

History of the Persian Language in the East (Central Asia)

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In pursuit of this quest we must first examine the origins of the Persian language. It began as the dialect of the Persian tribes settled in the southwestern part of the Iranian plateau, and especially the dialect of the clan of the Achaemenids who founded an empire in the sixth century B. C. For more than two centuries Persian was the spoken language of the rulers of the vast empire, and the upper classes of many other Iranian peoples, as well as non-Iranian peoples, learned the language. This contributed to the breakdown of the complicated grammatical structure of Persian, as we know from the inscriptions written by the Achaemenids, and which we today call Old Persian. Even though only a small number of inscriptions have been found the disappearance or falling together of noun cases, such as the dual number, and verbal forms such as conditional clauses, reveal the progressive simplification of the language. The use of Persian by non-Persian speakers contributed to this simplification, as well as the introduction of foreign words into Persian, especially from Aramaic, which was the *lingua franca* of the empire.

It is generally agreed that by the end of the Achaemenid Empire in 330 B. C. the Persian language had reached the Middle Persian stage, but this cannot be proved because of the nature of writing systems which

conceal the pronunciation of words. As a matter of fact, as far as we know, the cuneiform system of writing of Old Persian was only used for royal inscriptions, while ordinary writing was in the Aramaic language with an Aramaic alphabet. Already in Assyrian empire of the seventh century B C. Aramaic had become the means of communication and accounts, and when the Achaemenids became the heirs of the Assyrian Empire they adopted the existing general system of writing in Aramaic. When the Achaemenid ruler wished to send an order to all parts of the empire he would speak in Persian to a scribe who would translate and write the message in Aramaic. Messengers would go to Egypt and deliver the message to a scribe who would then translate it and speak the message in an Egyptian language. Other messengers would go to the satrapy or province of Sind (called Hindu- in Old Persian) where a scribe would translate the message and speak it in an Indian tongue. Likewise a messenger would go to Samarkand and give the document to a scribe who would translate it into the Sogdian language. This was the way that messages were sent throughout the empire, which had many languages.

With the coming of Greek as the language of rulers and bureaucracy the old system continued as a parallel to Aramaic. But scribes in Parsa or Fars began to insert Persian words into their Aramaic texts, or add Persian endings to an Aramaic word, and thus the system known as Huzvaresh for Middle Persian began to develop. This system of writing meant that a word would be written in Aramaic but would be read as Persian, thus '*hdwn*' meaning 'to take or hold' in Aramaic would be read in Persian as *grift*. Later, Persian endings would be added to the Aramaic root, thus '*hdwntn*' to be read as *griftan*. In Central Asia scribes also began to insert local words into the Aramaic texts, for example Sogdian in Samarkand. In eastern Iran,

the Achaemenid satrapy of Parthia or present Khurasan, scribes added Parthian words to the Aramaic, or they put Parthian grammatical endings on Aramaic words, just as the scribes in Fars did the same with Persian. The spoken languages, however, had few Aramaic words, although gradually an exchange of various Iranian words and phrases entered the local tongues, as it did also with Persian.

So the Seleucid rulers of Iran continued the same practice as the Achaemenid emperors. The former would issue orders in Greek to a Greek scribe or to a local scribe who usually knew Greek as well as Aramaic. The message would be sent to various parts of the empire where scribes would translate the contents in a local language. So a double bureaucracy existed using both the Greek and the Aramaic languages. When the Parthian rulers replaced the Seleucids they continued the double bureaucracy, but as time passed Greek declined everywhere except in one area, Bactria.

The reason why Greek flourished in Bactria was the existence of many colonies of Greeks and Macedonians settled by the Seleucids to protect their eastern frontiers. Those Greeks were numerous enough to establish a Greco-Bactrian kingdom after the Seleucids left Iran. The Greek language replaced Aramaic in Bactria as the written language of government and bureaucracy.

About the year 150 B.C. the situation was as follows: In Fars people were writing in broken Aramaic or Huzvaresh, but speaking Persian in a Middle Persian form or in dialects of Persian. In northern Iran, former Media and Khurasan, the official language was Parthian, also written in a Huzvaresh form, but many dialects were spoken here. In Bactria the written language was Greek but again various Iranian dialects were spoken. In Central Asia Sogdian dialects were spoken but the written language was a

form of Huzvaresh. It is necessary to explain the different kinds of languages in use in these regions.

Long ago I have proposed a scheme of different languages used at any one time and place. First is the 'official' written language, second is the 'official' spoken language; third is the religious language and fourth are spoken dialects. As an example we may take Babylon, Persepolis, Ecbatana or Hamadan and Samarqand in the time of Darius, in the first century and in the third century to see what changes occurred. The results may be presented in a table.

In none of the above do all four languages coincide, since in the ancient world writing was almost a monopoly of scribes and/or religious leaders. It seems that the development of the writing of defective Aramaic, in the Parthian and Middle Persian languages of the early Sasanian period of the third century, was not a steady progression; rather at some time in the second century of the common era the Parthian government instituted a change in writing from defective Aramaic to Parthian, with remnants of Aramaic words pronounced as Parthian. The Parthian alphabet was a modified form of Aramaic but the majority of words were written in Parthian, although a few Aramaic words were retained in the form of Huzvaresh. We may assume that a similar change occurred in Fars with the rise of the Sasanians, when Aramaic gave way to Persian with some Aramaic words as Huzvaresh. Unfortunately the second century is a blank period with no written remains from Iran to show the change in language which happened. All the time Parthian words were entering the Persian language of Fars, but with the coming of Ardashir Papakan Persian now became both the 'official' written and the spoken language of the Sasanian

Empire. For more than four centuries the Persian language in its Middle Persian form spread throughout Iran and into neighboring lands. Also the various scribes of government and bureaucracy, scribes of priests and religious folk, as well as scribes for merchants and ordinary people, now became united in a standardization of language usage under the Sasanians.

In Bactria and Central Asia, however, local languages flourished while Persian slowly became a language of merchants engaged in long distance trade. In Bactria, the area of the Hindukush Mountains, as well as the regions extending to the plains of India, in the second century the Bactrian language became the written tongue of the Kushans under their most famous ruler Kanishka. His dates of rule are uncertain, but he lived at the beginning of the second century and, similar to Darius the Achaemenid, he ordered the Bactrian language to be written in a new modified Greek alphabet. Thus Bactrian became the only Iranian language written in the Greek alphabet, and it continued to be used in villages in the Hindukush mountains until the eleventh century. With the Sasanian conquest of Bactria, on both sides of the Amu Darya south of the Hissar mountain range in 558, however, The Persian language became the official language of local government. Since the Persian language was simpler in grammar the local people readily learned it. This was the first spread of the Persian language among the common folk, as well as among the members of government, in the east and Central Asia.

North of the Hissar mountains the Sogdians had a flourishing culture based on extensive trade relations with the Turks and with China. The Sogdian alphabet, based on Aramaic, was spread to the Turks and Mongols who modified it to fit their languages. The Sogdians had colonies along the ‘Silk Road’ to China, and even in Chang-an, present Xian, the capital of

Tang dynasty China, many Sogdians could be found. Likewise the Khwarazmians traded with many peoples in Russia, especially with the Bulgars on the Volga River. So at the beginning of the Arab conquests in Central Asia, in the middle of the seventh century, the linguistic situation in eastern Iran and Central Asia can be presented in a manner similar to the earlier one.

1. Official written language;
2. official spoken language;
3. religious language;
4. dialects
5. language of trade

In Bukhara and Samarkand 1. Sogdian; 2. Sogdian; 3. Avestan for Zoroastrians, Syriac for Christians, and Parthian for Manichaeans; 4. Sogdian dialects; 5. Sogdian and Persian.

In Bactria 1. Persian; 2. Persian; 3. Avestan for Zoroastrians, Sanskrit or a Prakrit for Buddhists.; 4. Bactrian dialects; 5. Persian.

In Khwarazm 1. Khwarazmian; 2. Khwarazmian; 3. Avestan for Zoroastrians and Syriac for Christians; 4. Khwarazmian dialects; 5. Khwarazmian and Sogdian.

Farther to the East in the southern Tarim basin of western China another Iranian language was in use, called Khotanese Saka by linguists. This had been brought to the region of Khotan and Karashahr by a migration of Sakas, probably in the second century B.C. when many nomads were in migration. Since the population of this region followed the Buddhist religion, their basic religious language was Sanskrit, while Sogdian probably was their language of trade. The Saka language was written and spoken in the southern oases, but Chinese was used when Chinese control of the oases happened, as it was at the beginning of the Tang dynasty.

This was the linguistic situation in the east at the time of the coming of the Arabs when changes occurred.

To review the place of the Persian language before the coming of the Arabs, the changes from the beginning to the end of the Sasanian dynasty should be emphasized. In the third century of the common era, the Parthian language, with many dialects, was the principal spoken and written language in northern Iran, extending from Ctesiphon in Mesopotamia to Merv and Herat in the east. In the south Persian, with many dialects, was spoken in Fars province and probably in Kerman, while Semitic languages and dialects, as well as pockets of Elamite dialects in the mountains, were spoken in Khuzistan. In Bactria and the Hindukush mountain area Bactrian, with dialects, was the predominant spoken language, as Sogdian was to the north of the Hissar mountain range, and Khwarazmian in that land to the south of the Aral Sea.

By the seventh century Persian had spread from Khuzistan to Sistan. It had also become the official written and spoken language in the Parthian language area, as well as in Bactria, and it had absorbed many Parthian words in its vocabulary. Parthian dialects were only spoken in villages while Persian replaced Parthian in cities and towns. In Sogdia and Khwarazm Persian had begun to assume the role of a *lingua franca*, especially for merchants. The spoken Persian in northern Iran, however, had become a mixed language, while the same language in Fars, homeland of the Sasanians, retained a more pure Persian character. For example, the word *gap* in the south was *buzurg* in the north. But the Sasanian court early had moved from Fars to Ctesiphon, and northern Iran had assumed more importance than Fars province in the government and bureaucracy of the Sasanians. As a result that dialect of Persian with Parthian elements became

the official spoken language of the Sasanian state. It was called *dari* from *dar-* ‘the court’ as distinguished from *farsi* (*parsig* in Middle Persian) in the south.

It is instructive to compare the remarks of Ibn Muqaffa’ , as found in the *Fihrist* of Ibn Nadim and the *Mafatih al-‘ulum* of Khwarazmi with the above. He wrote that *farsi* was the tongue of mobads and of scholars and was the language of Fars, while *dari* was the language of the royal court, as well as the dialect of Khurasan and the east. The written language of both scholars and mobads and of the court and bureaucracy, however, was what we know as the Pahlavi of Zoroastrian books. Unfortunately the word *pahlavi* has been used differently by various authors at different times. Originally it simply meant Parthian, but in Islamic times it was used by some for Middle Persian (*parsi*) or even for dialects. Ibn Muqaffa’ says that *pahlavi* refers to Fahlav, Isfahan, Ray, Hamadan, Mah Nihavand and Azerbaijan. It is uncertain whether he meant Parthian or Persian, or was he limiting his usage to the written language of the Sasanians. But by the end of the Sasanians such a usage meant the northern dialect of Persian (with many Parthian words) as contrasted with the southern dialect of Persian. It was the northern dialect of Persian that the conquering Arabs adopted as their language of communication with the Iranians they encountered. What happened in the three centuries after the Arab conquests?

In the extended domain of the former Sasanian empire scribes in the bureaucracy continued to use the archaic Pahlavi system of writing, as did the mobads of the Zoroastrians. Those who converted to Islam’ became Arabs’, which meant that they left their former communities and joined the Islamic *ummah* and learned the Arabic language. Under the Umayyad Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik (685-705) Arabic replaced Pahlavi as the official state

language of the Caliphate, although it was not until 742 that the officials and scribes in Khurasan adopted Arabic. Gradually Arabic spread as the literary written language of Iran, while Pahlavi became restricted to Zoroastrians. But the principal spoken language everywhere remained the *dari* dialect of the Sasanians, for even the Arabs had to learn it to communicate with their subjects. When the Muslim armies crossed the Amu Darya into Central Asia the common tongue in the army was *dari* Persian rather than Arabic, since the bulk of the army was composed of *mawali* rather than Arabs. The written language of the army, however, was Arabic and it became the language of administration while Bactrian, Sogdian and Khwarazmian rapidly declined in use.

The linguistic situation in the eastern part of the 'Abbasid Caliphate was similar to northern Europe in the early Middle Ages, where Latin was the written language, still spoken in Italy, but local tongues, German, Slavic languages, etc. were spoken north of the Alps Mountains. Just as the mass of people in northern Europe could not speak or understand Latin, so the common folk in Iran and Central Asia could not understand Arabic. As long as the Islamic religion remained essentially an Arab faith, tied to Bedouin mores and customs it remained restricted to Arabs and their *mawali*, who became the ruling class. It was not until the third century of the *hijra* that Islam began to change.

Two factors brought about a change; one was the great spread of missionary activity among the common folk in the third century of the *hijra*, and the other was the contribution of non-Arabs to the creation of an 'international' learned Islamic religion and culture. The spread of the Islamic religion in the east was started by competition between different branches of Islam, especially the Ismailis of the Fatimid Caliphate of Egypt and the

Sunni establishment of the ‘Abbasid Caliphate as well as the Samanids in Central Asia. Missionaries had to use a language understood by common folk, so Persian became the vehicle of explanation of Islam for the common people.

The second factor is best illustrated by the remarks of Ibn Khaldun, the great sociologist living in Tunis in the fourteenth/ seventh *hijra* century. In his *Muqadimah* to history he wrote:

”It is a remarkable fact that, with few exceptions, most Muslim scholars both in the religious and intellectual sciences have been non-Arabs... Thus the founders of grammar were Sibawaih, and after him al-Farisi and al-Zajjaj. All of them were of Iranian descent. They were brought up in the Arabic language and acquired knowledge of it through their upbringing and through contact with the Arabs. They invented the rules (of grammar) and made it into a discipline for later generations. Most of the *hadith* scholars, who preserved the traditions of the Prophet for the Muslims, were also Iranians, or Persian in language and breeding, because the discipline was widely cultivated in Iraq and regions beyond. Furthermore, all the great jurists were Iranians, as is well known. The same applies to speculative theologians, and to most of the Qur’an commentators. Only the Iranians engaged in the task of preserving knowledge and writing systematic scholarly works. Thus the truth of the statement of the Prophet becomes apparent, ‘If learning were suspended at the highest parts of heaven the Iranians would attain it.’ The intellectual sciences were also the preserve of the Iranians, left alone by the Arabs, who did not cultivate them. They were cultivated by Arabicized Iranians, as was the case with all the crafts, as we stated at the beginning. This situation continued in the cities as long as the Iranian, and the Iranian lands, Iraq, Khurasan and *ma wara-l-nahr*, retained

their sedentary culture. But when those cities fell into ruins, sedentary culture, which God has devised for the attainment of the sciences and the crafts, disappeared from them. “

It is interesting to note that Ibn Khaldun speaks of Iranians, or those of Persian language and breeding, which indicates that the Persian language had been elevated to a par with Arabic since Persian was a tongue of breeding and culture. So the spread of Islam among the masses, and the prestige of Persian speakers in forming an international Islamic civilization, both contributed to the spread of Persian in the east.

It was inevitable that some intelligent Persian speakers would realize that the Arabic alphabet could be employed to write Persian. It happened in the northeast and not in the southwest where the *dari* dialect of Persian had to compete with the *farsi* dialect, and where the line was sharp between the majority of Zoroastrians living in Fars, who used Pahlavi as their written language and the converted Muslims, who used Arabic. In Khurasan and Central Asia, however, Islam had progressed much faster and was dominant almost everywhere. The cleavage between Muslims and non-Muslims was not nearly as pronounced as in Fars. So not only was Islamic culture formed in the east but also the *dari* dialect, written in Arabic characters, produced the first written literature of the New Persian language.

It was not only the *dari* dialect of Persian which was written in a modified Arabic script, but also others saw the advantages of the Arabic alphabet as contrasted with local alphabets derived from Aramaic. Attempts were made to write the Khwarazmian language in Arabic script, and fragments of manuscripts in the Khwarazmian language have survived. Also in Mazanderani we have fragments of texts in that language from the eleventh/sixth century. So the way was opened to languages other than

Arabic to flourish as Islamic languages with literatures but Persian replaced all the local languages.

Although Arabic remained the written language of the bureaucracy not only of the Caliphate but also of the local courts such as the Samanids in Bukhara or vassals of the Samanids in Chaghaniyan and elsewhere, Persian began to be written by poets and prose authors. In the major cities of Central Asia spoken Persian had replaced local languages and dialects by the end of the Samanid dynasty. The flowering of New Persian literature in the east, with poets such as Rudaki, Daqiqi, and of course Firdosi, is well known and needs no discussion here.

Under the rule of the Turkish Qarakhanids in Central Asia Persian replaced Arabic as the written language of the government, and spoken Persian became the preferred language of discourse in cities. In villages gradually Turkish replaced local dialects since Turkish nomads settled down on the land in Central Asia. Although under the Qarakhanids a written Turkic language written in the Arabic or Uighur (derived from Sogdian) alphabets for a short time flourished with such works as the *Qutadgu Bilig*, Persian influence on that literature was evident. From this time Persian remained the literary language of Central Asia until the Timurid period when the dialect of Turkish called Chagatay began to compete with Persian, but it never replaced Persian. Arabic was restricted to religious scholars and savants who wrote about sciences or philosophy.

The history of the spread of the Persian language in India is well known, beginning as the spoken tongue of the armies of the Ghaznavids. Under the Ghurids Persian became both the spoken and written language of the government, and this continued also under later Turkish dynasties. Under the Moghuls, however, because of the large number of Indians recruited into the

armies, the Hindu dialect of the Delhi region began to replace Persian as the language of the army. Many Persian words and expressions were introduced into that language which came to be called Urdu, since it became the language of the army. And just as New Persian literature and poetry began in the Samanid domains of Central Asia rather than in Iran proper, so Urdu literature began in the Deccan in south India where the Moghul armies brought both the Urdu language and the Islamic religion. What is the situation in Central Asia today?

+ - In Uzbekistan the Tajiki dialect of Persian is still spoken in villages to the east of Tashkent and in the Ferghana valley, while it is the preferred language of most inhabitants of Bukhara and Samarkand. In Tajikistan it is the official language and will not vanish in the future. Furthermore, the history of the spread of the Persian language in the farther east went hand in hand with the spread of Islam, and it remains today the second Islamic language for converts to Islam in China, Japan and elsewhere. It will remain a language of culture and prestige in the Indian sub-continent and in the western province of China. So Persian remained the language of culture in the east to the present.

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