

The Avestan Script. Pronunciation & Genesis.

We do not know what Zarathushtra's language was called in his day. 'Avestan' was the name it was given long after Zarathushtra.

The way an Avestan word is pronounced changes its meaning.

So linguists have developed a system of English letters, each of which represents a given letter of the Avestan alphabet. This system is called transliteration, and it enables the accurate pronunciation of Avestan words, which in turn affects their meaning.

For example: *aša-* 'asha' is pronounced by most people with a long first and last 'a' (aashaa). But in GAv., its first *a* is always short. And the final 'a' is long (*ašā*) only in its vocative form 'o truth', and its instrumental form 'with-truth'. Now think of those priests who in chanting Avestan pronounce their words with whatever endings they think sound most sonorous, and you can see that they have materially altered the meanings of the words they are chanting, or are chanting words in a form that is meaningless.

The pronunciation of most Avestan words, (which affects meaning), cannot be conveyed accurately with the standard English (or Gujarati) alphabet.

Until you get used to them, transliterated words can be annoying, irritating, maddening and infuriating (in a crescendo). I agree. But it is the only way of ensuring that we pronounce Avestan words as accurately as the present state of our knowledge allows. So the quickest way to stop the aggravation, is to remember how each transliterated symbol is pronounced. After a while, you will be doing it in your sleep.

The transliteration system I use. Sometimes there are two or more Avestan letters for one sound. For example, there are 3 Avestan letters for the 'sh' sound (each with its own transliteration symbol, *š*, *ṣ*, and *ṣ̄*). To keep things simple, where there are no material pronunciation differences, (and no other reasons), I use just one transliteration symbol one sound (which is what Insler 1975 does), and I do not transliterate Avestan words in a title.¹ However, I usually use *š* for its Avestan letter because it is used in *aša-* ~ the core of Zarathushtra's teachings ~ and because the difference in Avestan can result in a totally different word/meaning. Take for example:

ašī- "(evil) eyes" (Skjaervo 2006);

aši- "reward" (Skjaervo 2006).

So I use the *š* symbol for its Avestan letter (e.g. in *aša-*, *xšaθra-*, *frašō.karaiti-*, *aši-* etc.), but I use the homogenized *š* for all other 'sh' sounds.

To avoid confusion (and the tearing of my hair and yours), when I quote from the works of different linguists, I do not use their transliteration preferences. But when quoting the older generation of scholars (of the late 19th and early 20th centuries), I use their old system of transliteration or its nearest English equivalent (because their quotations are not from Geldner, and I do not know their mss. sources to accurately transliterate their Av. words).











And, lest you think I have just forgotten, there is no Avestan letter for the sound *l* (as in *lollipop*).

The following Avestan letters are from Taraporewala 1951, Beekes 1988,² and the manuscripts J2, K5, and L17. I have written some of the letters by hand because because my Avestan fonts are limited. Combined letters are not shown. For pronunciation I follow Taraporwala³ (who came from a priestly family) although I sometimes use different illustrative examples.

Avestan	Translit.	How pronounced
𐬀	a	short a, pronounced-as in 'fun'
𐬁	ā	long a, as in 'father'
𐬂	ā̃	opinions differ. It is pronounced 'ao' (as in 'wow') according to Taraporewala; ⁴ or 'aw' (as in 'awe' or 'sought') according to Jackson ⁵ and verbal advice from the late Dastur Unvala of Bangalore, but these pronunciations puzzle me because the Avestan letter appears to be a combination (reading from right to left) of ā and ə which would give a sound 'aa-eh', and not 'aao' or 'aw'; perhaps this letter originally was pronounced aa-eh. We just do not know.
𐬃 𐬄	ā̃	nasalized 'a' as in the French 'sans' or in the Gujerati 'kaam' for 'work', or Hindi 'aam' for mango. <i>Are these 2 forms just a handwriting difference ? a different related script arguing an historical genesis for the Av. script? We simply don't know.</i>
𐬅	ə	short e as in 'met'
𐬆	ē	the same sound prolonged as in 'mare'
𐬇 𐬈	e	short as in 'mate'; The different forms are just handwriting differences.
𐬉	ē	the same sound prolonged as in 'bay'
𐬊	i	short as in 'tip'
𐬋	ī	long as in 'deed'
𐬌	o	short as in 'remote'
𐬍	ō	the same sound prolonged as in bowl

𐬀	u	short as in 'pull'
𐬁 𐬂	ū	long 'u' as in 'food'. These 2 Av. letters are 2 different ways of writing the same sound. Generally, a ms. will consistently use one or the other ~ arguing an historical genesis for these 2 different Av. letters.

𐬃	k	as in 'kite'
𐬄 𐬅 𐬆	x	pronounced 'kh' The different forms are just handwriting differences.
𐬇	h	normal 'h' sound;
𐬈	ħ x̣	pronounced as a cross between 'h' and 'kh' (pronounced in the back of the throat). I do not have a font for x̣, so I have to use ħ.
𐬉	xʷ	a 'khv' sound
𐬊	g	hard 'g', as in 'good'
𐬋	γ	'gh' as in 'ghost'
𐬌	c	'ch' as in 'child'
𐬍	j	j as in 'joy'
𐬎 𐬏	t	t as in 'tall'; there is no hard t or soft t in Avestan (as there is in Hindi). Unknown whether this consonant originally was pronounced hard or a soft. These different forms are handwriting differences.
𐬐 𐬑	t̥	't' as in 'hut' ~ not followed by a vowel. It appears at the end of a word (not counting suffixes e.g. <i>hyaṭ</i> , <i>hyaṭcā</i>); or the beginning (<i>tkaēša-</i>). 𐬐 is the form in J2, K5 and L17; 𐬑 is the form shown in Beekes 1988 ⁶ and Tarap. 1951; a handwriting difference? a different script? We do not know.

	<p>θ</p>	<p>th as in 'thin'. There is no hard 'tth' in Av. as there is in Hindi. The different forms are just handwriting differences.</p>
	<p>d</p>	<p>d. There is no hard d or soft d in Avestan, as there is in Hindi. Unknown whether this consonant originally was pronounced hard or a soft.</p>
	<p>δ</p>	<p>'dh' as in 'then'. There is no hard 'ddh' in Gathic as there is in Hindi. The second form is the way the Av. letter is written in ms. L17 ~ a handwriting difference ? a different related script ? We simply don't know.</p>
	<p>n n n</p>	<p>no pronunciation differences, so I just use <i>n</i> for all 3 Av. letters; } <i>n</i> is used when a word starts with 'n', or has 'n' within it. ✠ <i>n</i> is used when the 'n' sound is followed by a consonant (e.g. <i>spənta</i>) ʹ <i>n</i> is used when the 'n' sound is before <i>i</i> or <i>y</i> (Beekes 1988 p. 13-14); arguing an historical genesis for these different letters.</p>
	<p>ŋ ŋ</p>	<p>'ng' as in 'sing' ~ both letters are pronounced the same. ✓ is used before <i>e</i>, as in <i>yeŋhē</i> ; arguing an historical genesis for these different letters.</p>
	<p>p</p>	<p>p</p>
	<p>f</p>	<p>f</p>
	<p>b</p>	<p>'b' as in balloon; There is no letter for 'bh' as in Hindi</p>
	<p>m</p>	<p>'m' sound;</p>
	<p>y</p>	<p>the 'y' sound (as in 'yes') for all 3 letters ~ no pronunciation differences ~ arguing an historical genesis for these different letters. ʹ and ʹ are two different ways of writing 'y' when a word starts with 'y' (initial 'y') ~ an additional argument for an historical genesis. ʹʹ is the Avestan letter for 'y' when it appears within a word (medial 'y').</p>

𐬀	r	r
𐬁	w	'w' / 'wh' as in 'winter' and 'when'.
𐬂 𐬃 𐬄 𐬅	v	v as in victor for all these letters. There are no difference in pronunciation - <i>arguing an historical genesis for these letters.</i> 𐬂 is used for the 'v' sound at the beginning of a word (initial v); 𐬃 is just a different style of handwriting; 𐬄 is a different form for initial v shown by Beekes 1988 - <i>arguing an historical genesis.</i> 𐬅 is used for the v sound when it occurs within a word (medial v).
𐬆 𐬇 𐬈	š	'sh' as in 'shake' All these three Avestan letters are used for the 'sh' sound. There is no difference in pronunciation, so (with some exceptions) I normally use š for these 3 Av. letters. But in Av. they are not used interchangeably <i>arguing an historical genesis for the script.</i> š is used for the 'sh' sound in <i>vahišta-</i> and other words; 𐬇 is used for the 'sh' sound in <i>aša-</i> , <i>xšaθra-</i> and other words; 𐬆 is used when the 'sh' sound is followed by a 'y' (as in <i>šyaodana-</i> 'action');
𐬉 𐬊	s	s as in 'sand'. The 2d letter is simply a clarification of the Av. letter (based on the mss.) which in my font is not too clear.
𐬋	z	'z' as in 'Zarathushtra'
𐬌	ž	'zh' as in 'Zhivago' or French 'jolie'

Genesis of the Avestan Script.

Many scholars have conjectured that Avestan was not a written language in Zarathushtra's day and that the Av. script was invented during Sasanian times to record the corpus of religious songs and chants in a pre-existing ancient language, later called Avestan.⁷

But (with respect) I disagree for at least two reasons ~ there doubtless are more.

First reason: If the Sasanians had invented an alphabet to record Avestan, they would have had no reason to invent 2 or 3 different letters for the same sound, or different letters for the initial and medial letters 'v' and 'y', or different letters for a sound after certain vowels. Nor is an invented alphabet consistent with fact that we have different forms of the same Avestan letters in different

manuscripts, or that certain manuscripts have some rare forms, the values and uses of which are not yet known.⁸

All these facts argue for an historical genesis for Avestan letters ~ originating from perhaps different but related linguistic scripts.

Second reason: There is a well established tradition ~ recorded in multiple Pahlavi texts ~ that writings containing Zarathushtra's teachings and explanations were written down in Zarathushtra's time and in Achaemenian times.

Here are some examples. It is interesting that in the first of these passages, it does not say that the *Gathas* were written down. The *Gathas* were sung. It says that questions put to Zarathushtra, and answers given by him, were written down at the order of Vishtasp (Av. Vishtaspa) who was Zarathushtra's patron king.⁹

"... By asking questions (of him) and by listening (to his answers), the first pupils of this (Zarduxsht) of revered Fravahr (obtained) manifest knowledge and information of the good religion regarding all subjects, in the same way as splendour (is emanated) from a basic light. The sagacious Kay Vishtasp, the exalted ruler, arranged for a basic (text) of those questions (and answers) to be written down. Then he arranged that all the basic (texts) be laid down in the Royal Treasury. Then he gave the order to disseminate properly (written) copies of it. Thereafter he send a copy to the National Archives in order to store the information there." *Dinkard* Vol. 4, Humbach 1991 translation.¹⁰

The following Pahlavi passage tells of the dissemination of these writings.

"When Vishtasp-shah had finished the war with Arjasp, he sent (messages) to the chief rulers regarding the acceptance of the religion, and (he sent) books (taken) from the Mazdayasnian religion, adorned with universal knowledge, ... as an organ of instruction, he sent Magian men instructed in the language along with (them). ...". *Dinkard* Vol. 4, Humbach 1991 translation.

In the next passage, we are told that Jamasp's words about Zarathushtra's teachings were written down by "someone". Jamasp (Av. Jamaspa) was King Vishtaspa's prime minister, who (according to tradition) married Zarathushtra's youngest daughter.

"That which Jamasp had spoken from the teachings of Zardusht and which someone had written down, both Avesta and Zand ~ (all that) had been written with gold(en letters) on cowhide and were kept in the Treasury of the Lords, and the rulers and the religious authorities made additional copies therefrom." *Dinkard* Vol. 5, Humbach 1991 translation.¹¹

With the passage of centuries, these earlier copies had likely deteriorated, to the point where new copies would have been needed, and sure enough, we have an Achaemenian king arranging for more copies ~ in what script we do not know.

"Daray, son of Daray (arranged for) two copies of the entire Avesta and Zand, (just) as Zarduxsht had received them from Ohrmazd, to be written. One of them he ordered to be kept in the Royal Treasury, the other in the National Archives." *Dinkard* Vol. 4, Humbach 1991 translation.¹²

The rock inscriptions of the Achaemenians are in 'Old Persian' which shares an ancestral language with Avestan. Old Persian was written in a cuneiform script. But Old Aramaic was widely used throughout the Achaemenian Empire and had its own script. And the later Middle Persian (Pahlavi) script shows influences of the Imperial Aramaic script, as does the script in surviving Avestan mss.

The Pahlavi *Dinkard* was written after the Arab invasion which resulted in a devastating loss of knowledge, when books were burned and the learned killed. So the author of the above quoted *Dinkard* passage (circa the 9th century CE or later) ~ more than 1,000 years after the fall of the Achaemenians ~ would understandably have been hazy about the order in which the Achaemenian kings reigned.¹³

But setting aside the inaccurate "Daray, son of Daray" (which Humbach thinks was a mistake for Darius I, called 'the Great'), we have repeated passages in Vols. 3, 4 and 5, to the effect that books regarding the religion existed from Zarathushtra's time through Achaemenian times. And there are other passages as well which describe what happened to these texts after the fall of the Achaemenian empire.¹⁴

As Moulton 1912 summarizes it,

"Tradition told how the twenty-one Nasks [Avestan prose texts] were lost in the invasion of Alexander; how the Parthian king Valkhash ... ordered the scattered remnants to be collected; how the founder of the Sassanian dynasty, Ardashir, and his successor Shahpuhr, completed the canon two centuries later." p. 11.

If "scattered remnants" of Avestan texts were collected during Parthian and Sasanian times, some written script would have had to exist before then, to have been scattered and collected, which means that the Sasanians could not have invented a wholesale new script for Avestan. As far as I am aware,¹⁵ none of the Pahlavi texts which describe the Sasanian process of collecting and collating the scattered remnants of texts (and memorized knowledge) say that the Sasanians invented a script for the Avestan language.

The only conclusion (that I can think of) that fits all this evidence, is the following.

It is a fact that written languages were widespread in the Middle East (and elsewhere) before and during Zarathushtra's time, as the footnoted evidence establishes.¹⁶

Based on all the evidence, it would be reasonable to conclude that an Avestan script existed in Zarathushtra's day. But exactly what that Avestan script may have been, we do not know. Scripts (like languages), evolve over time, and can be influenced by, and assimilate, aspects of other languages and scripts, often through the influence of trade and travel.

As Zarathushtra's religion spread, and the centuries rolled by, the script of his day would have evolved. It may have assimilated some letters and features from other scripts, and may have been written somewhat differently in different areas, until the time when Avestan ceased to be a language in every day use, and was preserved only for sacred use (which is exactly what happened to ancient Sumerian).

After the widespread destruction wrought by Alexander (around 331 BCE), many of the writings in Avestan and related languages were destroyed,¹⁷ and with passing generations, knowledge of the

script, grammar and vocabulary of the Avestan language declined. But (thanks to the priests) at least the songs and chants had been preserved because they were memorized and recited as part of the rituals.

So what the Sasanians (around 220 CE ~ more than 500 years from the destruction wrought by Alexander) were able to find in outlying areas, when they attempted to collect the scattered remnants of the Avesta ~ in writing and in memory ~ may not have been sufficient to write down all the surviving words and sounds of the Avestan language. The Sasanians may have had to supplement additional letters for those that had not survived (but were known by sound, because of the memorized recital of the Avesta). To accomplish this collation and writing down of the surviving Avesta would have been a monumental task. And however much we might deplore the high handedness of Tansar,¹⁸ the Sasanian priest who directed this endeavor, without his efforts the Avestan texts we have today would not exist.

I therefore speculate that the 'Avestan' script which exists today is a mix of the script of (or close to) Zarathushtra's day but in a form that evolved over several centuries through and past Achaemenian times, and was supplemented to the extent necessary during the Sasanian collation in around 220 CE, by which time the language itself was no longer in current use (except for sacred purposes).

Is my conclusion also a conjecture? It is. Might it require some adjustment and supplementation, in light of more precise linguistic knowledge? Surely. But as a general proposition, it fits the evidence. The conjecture that the Sasanians invented the Avestan script does not.

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¹ I resolve manuscript differences by simply transliterating the Avestan script as it appears in Geldner unless some other source is specified.

² I have not shown some of Beekes' different Av. letters.

³ Taraporewala 1951 pp. xxii ~ xxv.

⁴ Taraporewala 1951 p. xxii.

⁵ Jackson 1892) pp. 2 - 3.

⁶ Beekes 1988 p. 12.

⁷ Some Zoroastrians who hold the same opinion, point to the fact that the Gathas contain words for 'speech, word, utterance' [*vacah-*, *ux δa-*], 'to speak' [*mrāo-*], to sing [*gar-*] and 'verse' [*afšman-*], but no word for 'to write'. But (with respect) this is not persuasive (let alone conclusive). The Gathas are songs, composed in an era when most of the population was not literate. There would have been no reason to include the verb 'write' or related nouns, in songs. Even today, when literacy is widespread, how many religious or secular songs have the word 'write' in them?

⁸ Beekes 1988 p. 13, states that he has not included a few rare letters "of unknown value" and "of unknown use". And I understand that Professor Malandra has discovered some rare forms of Av. letters (to which I have no access).

⁹ In describing these questions and answers, the author of this Pahlavi quotation could not have been influenced by the later Avestan texts in which Zarathushtra purportedly asks questions and Ahura Mazda

purportedly answers them, because in the Pahlavi quotation it is Zarathushtra's pupils who ask the questions, and Zarathushtra who answers them. A material difference.

¹⁰ Humbach 1991 Vol. 1, p. 51.

¹¹ Humbach 1991 Vol. 1, pp. 51 - 51.

¹² Humbach 1991 Vol. 1, pp. 51.

¹³ There is a Table in *Part Four: Zarathushtra's Date & Place* which shows how inaccurate was the knowledge of the names and order of the Achaemenian kings, the Pahlavi texts following the Arab invasion.

¹⁴ Additional examples are quoted in *Part Four: Loss of Knowledge Before & After Alexander*.

¹⁵ I do not know Pahlavi, and my knowledge of the Pahlavi texts is limited to the translations that appear in Humbach 1991, in SBE, and in the Haug & West translation of the Arda Viraf Namah.

¹⁶ Zarathushtra's date, although not established with certainty could not have been earlier than 2,200 BCE based on archeological and other evidence (discussed in *Part Four: Zarathushtra's Date & Place*).

Before, during, and after that time period many cultures in the Middle East and surrounding areas had written languages ~ their scripts being more than numbers and symbols for various items. Multiple (reputable) internet sources show the following information. The dates given by these sources may vary by a few centuries, because some of them may reflect older archeological dating methods, and others may reflect more reliable recent ones.

Most interesting of all were the Sumerians (4,500 ~ 1900 BCE) who lived east of the Euphrates river. The origins of the Sumerian language are not known, but it had a "complex system of metrology" (which means the science of measurement) around 4,000 to 3,000 BCE, which (later) resulted in the creation of arithmetic, geometry and algebra. From around 2,600 BCE onwards they wrote multiplication tables on clay tablets, and dealt with geometrical problems and division problems. They had a pre-cuneiform script around 3,000 BCE which evolved into "archaic cuneiform" around 2,600 BCE. The surviving Sumerian texts comprise a large body of "hundreds of thousands" of texts, including laws, hymns, prayers, stories, and poetic epics, one of which ~ the Epic of Gilgamesh ~ is dated at about 2,800 ~ 2,600 BCE. After about 2,000 BCE the language was no longer in general use, and was preserved only as a sacred language. These facts are summarized from many internet sites.

And in the Copper Development Assn's website, in an essay on Sumerians and Chaldeans (Mesopotamia) it says the following regarding the Sumerians, indicating that a fairly advanced ability to write existed in the Middle East around 2,800 to 2,000 BCE.

"... In other respects this group of city states was at first more advanced than those of the Nile. They had a system of writing, an art which the Egyptians only acquired late in their history. They made surveys, kept exact land records, and were capable mathematicians. If we accept the chronology which is favoured at present by the British Museum, their greatest period ranged between 2800 and 2000 BC. ..."

The Sumerians and Chaldeans,

<http://www.copper.org/education/history/60centuries/ancient/thesumerians.html>

Egyptians had writing around 3,100 BCE or later.

The Indus script of the Bronze Age Indus Valley civilization had a script dated around 3,000 ~ 2,600 BCE (as yet undeciphered).

An undeciphered Elamite script existed as early as 3,100 BCE, and was later replaced by Elamite cuneiform, possibly adopted from the Semitic Akkadian cuneiform script.

Mycenaean Greek (1,600 ~ 1,200 BCE) is the most ancient form of the Greek language. It had a script (which linguists call Linear B) first attested on Crete dated to about 1,400 BCE, written on tablets which were not deciphered until around 1952, consisting of mostly inventories, but also a few myths and poems.

Phoenecian (a northern Semitic language) had a linguistic alphabet as early as 1,050 BCE; it was derived from Egyptian hieroglyphs, was the most widely used writing system across the Mediterranean world; it evolved and was assimilated by many cultures, generating the Aramaic and the (later) Greek alphabets.

¹⁷ The evidence for this is detailed in *Part Four: Loss of Knowledge Before & After Alexander*.

¹⁸ See *Part Four: Collation of Texts in Parthian & Sasanian Times*.