar, texts, lexicon*. New Haven, Conn. : American Oriental Society, 1953.
4. Spiegel, Fr. (Friedrich), 1820-1905. *Vergleichende Grammatik der altiranischen Sprachen*. Amsterdam, Philo Press, 1970.

Links to other Relevant Websites

Link to: [Complete Old-Persian Text with English Translation](#).

The Achaemenian Kings left extensive cuneiform inscriptions in Old Persian dated roughly between 600 BCE and 300 BCE. They also left ruins which have been described as the most grandiose of the ancient world. While it is by no means certain that they were orthodox Zoroastrians, the majority

opinion among scholars is that this is very likely. One of the strongest arguments for this is the frequent mention of Ahura Mazda in the inscriptions, which is almost certainly an innovation of Zarathushtra's. Their religion is also described by Herodotus in sufficient detail to leave little doubt that they were basically Zoroastrian.

source:

http://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/Languages/aryan/aryan_language.htm