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Middle Persian & Pahlavi script

A Tiny Introduction

Sep 15, 2022 • Reading time: 14 minutes • [raw](#)

[Middle Persian](#), the successor of [Old Persian](#) from [Achaemenid Empire](#), was used by the [Sassanian Empire](#) of Iran, and is the ancestor of Modern Persian, which is currently the official language of Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan. This language has been written using multiple scripts, including [Pahlavi script](#), [Manichaean script](#) and [Pazend](#). This blog post is the most brief introduction to Middle Persian using Pahlavi script, a script derived from [imperial Aramaic](#).

This language is written and read right-to-left, however in this blog post because the main body of text is English, the text is aligned on the left-side.

This blog post requires a browser that supports custom fonts, since I am using the [Khusro Pahlavi font](#). If you cannot see this blog post properly, a PDF version of this blog post is available [here](#).

Alphabet

There are 14 primary letters in Pahlavi, some of which are used for multiple sounds. First, let's look at each letter of the alphabet individually. The content of this section is derived

mostly from (Kapadia, 1953).

𐬀

Sound: n, v, r, u, û, o, ô, rarely l

Modern Persian equivalents: ن، و، ر، گاهی ل

Notes: Joins with preceding 𐬀, 𐬁, 𐬂, 𐬃, 𐬄, 𐬅 and 𐬆, but not with any succeeding letter. Pahlavi words ending with 𐬄, 𐬅, 𐬆 and 𐬇, can optionally add an extra final 𐬀.

Examples:

1. 𐬀 (û): a conjunction, meaning and, or; و.
2. 𐬀𐬀 (van): a tree, forest, jungle
3. 𐬀𐬀𐬀 (nêvak): good, beautiful, virtuous; نیک.
4. 𐬀𐬀𐬀 (nihân): secret, concealed; نهان.
5. 𐬀𐬀 (vafra): ice, snow, hail, sleet; برف.

𐬁 / 𐬂

Sound: i, y, e, d, j, g

Modern Persian equivalents: ی، د، ج، گ

Notes:

1. In the body of a word it retains its form 𐬁 before 𐬀, 𐬁, 𐬂, 𐬃, 𐬄, 𐬅, 𐬆, 𐬇 and 𐬈; in all other cases it lapses into 𐬂.
2. 𐬁 (ê or î): used as an izâfat اضافت to show relation between two words, as possessor and the person or a thing possessed, in which case 𐬁 shows the genitive case.
3. Combines with all preceding letters except 𐬀, 𐬁, 𐬂, 𐬃, 𐬄 and 𐬅 and with all succeeding letters except 𐬀, 𐬁, 𐬂 where it takes the forms 𐬃, 𐬄, 𐬅.
4. 𐬁 used as the numeral “one” when it follows a substantive, e.g. 𐬁𐬀𐬀 (gabrâ-ê) a man; 𐬁𐬀𐬀 (mart-ê) a man; مردی.
5. 𐬂 used to represent numeral “one”, e.g. 𐬂𐬀 (ê-raz): one hundred; 𐬂𐬀 (ê-rag): one thousand; یک هزار.

Examples:

1. 𐬂𐬀 (dîv): satan, Dev, a demon, an evil spirit; دیو.
2. 𐬂𐬀𐬀𐬀 (mâtar-î-pûsar): mother of the boy; مادرِ پسر.
3. Using izâfat is optional, and when it is dropped, it is necessary that the qualifying

adjective or the thing possessed must precede the thing possessed or qualified; e.g.

𐭮𐭥𐭥𐭥𐭥𐭥𐭥𐭥 (pûsar mâtar), and it is the rule that a 𐭥 (zak) or 𐭥𐭥 (zak-î) is added before the two words, so: 𐭥𐭥𐭥𐭥𐭥𐭥𐭥𐭥 (zak-î pûsar mâtar)

4. It is also used as a rendering of Avesta relative pronouns 𐭥𐭥𐭥, 𐭥𐭥𐭥, 𐭥𐭥𐭥, who, which and what.

𐭮 / 𐭮

Sound: s

Modern Persian equivalent: س

Notes:

1. The 𐭮 form of this letter is used when it is the final word of a simple word, or when that simple word is part of a compound word, e.g. 𐭮𐭥 (râs), 𐭮𐭥𐭥 (vînâs), 𐭮𐭥𐭥𐭥 (vînâs-kâr)
2. The 𐭮 form of this letter is also used when before 𐭥, 𐭥, 𐭥, e.g. 𐭮𐭥 (sût), 𐭮𐭥𐭥 (asmân)
3. The 𐭮 form of this letter is also used to represent the numerical cipher 40, forty 𐭮𐭥𐭥 (chêhal); چهل

Examples:

1. 𐭮𐭥𐭥 (srôsh): one who obeys or hears; the name of the angel who protects mankind by night and day against the attacks of the Daevas, and guards the souls of the dead for the first three nights. He may be compared with Gabriel of Semitic mythology, as a principle messenger of God. He is always styled as 𐭮𐭥𐭥𐭥𐭥𐭥 (srôsh-î-ahlôb): holy srosh; metaphorically means “obedience”, “humility”.: سروش.
2. 𐭮𐭥𐭥𐭥 (spâhân): The city of Ispahan, former capital city of Iran; اصفهان.

𐭮

Sound: š (sh)

Modern Persian equivalent: ش

Notes:

1. In Indian manuscripts this letter is generally given as DE, which can be read as š, dâ, gâ, jâ, yâ, ih.

Examples:

1. 𐭮𐭥𐭥 (šûi): a husband; شوہر، شوی.

2. 𐭥𐭥𐭥𐭥 (šôstan): to wash, to cleanse, to purify; شستن.
3. 𐭥𐭥𐭥𐭥 (šikôh): pomp, grandeur, majesty, dignity; شکوه.

د

Sound: a, â, kh, h

Modern Persian equivalents: آ، خ، ه

Notes:

1. Can be used as a prefix, denoting “not” or negation, e.g. 𐭥𐭥𐭥𐭥 (a-vînâs): sinless.

Examples:

1. 𐭥 (hû): a prefix indicating “good”, “well”; opposite of 𐭥𐭥 (dûš) bad
2. 𐭥𐭥𐭥 (hû-mat): good thought
3. 𐭥𐭥𐭥 (aîrân): the home of the Aryans, the Iran proper; ایران.
4. 𐭥𐭥𐭥 (aêtih): existence, being; هستی.

ر

Sound: b, ê

Modern Persian equivalents: ب، ی

Notes:

1. Can be added to words to mean “one”, e.g. 𐭥𐭥𐭥 (mart-ê) a man; مردی.
2. Does not combine with any succeeding letter, and only combines with preceding 𐭥, 𐭥, 𐭥, 𐭥.

Examples:






1. 𐭥𐭥 (bûn): basis, root, beginning, bottom, foundation, extremity, end, origin; بن.
2. 𐭥𐭥 (bôi): to smell, fragrance, smell, perfume, scent; بو، بوی.
3. 𐭥𐭥𐭥 (ham-bast): bound together, connected together; همبست.
4. 𐭥𐭥𐭥 / 𐭥𐭥 (brâtar / brât): brother; برادر.

و



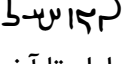




Sound: r, l

Modern Persian equivalents: ر، ل

Notes:

1. Sometimes l is written as  to distinguish it from r, specially in Pazend.
2. At the end of some Semitic words it is written as , e.g.  (akhar).
3. Used as the numerical cypher for number 20 (li = bist);  بیست.
4. Used as the first person singular pronoun (li=men): I, me, my, mine;  من.

Examples:

1.  (rûi): face, feature, countenance;  رو، روی.
2.  (levîn-û-âkhar = pêš-pas): more or less, before and after, first to the last;  کم و
بیش، پیش و پس، اول تا آخر.
3.  (rat): lord, master, spiritual chief, principal, a Dastur or high priest;
4.  (lagh / ragh): the numerical cypher for 1000; one thousand;  هزار.

S







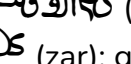







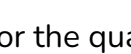
Sound: z

Modern Persian equivalents: ز

Notes:

1. Does not combine with any preceding letter but combines with all succeeding letters.

Examples:

1.  (zan): a woman, a female, a wife;  زن. The word is probably from the corresponding  زادن or  زائیدن (to give birth) from Avesta.
2.  (zand): great, vehement, powerful;  زند.
3.  (zîvandakîh): Abstract; life, existence;  زندگی.
4.  (zar): gold;  زر.
5.  (zak): A semitic particle, extensively used in Pahlavi and signifying a Demon.
Adjective and pronoun singular & plural: that, that one, also used in third personal pronouns: he, she or it, sometimes as a relative pronoun: that, which, who. The word is of frequent occurrence and invariably replaces Iranian word  آن (ân). Also, as explained before,  زک and  زک are used in the beginning of a genitive construction where the izafat "ر" is dropped and the thing possessed or qualified is placed after the possessor or the qualifying adjective, e.g.  زک-î-لی-مور (zak-î-li-môrv): my bird.

و

Sound: k, rarely g and y

Modern Persian equivalents: ک، گاهی گ، ی

Notes:

1. Generally used as a sign of past participle at the end of a verb in preterite form, e.g. 𐭥𐭥𐭥𐭥
برده (brde) or کرده (krde).
2. It is also used as a diminutive suffix, e.g. 𐭥𐭥𐭥𐭥 (pûsarak) پسرک.

Examples:

1. 𐭥𐭥 (kanû): now, at present, yet, still; کنون.
2. 𐭥𐭥𐭥𐭥 (kûtak-khrat): short-witted, foolish, silly; کوتاه خرد.
3. 𐭥𐭥𐭥𐭥 (kînîtan): Denominative verb from 𐭥𐭥 (kîn) malice; to bear malice to, to take revenge on; کین گرفتن.
4. 𐭥𐭥 (kakâ): a tooth, teeth; Semitic equivalent of 𐭥𐭥𐭥𐭥 (dandân) دندان.
5. 𐭥𐭥 (kam): less, little, small, a few, scarce, deficient; کم.
6. 𐭥𐭥𐭥𐭥 (katak-banûk): the mistress of the house, mater-familias. کد بانو.
7. 𐭥𐭥𐭥𐭥 (katak-khûtâi): the master of the house, pater-familias, a chief. کد خدا.

𐭥

Sound: m

Modern Persian equivalents: م

Notes:

1. Does not combine with preceding 𐭥, 𐭥, 𐭥, 𐭥, 𐭥, 𐭥, 𐭥
2. Even in its combined form, it keeps its full form, and it combines with all succeeding letters except 𐭥

Examples:

1. 𐭥𐭥 (mûy): hair; مو، موی.
2. 𐭥𐭥 (mang): a narcotic drug made from hemp-seed, hen-bane, a drug used for abortion, Cannabis Sativa; منگ، بنگ، بنج.
3. 𐭥𐭥𐭥 (mînôy / mînúg): spiritual, heavenly, invisible, a spirit, a spiritual being; مینو، مینوی.
4. 𐭥𐭥𐭥𐭥 (mâhmân): a guest, a visitor, one who is entertained; as adjective satisfied, pleased, gratified, agreeable, welcome; مهمان.
5. 𐭥𐭥𐭥 (Mitra): the name of an Yazat: Meher Yazad; presiding over light, also over faith, friendship and contracts; مهر.

𐭥

Sound: t, d

Modern Persian equivalents: ت، د

Notes:

1. Does not join any succeeding letter, and does not join with preceding ا, ر, و, م, ل, ن, ز
2. Always appears whole in any formation.

Examples:

1. 𐭌𐭎 (tan): body, person, the corporal body as distinguished from 𐭌𐭎𐭏 the spiritual body; تن.
2. 𐭌𐭎𐭏 (tanand): a spider, a cobweb; تننده، تنندو.
3. 𐭌𐭎𐭏𐭎 (tôjîtan): to atone for a sin, to expiate, to undergo punishment, to plunder, to assault; توزیدن.
4. 𐭌𐭎𐭏𐭎𐭎 (tûbânkar): rich, powerful, able, opulent, competent; توانگر.
5. 𐭌𐭎𐭏𐭎𐭎𐭎 (khûn-tachišnîh): flowing out of blood.

𐭎

Sound: pa, pha (if initial, also: cha, ja, za)

Modern Persian equivalents: پ، ف (اگر در ابتدا، همچنین: و، چ، ت، ز)

Notes:

1. Appears either as a whole, or as 𐭎 when joining the previous letter.

Examples:

1. 𐭎𐭎 (pavan = pa, pat): a semitic particle, used extensive as a preposition with meanings: to, by, from, through, according to, in, into, on, upon, with, among, about, at, for, as, as to, as if. It corresponds to Modern Persian پ، بر. It is the prefix for instrumental & genitive cases. e.g. 𐭎𐭎𐭎𐭎 (pavan-âkhar = pa-pas): in the end, at last; پا پس.
2. 𐭎𐭎𐭎 (pûst): the skin, a hide, a covering, a coating; پوست.
3. 𐭎𐭎𐭎 (frâz): A preposition with the meaning of: forth, further, forthwith, on, upon, above, upwards, aloft, back, down, after, again, opposite, contrary, before, near, forward, together; فرا، فراز.
4. 𐭎𐭎𐭎𐭎 (frazand): an offspring, child, son, progeny; فرزند.
5. 𐭎𐭎𐭎𐭎𐭎 (patmân): measure, standard, regulation, moderation, plan, design, rule, proportion, estimate, compact, agreement, (golden) mean, metrical measure; پیمان.

𐭪

Sound: ch, if initial: j, if medial or final: ch, j, z, zh, p, f, v

Modern Persian equivalent: چ، اگر ابتدا: ج، اگر میان یا انتها: چ، ج، ز، ژ، پ، ف، و

Notes:

1. Does not combine with any of the succeeding letters
2. Combines with preceding 𐭪, 𐭫, 𐭬 as 𐭪𐭫, 𐭪𐭬, 𐭪𐭭

Examples:

1. 𐭪 (cha): an enclitic particle, meaning: and, also, likewise, even, too, yet, else, always, added to the word it connects; when it follows a word ending in a consonant, the vowel (i) is conveniently added to the consonant, e.g. (nari-cha), (kasi-cha); sometimes the vowel (a) is added to the consonant (hasta-cha).
2. 𐭪𐭫 (chand): how much, how many, how long, of what length or duration, some, any indefinite quantity; چند.
3. 𐭪𐭬 (chînâr): the poplar tree, plane tree, the sycamore; چنار.
4. 𐭪𐭭 (chûnîh / chêgûnîh): abstract noun from 𐭪𐭮 (chûn): quality, qualification, description, whereabouts, peculiarity; چگونگی = کیفیت.

𐭫

Sound: gh

Modern Persian equivalent: ق

Examples:

1. 𐭫 (lagh / ragh): the numerical cypher for 1000; one thousand; هزار.
2. 𐭫𐭮 (magh): a pit, a hole, a row or line of stones on which a “riman” or “contaminated” person sits successively during the ceremony of purification; مغ، مگاک.
3. 𐭫𐭯 (mogh / magh): a magi, a mobed, one who practises magism; مغ.
4. 𐭫𐭰𐭱 (aghriya / aghrâya): this word is derived from 𐭫𐭰 meaning: top, head, summit, pertaining to top, pertaining to summit, topmost, of the first quality, the principal one.
5. 𐭫𐭱𐭲 (vaghtân): a head (of a good being), as opposed to 𐭫𐭱𐭳 (kamâr) head of an evil being.

Letters mixed

The table below shows how different letters mix together (Kapadia, 1953):

14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
𐬀	𐬁	𐬂	𐬃	𐬄	𐬅	𐬆	𐬇	𐬈	𐬉	𐬊	𐬋	𐬌	𐬍
𐬎	𐬏	𐬐	𐬑	𐬒	𐬓	𐬔	𐬕	𐬖	𐬗	𐬘	𐬙	𐬚	𐬛
𐬜	𐬝	𐬞	𐬟	𐬠	𐬡	𐬢	𐬣	𐬤	𐬥	𐬦	𐬧	𐬨	𐬩
𐬪	𐬫	𐬬	𐬭	𐬮	𐬯	𐬰	𐬱	𐬲	𐬳	𐬴	𐬵	𐬶	𐬷
𐬸	𐬹	𐬺	𐬻	𐬼	𐬽	𐬾	𐬿	𐭀	𐭁	𐭂	𐭃	𐭄	𐭅
𐭆	𐭇	𐭈	𐭉	𐭊	𐭋	𐭌	𐭍	𐭎	𐭏	𐭐	𐭑	𐭒	𐭓
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𐮍	𐮎	𐮏	𐮐	𐮑	𐮒	𐮓	𐮔	𐮕	𐮖	𐮗	𐮘	𐮙	𐮚
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Phrases & Words

1. 𐬀𐬎𐬎𐬎 (Aûhr-mazd): The Supreme Creator, Lord Ormazd, of Zoroastrian philosophy. Formerly read as Anhômâ.
2. 𐬀𐬎𐬎𐬎 (Aharman) اهرمن، اهریمن، is the destructive / evil spirit in Zoroastrianism. The name is traditionally written upside down.
3. 𐬀𐬎𐬎𐬎 (frôhâr): the guardian angel or spirit, a spiritual prototype, traditionally 𐬀𐬎𐬎𐬎 (rûbân) soul, and 𐬀𐬎𐬎𐬎 (frôhâr) are quite distinct. Ravan passes the Chinvat Bridge according to his or her deeds in this world, whilst fravashi is the sublime spirit which protects its counterpart in this world as a guardian angle. It is the highest of the five spiritual entities of which the human being is made up (ahu, daena, baodhang, urvan and fravashi). Also written 𐬀𐬎𐬎𐬎, 𐬀𐬎𐬎𐬎; فروهر.
4. 𐬀𐬎𐬎𐬎 (dîv): satan, Dev, a demon, an evil spirit; دیو.
5. 𐬀𐬎𐬎𐬎 (yazišn): to worship, part of Zoroastrian sacred texts known as Yasna: a sacrificial prayer with offerings of Hom; یسنا.
6. 𐬀𐬎𐬎𐬎 (ahlâyîh = aša): abstract noun for (ahlôb) righteous, i.e. truth, righteousness, holiness, sanctity, Asha; آشا.

The Threefold Path of Asha

The three ethical pillars of Zoroastrianism, mentioned in Yasna Haptanjhâiti یسنا هفت هات (Y. 35.4) are rendered in Pahlavi as such:

𐬀𐬎𐬎𐬎 (humînišn): good thought (منش نیک)

𐬀𐬎𐬎𐬎 (hukûnišn): good deeds (کنش نیک)

𐬀𐬎𐬎𐬎 (hugôîšn): good speech (گوش نیک)

Also see [HUMATA HŪXTA HUVARŠTA](#) for more information.

Common Persian Names

𐬀𐬎𐬎𐬎: name of the angel of victory, popularly known as Behram Yazat; also the name of the 20th day of the Zoroastrian month, over which Behram Yazat presides; the planet Mars is also known by the same name; بهرام.

𐬀𐬎𐬎𐬎 (srôsh): one who obeys or hears; the name of the angel who protects mankind by night and day against the attacks of the Daevas, and guards the souls of the dead for the first three nights. He may be compared with Gabriel of Semitic mythology, as a principle

messenger of God. He is always styled as **𐬰𐬀𐬎𐬎𐬀𐬎𐬀** (srôsh-î-ahlôb): holy srosh; metaphorically means “obedience”, “humility”; **سروش**.

𐬨𐬀𐬎𐬀 (Marva): name of the third of the goodly created places by Ahura Mazd according to Vendidad I: the modern “Marv”, “Margvan” of the classics; **مرو، مهرو**.

𐬨𐬀𐬎𐬀𐬎𐬀 (mahest): the greatest, the grandest, the highest, the longest; **میهن**.

𐬨𐬀𐬎𐬀𐬎𐬀 (mînôy / mînúg): spiritual, heavenly, invisible, a spirit, a spiritual being; **مینو، مینوی**.

𐬨𐬀𐬎𐬀 (frakh / frakho): prosperous, auspicious; **فرخ**.

𐬨𐬀𐬎𐬀 (yâsmen): a jasmine or jassemine, a kind of flower; **یاسمن**.

Additional resources

- [Introduction to Pahlavi by Prods OKTOR SKJÆRVØ](#): a great resource with introduction to grammar, a lot of words and full text translations.
- [Avestan Digital Archive](#): a search engine for manuscripts
- [Avesta - Zoroastrian Archives](#): has some of the texts and other resources related to Avesta and Zoroastrianism

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