

LESSON 1

THE AVESTAN ALPHABET

The Avestan alphabet was invented in ab. 500 C.E. as a phonetic, rather than a phonemic, alphabet, in which every sound was to be represented by one letter. Two things must be kept in mind:

1. The sounds this alphabet was intended to record were those of the oral recitation as performed at the time of the invention, not the original pronunciation of Old and Young Avestan, and we do not know to what extent the pronunciation had changed in the ritual recitation;

2. The Avestan and (Book) Pahlavi alphabets are known only from the 13th century onward, and we do not know what their exact forms were at the time of the invention of the Avestan alphabet. The Pahlavi script, for instance, may have been more differentiated than it is in the standard form of the manuscripts.

The alphabet was based upon the Pahlavi (Middle Persian) alphabet in use at the time, which was descended from Aramaic. The Avestan script is therefore also read from right to left.

𐬀	𐬁	𐬂	𐬃	𐬄	𐬅	𐬆	𐬇	𐬈	𐬉
a	ā	i	ī	u	ū	e	ē	o	ō
𐬊	𐬋	𐬌	𐬍	𐬎	𐬏				
ə	ē	ā	ā (*ə)	ā	ā				
𐬐	𐬑	𐬒		𐬓		𐬔	𐬕		
p	b	β		f		m	ṃ		
𐬖	𐬗	𐬘	𐬙	𐬚	𐬛	𐬜	𐬝	𐬞	𐬟
t	d	δ	δ ₂	θ	t	t ₂	n	ṇ	
𐬠	𐬡	𐬢	𐬣	𐬤		𐬥			
k	g	ḡ	γ	x		ṅ			
𐬧	𐬨					𐬩	𐬪		
c	j					ñ			
𐬬	𐬭	𐬮		𐬯		𐬰			
y	Y	ii		ḫ		ṇj			
𐬲		uu		x ^v		ṇ ^v			
𐬴	𐬵	𐬶	𐬷	𐬸	𐬹	𐬺	𐬻		
r	s	š	š̄	š̅	z	ž	h		

For ā (*ə), δ₂, ḡ, and t₂ one usually writes q, δ, g, and t.

Note that y Y v are only written in initial position, except in very late manuscripts, while in non-initial position <ii> and <uu> are used to express Eng. w and y. Before vowels ii and uu are written to express [i, ī] and [u, ū], e.g.:

yāna- “boon,” *xšaiiat* /xšajāt/ “he ruled,” *mašiiō* /mašijō/ “(mortal) man” (Skt. *martiyo*);

vohu “good,” *yauuat* /jauāt/ “as long as” (Skt. *yāvat*), *druuō* /drujō/ “sound, healthy” (Skt. *dhruvo*).

Note that ii and uu are also found in initial position, although rarely:

iiēiān, subj. of the perf. stem **iiāi*- < √i (= Skt. *iyāy*-),

uua [ūu] < **uβa* “both.”

Until recently ii and uu in all these functions were usually transliterated as y and v, so that no distinction was made between them and initial y/Y and v (e.g., Bartholomae, *Air. Wb.*). When uu and ii appeared in initial position *u*va- and *y*- were written (thus Bartholomae, *Air. Wb.*, cols. 147, 399).

LESSON 1

Note that Bartholomae used *w* to transliterate <β>.¹

t̥ is written for *t* in final position and before stops (*tk*, *t̥b*), e.g., *āaṭ* “then,” *t̥kaēša-* “guidance,” *t̥baēšah-* “evil, hostility.”

LIGATURES

In many manuscripts certain letters are frequently combined. Some common combinations, or “ligatures,” are the following:

𐬀 + 𐬀 = 𐬀𐬀	𐬀 + 𐬀 = 𐬀𐬀	𐬀 + 𐬀 = 𐬀𐬀	𐬀 + 𐬀 + 𐬀 = 𐬀𐬀𐬀
𐬀 + 𐬀 = 𐬀𐬀	𐬀 + 𐬀 = 𐬀𐬀	𐬀 + 𐬀 = 𐬀𐬀	𐬀 + 𐬀 + 𐬀 = 𐬀𐬀𐬀
𐬀 + 𐬀 = 𐬀𐬀	𐬀 + 𐬀 = 𐬀𐬀	𐬀 + 𐬀 = 𐬀𐬀	𐬀 + 𐬀 = 𐬀𐬀

STRESS

We know nothing certain about stress in Avestan. For practical purposes a stress rule like that of Latin or Classical Sanskrit may be used, i.e., 1) stress the second-last syllable (the “penultimate”) if it is “heavy,” i.e., has a long vowel (or diphthong) or a short vowel followed by two or more consonants, or if the word has only two syllables, e.g., *á̇pō*, *ápō*, *mazíštō*; 2) stress the third-last syllable (ante-penultimate) if the penultimate is “light,” i.e., has a short vowel followed by one consonant only, e.g., *váēnahi*, *barámahi*; 3) stress the fourth-last syllable if the antepenultimate and penultimate are both light, but put a secondary stress on the penultimate, e.g., *á̇huràhe*, *yázamàide*.

It is also possible that some words still had the accent on the final syllable, as in Old Indic, e.g., *á̇pō* but *apó*.

Note that a final *-ə* does not count as a syllable. The vowel sequences *ai*, *ei*, *au*, *ou* count as short vowels (*aⁱ*, *eⁱ*, *a^u*, *o^u*). Double *ii* and *uu* either count as single consonants *i* and *u* or as vowel + consonant *ij* and *uu*.

PUNCTUATION

In the Avestan manuscripts every word—and sometimes parts of words—are separated by a period. Sentences are usually marked by a triangular group of three dots (∴) or other decorative marks.

PRONUNCIATION

Following are some guidelines to the pronunciation of Avestan.

1. Vowels.

Note that the vowels should be pronounced “cleanly,” as in Italian or Spanish, rather than as in English.

letter	example	approximate pronunciation
<i>a</i>	<i>apō</i>	Span. <i>gato</i> ; Eng. <i>cart</i> or <i>cut</i> ; Germ. <i>Katze</i> .
<i>ā</i>	<i>āpō</i>	Eng. <i>car</i> or <i>bath</i> (not Amer. Eng.); Germ. <i>Lade</i> .
<i>aē</i>	<i>baēuuarə</i>	Span. <i>baile</i> ; Eng. <i>bite</i> ; Germ. <i>kein</i> .
<i>ao</i>	<i>gaoš</i>	Span. <i>causa</i> ; Eng. <i>cow</i> ; Germ. <i>Haus</i> .
<i>i</i>	<i>pīta</i>	Span. <i>hijo</i> ; Eng. <i>feet</i> ; Germ. <i>bitte</i> .
<i>ii</i>	<i>maīia</i>	Span. (not Amer.) <i>mayo</i> , Amer. Span. <i>pollo</i> ; Eng. <i>layout</i> .
<i>ī</i>	<i>vīspe</i>	Eng. <i>feed</i> ; Germ. <i>lies</i> .
<i>u</i>	<i>uṛa</i>	Span. <i>gusto</i> ; Eng. <i>foot</i> ; Germ. <i>Lust</i> .

¹ In the Bavarian pronunciation of Bartholomae German *w* was a bilabial similar to [β], so it could not be used for the labiodental *v*.

LESSON 1

- aši- f.: reward; Aši, goddess of the rewards
ašiio, nom. sing. of ašiiia-: who is in charge of rewards (and punishments); standing epithet of Sraoša
Ažim Dahākəm, acc. sing. of Aži- Dahāka-: Azhi Dahaka, name of a giant dragon (Pers. Aždahā or Zohhāk)
ā: (up) to (+ acc.)
āa: then
āfš, nom. sing. of āp-/ap-
āp-/ap- f.: water
āpō, nom. plur. of āp-/ap-
baraiti < bara- √bar: he carries
darəγəm, acc. sing. m. of darəγa-: long
daχiiunəm, gen. plur. of daγhu- f.: land
druua, nom. plur. of druuā-: sound, healthy
haņjamanəm, nom.-acc. sing. of haņjamana- n.: assembly
haņti < ah-: (they) are
huuəθβa-: who has good herds; standing epithet of Yima
jana: < jan(a)- √jan/γn: smote, struck, smashed, killed
jaņta, nom. sing. of jaņtar-: smiter, striker, smasher
Jāmāspa, voc. sing. of Jāmāspa-: Djamaspa; person figuring in the legends of Zarathustra.
Jāmāspō, nom. sing. of Jāmāspa-
maniiuš, nom. sing. of maniiu-: mental force, inspiration; traditionally translated as spirit (see Lesson 2)
mašiiā-: man, mortal man
mašiiō, nom. sing. of mašiiā-
mazdaiiasna, nom. plur. of mazdaiiasna-: someone who sacrifices to (believes in) Ahura Mazdā;
Mazdaiiasnian, Mazdean
maθrəm, acc. sing. of maθra-: poetic thought (expressed in words)
Miθrəm, acc. sing. of Miθra-: solar deity, god of contracts and agreements (see Lesson 2)
nauuāzəm, acc. sing. of nauuāza-: ship's captain
Pāurum, acc. sing. of Pāuruua-
Pāuruua-: name of a ship's captain tossed up into the air by Thraetaona (Θraētaona) but saved by Arəduuī
Sura Anāhita
Pourušāspa, voc. sing. of Pourušāspa-: name of the legendary father of Zarathustra; lit. having/with grey
horses
spənta, nom. plur., spəntəm, acc. sing. of spənta-: "life-giving, (re)life-giving," literally "swollen (with
fertility, etc.)." The term is traditionally translated as "beneficial" (also "incremental") or even "holy";
fundamental concept in Mazdaiism: the quality of those who, like Ahura Mazdā, keep or reestablish the
cosmos in/to its pristine state
spəništō, superlative, nom. sing. m. of spənta-: most life-giving
Spitama, voc. sing. of Spitāma-: of the Spitāmas, Spitamid; (probably) family designation of Zarathustra
Sraoša-: name of a god personifying one's readiness to listen to the gods and the gods' to humans
sura- (sūra-): rich in life-giving strength
šiiāoθna, nom.-acc. plur. of šiiāoθna- n.: deed, act, action
tacaiti < taca- < √tak: flows
ta: , nom.-acc. sing. n. of ta-: that
taxma-: firm, enduring, steadfast, brave
tbaēšah- n.: hostility, evil
tkaēša-: guidance
Θraētaona-: Thraetaona, name of dragon-slaying hero (Pers. Feridun)
upa.taca: < upa-taca- √tak: came running
uua, f.n. uiiē: both
vaγhu-, vohu-: good; good thing
vaγ^hhi, nom. sing. of vaγ^hhī- f. of vaγhu-: good
vifra, nom. sing. of vifra-: smart
vifrō, nom. sing. of vifra-

LESSON 1

vifrō.təməm, acc. sing. of vifrō.təma-, superlative of vifra-: smartest
vispa-: all

vohu, nom.-acc. sing. and plur. n. of vaṇhu-: good

xšaētō, nom. sing. of xšaēta-: radiant(?); standing epithet of Yima

xšaiiata < xšaiia-: he ruled

x^varāmahi < x^vara- √x^var: we eat

x^varəθa- n.: food

yauuaṭ: as long as

yāna- n.: a boon (that is requested)

yāsa- √yā: to request

yāsāmi < yāsa-: I request (am requesting)

Yima-: Yima, proper name; the first king and builder of a fortress (vara-) to preserve species of the good
creation during a devastating winter

yō, nom. sing. of ya-: who

zaoθrā-: libation

zruuan-, zruuān-, zrun-: time