



# IRAN VIII. PERSIAN LITERATURE (1) PRE-ISLAMIC

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## IRAN

### viii. PERSIAN LITERATURE

#### (1) Pre-Islamic Literature

#### (2) Classical Persian Literature.

#### (3) Modern Persian Literature.

#### (1) Pre-Islamic Literature

Until the late Sasanian period, pre-Islamic Iran was mainly an oral society. As a result, Iranian “literature” was for a long time essentially of oral nature as far as composition, performance, and transmission are concerned. Many products of this oral type of literature (whether in verse or in prose) have thus not survived to the present day or were committed to writing only many centuries after their original composition. In these circumstances, the art of the court singers flourished from the first bards (Greek *ōidoí*) who exalted the courage of Cyrus the Great at the Median court of Astyages (Dinon, apud Athenaios, *Deipnosophistai* [q.v.] XIV 633c-d) until the *gōsān* (q.v.) of the



Parthian and Sasanian periods. A change of literary taste and a preference for the work of writing poets was brought about at the time of the Arab conquest.

In the early times of the Persian empire, writing was used almost exclusively for reasons of prestige in royal inscriptions or for practical purposes of administrative and economic order. It thus remained for centuries a privilege of the various scribes at the service of the dominant class or the clergy. Although writing had of course been known in Persia before the time of the Achaemenids—it may be recalled that the verb OPers. *nipaištānaiy* “write” is of Median origin, as is shown by the consonantal cluster *št*, but no records written in that language are extant: the Old Persian version of the great inscription of Darius I at Bisotun (q.v.) is the first dateable text ever to have been written in an Iranian language (519 B.C.E.). It is not until the 3rd century C.E. that works of religious content came to be written down, when Mānī was the first religious teacher in Persia to recognize the importance and force of the written word.

Because of the oral character of pre-Islamic Iranian literature and the restricted use of writing, little of what has come down to us in written form can therefore be considered to be literature in its narrow sense as belles-lettres.

*Old Persian literature.* Old Persian literature is restricted to the inscriptions in cuneiform script, which were a privilege of the Achaemenid Great Kings (see [EPIGRAPHY](#) i). With the partial exception of the Bīsotūn inscription, they are not narrative documents but pursue an ideological purpose in that they celebrate the power of the Great King. Except for that one inscription, Achaemenid royal inscriptions are therefore largely “timeless,” which explains why the inscriptions of Xerxes I are so often interchangeable with those of his father Darius, or why the so-called *daivā* inscription (XPh) against the false divinities does not refer to a particular historical event but is actually a programmatic declaration. Most of the inscriptions come from the center of the empire (Persia, Elam, Media); more than half date from the reigns of Darius I (522-486) or Xerxes I (486-465); and, until the time of Artaxerxes I (465-424), many are trilinguals (written in Old Persian, Elamite, Neo-Babylonian, in hierarchical order).

*The Avesta* (q.v.). Like the theogonies (*theogoníai*) recited by the magi according to Herodotus (1.132), the Avesta was orally composed, and its genesis took place over a long period of time. The language in which it was



composed belongs to the Eastern Iranian group, though it remains impossible to localize the region(s) of its creation. Two chronologically and dialectally different variants can nevertheless be distinguished: Old Avestan (or Gāthic), the language of the 5 metric *gāθās* attributed to Zaraθuštra, the *Yasna Haptaŋhāiti*, and some short prayers, all of which are hypothetically dated around the turn of the 2nd to the 1st millennium B.C.E. All other texts (*Wisprad*, *Xorda Avesta*, *Sīrōza*, *Yašts*, and *Wīdēwdād*), composed in Younger Avestan, are of more recent date, while their linguistic and stylistic qualities differ substantially. The oldest and better parts of the *Yašts* may well have been composed around the beginning of the Achaemenid era. For many centuries, the Avesta was orally transmitted, and the writing down of the “canonized” text seems to have taken place in the Sasanian period, though for linguistic and historical reasons presumably not before the 6th century. (Kellens, 1998, pp. 482-83, now proposes a date no earlier than the reign of Husraw [Kosrow] II, 590-629 C.E.) The by now almost general assumption that the extant written corpus represents only about one-fourth of the original Avesta is at best an educated guess.

*Parthian literature.* Parthian literary remains from the Arsacid period are almost non-existent. Inscriptions are few and short (see [EPIGRAPHY i](#)), since the use of Aramaic and Greek was still frequent at that time; all longer Parthian inscriptions actually date from the early Sasanian period, when the first kings of the new dynasty chose to incorporate a Parthian version in their trilingual or bilingual inscriptions. Mainly due to the oral character of Parthian literature, both religious and secular, no work of literary value survives from the Arsacid period, though secondary Middle Persian redactions, as well as tertiary Persian and Georgian versions of those, do give us an indirect impression of what was lost. Thus, a fragment of the Kayanian epic cycle survives in the *Ayādgār ī Zarērān* (q.v.) or “Memorial of Zarēr.” This heroic poem, transmitted in a late post-Sasanian Middle Persian redaction (perhaps of the 9th century), is undoubtedly of Parthian origin, as can be seen from the use of Parthian words and expressions. It relates the exploits of the Iranian hero Zarēr in the confrontation of the Iranians under King Wištāsp with King Arjāsp and his Xiyonians. A number of passages were later taken over almost word for word in the *Šāh-nāma*. Another work of Parthian origin that has come down to us in a Persian version of the 11th century and a Georgian version of the 13th century is the romance of *Vis o Rāmin*, which relates the story of Rāmin’s love for the wife of his brother, King Mōbad. Finally, wisdom literature is represented by the *Draxt ī asūrīg* (q.v.) or “The



Babylonian Tree,” another Middle Persian poem of Parthian origin, in which the contest between a palm tree and a goat may be interpreted as an allegory on the superiority of pastoral life over agriculture. The bulk of Parthian literature was written after the Arsacid period, however, and is of Manichean content. It dates from the 3rd to 10th centuries, reaching its peak between the 4th and 6th centuries. The latest texts show less literary merit, since they were composed by Sogdian speakers, at a time when Parthian had become a dead, church language. Relatively few texts have survived to the present day (see, most recently, Tremblay, 2001, p. 220); however, among them one might mention, in particular, the hymn cycles *Huyadag-mān* “Fortunate for us” and *Angad Rōšnān* “Rich in light,” both named after the first words of the text and attributed to Mānī’s disciple Mār Ammō (and thus dateable in the latter part of the 3rd century).

*Middle Persian literature.* Other than legends on coins and seals, as well as private and business letters, economic documents, and administrative records on ostraca and papyri, Middle Persian literature encompasses fragments of a manuscript of the Psalter and a number of inscriptions up to the 11th century, but above all an important corpus of writings in Book Pahlavi script (mostly of religious content) and of Manichean texts.

The manuscript from Bulayīq (see below) with a Middle Persian translation of the *Psalter* was probably written no earlier than the 7th century, though the original text itself presumably dates from the 5th century. Although Middle Persian continued to be used in private inscriptions from India and Māzandarān as late as the 11th century, the most important and longer inscriptions date from the 3rd century (see [EPIGRAPHY i](#)). These include the trilingual inscription (Middle Persian, Parthian, Greek) of Šābuhr I (241-72) on the [Ka’ba-ye Zardošt](#) at Naqš-e Rostam, the bilingual (Middle Persian, Parthian) inscription of Narseh in Pāikuli, and the four Middle Persian inscriptions of the Mazdean (Zoroastrian) high priest Kerdīr, all of which show a number of interesting parallels with the Old Persian inscriptions of the Achaemenids.

The mostly severely damaged Manichean manuscripts discovered in the early decades of the 20th century in Central Asia are written in a variant of the Palmyrene script and deal with religious matters. Apart from the one work written in Middle Persian and entitled *Šābuhragān*, in which Mānī summarized his teachings in order to convince the Sasanian king of kings Šābuhr I of his new religion, all his works were presumably written in his Aramaic dialect. The latest dateable Middle Persian Manichean text is in prose



and was written in the second quarter of the 9th century: it is the introduction by a Sogdian author to a hymn-book (M 1) composed at Qarašahr between 825 and 832. Other texts include hagiographic and dogmatic prose writings as well as fragments of Manichean church history, homilies, prayers, and the translation of two Christian apocryphal works, the “Shepherd of Hermas” (see [HERMAS, SHEPHERD OF](#)) and the “Book of Henoah” (see [ENOCH, BOOKS OF](#)). The major part of Middle Persian Manichean texts, however, is comprised of versified hymns, among which one might mention the *Gōwišn īg Grīw Zīndag* “Hymn of the Living Soul” and the *Gōwišn īg Grīw Rōšn* “Hymn of the Light Soul.”

Middle Persian literature (see Tavadia, 1956, now superseded by Cereti, 2001, who also offers long excerpts in translation) other than Manichean includes first of all a word-for-word translation of the Avesta (even faithfully rendering Avestan syntax, which results in a clumsy, not to say at times obscure, Middle Persian version), accompanied by a Middle Persian commentary. The whole is called *Zand* “Understanding,” and priests made no distinction between the two parts, learning both of them by heart. In post-Sasanian times, as knowledge of the Avestan language dwindled, compilations relating to particular themes became increasingly popular. One such work is the *Bundahišn* (q.v.) or “Creation” (compiled in the 9th century), also called *Zand-āgāhīh* “Knowledge from the Zand”; this work exists in a shorter Indian recension along with a longer Iranian version. It deals with Zoroastrian cosmology and the creation of the world and much else. By far the most voluminous compilation, however, is another 9th-century work called *Dēnkard* (q.v.) or “Book of the Religion,” which on its own represents about one-fourth of Middle Persian literature. It is an encyclopedic work of Zoroastrian knowledge in nine volumes, written in a tortuous and dry style. The sixth book offers an anthology of wise sayings, the seventh a sort of universal history, including the fullest legend of the life of Zaratuštra, and the eighth a summary of the original Avesta. Yet another work offering excerpts from the Avesta and its commentary was compiled in the late 9th century by a man named Zādspram, son of Gušn-Jam (or Juvānjam?), and therefore called *Wizīdagīhā ī Zād-spram* “Selections of Zādspram.” This anthology deals with several themes, such as the creation of the world and the formation of man, legends about Zaratuštra, and the final Restoration of the world. Since the text is the work of a single man, it suffers less from repetitions than the two previous works. The *Škand-Gumānīg-Wizār*, the “Doubt-destroying Exposition” is a further 9th-century work which stands somewhat apart from the others: in an elevated but clear style, it exposes Zoroastrian



beliefs and polemically criticizes other religions, in particular Islam, Judaism, Christianity, and Manicheism. It survived in Sanskrit and Pāzand (i.e., Middle Persian transcribed in Avestan characters) redactions, and corruptions are numerous.

Among the many other later religious writings of didactic or normative character, the following may be briefly mentioned: the *Dādestān ī Mēnōg ī Xrad* (q.v.) “Judgements of the Spirit of Wisdom,” the *Dādestān ī Dēnīg* (q.v.) “Religious judgements” and the Pahlavi *Rivayāt* accompanying it, the three “Letters of Manuščihr,” and the short treatises *Šāyast nē-Šāyast* “Allowed and not-allowed” and *Čim ī Kustīg* “Reasons for the sacred girdle.” Visionary and apocalyptic works include the *Ardā Wirāz -nāmag* “Book of the Righteous Wirāz,” a popular prose work in simple style relating the visions of heaven and hell by the righteous Wirāz; the *Zand ī Wahman Yasn* “Interpretation of the Wahman Yašt,” a prophecy on the fate of Iran till the end of time; the *Jāmāsp-nāmag* “Book of (the seer) Jāmāsp,” another prophecy, later incorporated as the sixteenth chapter in the *Ayādgār ī Jāmāspīg* “Memoirs of Jāmāsp” (which survived only in Pāzand and Persian versions). Wisdom literature constitutes another rich genre, cultivated by the Zoroastrian priests in the *andarz* (q. v.) “precept” texts, such as the *Pand-nāmag ī Zardušt* “Book of advice of Zardušt” and the *Čīdag Andarz ī Pōryōtkēšān* “Collection of precepts of the ancient teachers,” or in riddle-texts like the *Mādayān ī Jōšt ī Friyān* “Book of Jōšt ī Friyān,” which is about the Zoroastrian Jōšt who resolves all riddles propounded by the sorcerer Axt (q.v.).

Few secular Middle Persian works have survived. Apart from those already mentioned above that are actually translations of older Parthian originals, they include the legendary history of the *Kār-nāmag ī Ardaxšīr ī Pābagān* “Book of the deeds of Ardašīr, son of Pābag” and similar (but lost) works; these finally found their way into the (also lost) *Xwadāy-nāmag* “Book of Kings” in the late Sasanian period. Of the numerous lawbooks that must have existed, only one lengthy work composed at the late Sasanian period survives: it is the *Mādayān ī Hazār Dādestān* “Book of a Thousand Judgements.” Rather than being a systematic legal code, it discusses a number of actual or hypothetical cases (concerning marriage [see [FAMILY LAW](#)], inheritance [q.v.], property, rents, trade, etc.), Further secular works are the *Šāhrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr* “Cities of Iran,” a catalogue of the chief cities of Iran with their legendary or actual founders; the *Abdīh ud Sahīgīh ī Sēstān* “Wonders and remarkable features of Sīstān,” obviously the only Middle Persian text composed outside of



Pārs; the *Wizārišn ī Čatrang* “The explanation of chess”; the *Husraw ī Kawādān ud Rēdak-ē* “Husraw, son of Kawād, and a page,” which gives a vivid picture of courtly luxury at the time of Husraw I in the form of a series of questions asked by the king and answered by his page (the topics dealt with concern food, wine, musical instruments, scents, flowers, women, riding animals, etc.). Finally, two important political treatises written at the time of Husraw I survive only in an Arabic (the “Testament of Ardašīr”) and a Persian (the “Letter of Tansar”) translation.

No doubt, Middle Persian literature must have been much richer still, as can be deduced from the numerous Arabic translations and Persian adaptations of lost Middle Persian works. Their loss can be explained by the religious fanaticism of Mazdean priests who may have destroyed all nonconformist literature, by the obliteration of Middle Persian literature, first after the conquest of Iran by the Arabs (though admittedly many works were not written down before the 9th or 10th centuries) and later after the invasions of the Mongols, as well as by the gradual falling into oblivion of the difficult Pahlavi script caused by the generalized use of Arabic script.

*Eastern Iranian literature.* For the sake of completeness, Bactrian, Sogdian, Chorasmian, and Khotanese literatures are also rapidly dealt with here, although they mostly exceed the chronological limit of the pre-Islamic period.

Apart from the short legends on coins and seals, as well as the inscriptions already known from the mid-1950s onward (altogether not exceeding 100 lines; see [EPIGRAPHY i](#)), *Bactrian* epigraphy was enriched about a decade ago by the discovery in 1993 of an important inscription of 23 lines in the Rabāṭak region, on the western border of the modern Afghan province of Baḡlān (Sims-Williams and Cribb, 1996; Sims-Williams, 1998). Like the previously known monumental inscription from Sorḡ Kotal of comparable length, the new inscription makes mention of the Kushan King Kaniška I and his official Nukunzuk. It is of the utmost importance from a historical point of view, in that it led to a fundamental reassessment of early Kushan chronology and because of the remarkable similarity of some expressions in it to formulas known from Achaemenid and Sasanian inscriptions. An even more sensational discovery concerns a series of over 100 documents on leather, cloth, and wooden slips found in northern Afghanistan. They include letters (some of them still sealed at the time of their discovery), lists, and accounts, as well as legal documents such as marriage and sale/purchase/loan contracts, deeds of gift or manumission, and receipts (Sims-Williams, 1996; partially



published in idem, 2000). Many of them are dated after a Bactrian era perhaps starting in 233 C.E. and thus seem to belong to a period between 342 and 781 C.E. Special mention must be made of a still partially unpublished single leaf of a manuscript in Manichean script in the Berlin Turfan Collection (M 1224), which contains a fragment of a homily in Bactrian or in a language closely related to it.

*Sogdian* literature is comparatively rich and includes—apart from a limited number of secular texts—an important quantity of Buddhist, Manichean, and Christian texts (on the whereabouts of Sogdian manuscripts and the state of publication of Sogdian literature in general, see the most recent and detailed survey by Tremblay, 2001, pp. 196-219). The earliest written documents are coin legends from the 2nd century C.E., but the first longer texts are the so-called Ancient Letters (q.v.), discovered in the Chinese frontier wall between Dunhuang and Loulan, and they are assumed to have been written in the early 4th century. The Sogdian graffiti discovered about a decade ago in northern Pakistan and written in a ductus similar to that of the Ancient Letters are scarcely later in date. More Sogdian inscriptions have been found as far as Kirgizia, Mongolia, and Ladakh. Together with the Ancient Letters, the documents from Mount Muğ, including letters, administrative, economic, and legal documents, are among the most important secular writings; they were saved from the Arabs by Dēwāštīč (q.v.), the last ruler of Panjikant, around 722 C.E. Other texts of non-religious nature comprise a few medical fragments and especially a fragment of 44 lines of the Rustam epic cycle. A unique Mazdean fragment contains an Old Sogdian version of the *Ašam vohū* prayer.

Few Buddhist texts (Utz, 1978, Yoshida, 1991) are complete, but some of the writings found at Dunhuang extend to several hundred lines. Most of them were translated from Chinese, more rarely from Indian originals. From a literary point of view, the *Vessantara Jātaka* is stylistically the most developed and may be one of the few original Buddhist Sogdian compositions; although based on a Chinese model, it is rather a retelling than a mere translation. With the exception of some twenty fragments, the majority of Manichean texts (for the most part extremely fragmentary) are in the German Turfan Collection in Berlin (for a full survey of published Manichean fragments, see Lieu, 1998, pp. 207-37). Many works are in fact translations from Parthian and Middle Persian hymns, though there also exists a considerable number of original Sogdian prose texts. Subjects cover a wide range and encompass church history, cosmology, stories and parables, confessional texts, calendar tables, letters,



lists, and glossaries. Christian literature comes almost exclusively from the site of the Nestorian monastery of Bulayīq, north of Turfan, and all manuscripts with very few exceptions are in the German Turfan Collection in Berlin (a full and accurate catalogue is unfortunately still lacking; for the time being, see the overview in Sims-Williams, 1991). Christian Sogdian texts are usually translations of known Syriac originals, a fact that often allows the identification of even small fragments. In addition to biblical texts, the literary genres represented vary from homilies, hagiographic literature, apophthegmata, and commentaries to poems.

Old *Chorasmian* material (for an overview see [EPIGRAPHY i](#) and [CHORASMIA iii](#)) from the pre-Islamic period consists of coin legends, short inscriptions on vessels and ossuaries, as well as mostly unpublished documents on wood and leather dated after an unknown era, all of which have historical and linguistic, but no literary, value. Late Chorasmian is known primarily from the interlinear glosses in al-Zamaḡsari's (1075-1144) encyclopedia *Mo-qaddemmat al-adab* written in a manuscript of the 12th century from Konya, and also from quotations from the 13th-century lawbooks *Qonyat al-monya* by al-Zāhedī and the slightly older *Yatimat al-dahr* by at-Tarjōmānī, as well as from the *Resāla*, a glossary of the words occurring in those works as well as some other material.

*Khotanese* literature dates from the 7th to 10th centuries and is extremely rich, while *Tumshuqese* remains—the oldest document being the so-called *Karmavācanā* text—are more scanty (for the most recent and detailed survey of the extensive Khotanese material, see [BUDDHISM iii](#) and Emmerick, 1992). The Khotanese documents were found mainly at the sites of Buddhist monasteries within the former kingdom of Khotan as well as in the caves of Dunhuang. Khotanese texts are almost exclusively of Buddhist nature, mostly translations from Sanskrit. Moreover, many works have a Chinese, Tibetan, or Sanskrit parallel text. One of the oldest texts and the longest single Khotanese poem extant is a didactic poem dealing with various aspects of Buddhism, called the “Book of Zambasta” after the official who ordered it to be written. Other works include medical treatises, letters, *jātakas* and *avadānas*, secular lyric poems, etc. There are also a few inscriptions on wood as well as some legends on wall paintings.



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