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# Middle Persian & Pahlavi script

## A Tiny Introduction

Sep 15, 2022 • Reading time: 18 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).

## l

Sound: n, v, r, u, û, o, ô, rarely l

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

Notes: Joins with preceding  $J, -\vartheta, -\vartheta, -\vartheta, -\vartheta, -\vartheta, \delta$  and  $\epsilon$ , but not with any succeeding letter. Pahlavi words ending with  $P, q, \vartheta$  and I, can optionally add an extra final I.

Examples:

- 1. I ( $\hat{u}$ ): a conjunction, meaning and, or;  $_{9}$ .
- 2. III (van): a tree, forest, jungle
- 3. **)۲۱** (nêvak): good, beautiful, virtuous; نيک.
- 4. الال-ا (nihān): secret, concealed; نهان.
- .برف (vafra): ice, snow, hail, sleet; الع<sup>(</sup>

## و ہر

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

ی، د، ج، گ :Modern Persian equivalents

Notes:

- 1. In the body of a word it retains its form ، before ۱, ه as ۲, ۵ as ۲, ۰۰, ۵ and ළ; in all other cases it lapses into .
- 2. J (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 J shows the genitive case.
- 3. Combines with all preceding letters except 1, \_\_, 9, °, °, and with all succeeding letters except 1, \_\_, 6 where it takes the forms °, \_\_, , &
- 4. J used as the numeral "one" when it follows a substantive, e.g. سري (gabrâ-ê) a man; مردى (mart-ê) a man; مردى.
- 5. ع used to represent numeral "one", e.g. ع (ê-raz): one hundred; يک صد (ê-rag): one thousand; يک هزار .

Examples:

- 1, ۲೮ (dí̪v): satan, Dev, a demon, an evil spirit; ديو.
- 2. مادر پسر (mâtar-î-pûsar): mother of the boy; مادر 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. ກາຍເອົາມາຍ (pûsar mâtar), and it is the rule that a ສ (zak) or ງສ (zak-î) is added before the two words, so: ງາຍເອົາມາ ສ (zak-î pûsar mâtar)
- 4. It is also used as a rendering of Avesta relative pronouns לאיש, איזט, אי



Sound: s

س :Modern Persian equivalent

Notes:

- 1. The -b 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. (râs), -b--۱۱ (vînâs), -b---۱۱ (vînâs), -b---۱۱ (vînâs), -b---۱۱ (vînâs), -b---۱۱ (vînâs), -b------
- 2. The -v form of this letter is also used when before , 6, I, e.g. ۵-۷ (sût), ۳, ۳, ۵, ۱) (asmân)
- 3. The 🗝 form of this letter is also used to represent the numerical cipher 40, forty کی (chêhal); چهل (chêhal);

#### Examples:

- ישר (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 
  image: Style of Style o
- 2. اصفهان (spâhân): The city of Ispahan, former capital city of Iran; اصفهان.

## -"U

Sound: š (sh)

ش :Modern Persian equivalent

Notes:

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

#### Examples:

.شوی، شوهر (šûi): a husband; شوی، شوهر.

2. الشستن (šôstan): to wash, to cleanse, to purify; شستن.

3. سُكوه (šikôh): pomp, grandeur, majesty, dignity; شكوه.

J

Sound: a, â, kh, h

```
آ، خ، ه :Modern Persian equivalents
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Notes:

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

Examples:

- 1. Ÿ (hû): a prefix indicating "good", "well"; opposite of づく (dûš) bad
- 2. 🍳 (hû-mat): good thought
- عد (aîrân): the home of the Aryans, the Iran proper; ايران.
- 4. د شانه (aêtîh): existence, being; هستى.

# **\_**

Sound: b, ê

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ب، ی :Modern Persian equivalents
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Notes:

- 1. Can be added to words to mean "one", e.g. المردى (mart-ê) a man; مردى.
- 2. Does not combine with any succeeding letter, and only combines with preceding  $\mathbf{s}_{1}, \mathbf{s}_{2}, \mathbf{s$

Examples:

- 1. ال\_ الك) (bûn): basis, root, beginning, bottom, foundation, extremity, end, origin; بن.
- 2. ال (bôî): to smell, fragrance , smell, perfume, scent; بو، بوى

3. همبست (ham-bast): bound together, connected together; همبست.

4. (brâtar / brât): brother; برادر,

## 2

Sound: r, l

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ر، ل Modern Persian equivalents:
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Notes:

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

Examples:

- 1. کم (rûi): face, feature, countenance; رو، روی. 2. کم و (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. او (rat): lord, master, spiritual chief, principal, a Dastur or high priest; 4. و(lagh / ragh): the numerical cypher for 1000; one thousand; هزار.

### S

Sound: z

Modern Persian equivalents: ;

Notes:

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

**Examples:** 

- 1.  $rac{1}{5}$  (zan): a woman, a female, a wife; زن). The word is probably from the corresponding زادن or زائيدن (to give birth) from Avesta.
- 2. جو (zand): great, vehement, powerful; زند;
- زندگی ;zîvandakîh): Abstract; life, existence) کټال*د*ګ- <u>.</u>3
- 4. کر (zar): gold; زر
- 5.  $\mathfrak{S}$  (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 occurence and invariably replaces Iranian word التن (ân) آن. Also, as explained before,  $\mathfrak{G}$  and  $\mathfrak{G}$  are used in the beginning of a genitive construction where the izafat is dropped and the thing possessed or qualified is placed after the possessor "ر" اضافت or the qualifying adjective, e.g. المرحين (zak-î-li-môrv): my bird.

## 9

Sound: k, rarely g and y

ک، گاهی گ، ی Modern Persian equivalents:

#### Notes:

- 1. Generally used as a sign of past participle at the end of a verb in preterite form, e.g. واصلا 1. Generally used as a sign of past participle at the end of a verb in preterite form, e.g. واصلا 1. Generally used as a sign of past participle at the end of a verb in preterite form, e.g.
- 2. It is also used as a diminutive suffix, e.g. يسرک (pûsarak).

#### Examples:

- 1. الغ (kanû): now, at present, yet, still; كنون.
- 2. كوته خرد ;kûtak-khrat): short-witted, foolish, silly) واحاوه د.
- 3. الלשא) (kînîtan): Denominative verb from אור) (kîn) malice; to bear malice to, to take revenge on; کین گرفتن.
- 4. بالالا (kakâ): a tooth, teeth; Semitic equivalent of الالاح (dandân) دندان.
- 5.**69** (kam): less, little, small, a few, scarce, deficient;  $\mathcal{L}_{0}$ .
- 6. وموري (katak-banûk): the mistress of the house, mater-familias. كد بانو.
- 7. ٣٣ (katak-khûtâi): the master of the house, pater-familias, a chief. كد خدا.

## 6

Sound: m

م Modern Persian equivalents:

#### Notes:

- 1. Does not combine with preceding I, \_\_, 9, 1°, 0, 9, 9, 10
- 2. Even in its combined form, it keeps its full form, and it combines with all succeeding letters except **9**\_\_\_\_\_

#### Examples:

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

р

Sound: t, d

ت، د :Modern Persian equivalents

Notes:

- 2. Always appears whole in any formation.

Examples:

- 1. الله (tan): body, person, the corporal body as distinguished from ولحن the spiritual body; .
- 2. تتنده، تنندو (tanand): a spider, a cobweb; تتنده، تنندو.
- 3. المعاصية (tôjîtan): to atone for a sin, to expiate, to undergo punishment, to plunder, to \_assault; توزيدن.
- . دوانگر (tûbânkar): rich, powerful, able, opulent, competent; توانگر.
- 5. שאט אין (khûn-tachišnîh): flowing out of blood.

## ၅

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Sound: pa, pha (if initial, also: cha, ja, za)
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پ، ف (اگر در ابتدا، همچنین: و، چ، ت، ز) Modern Persian equivalents:

Notes:

1. Appears either as a whole, or as  $\ell$  when joining the previous letter.

Examples:

- 1. الى (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 & genetive cases. e.g. اس (pavan-âkhar = pa-pas): in the end, at last; پا پس ا.
- 2. بوست (pûst): the skin, a hide, a covering, a coating; يوست.
- 3. שוט (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; فراز، فرا:
- 4. فرزند (frazand): an offspring, child, son, progeny; فالحَوْ
- 5. الاש (patmân): measure, standard, regulation, moderation, plan, design, rule, proportion, estimate, compact, agreement, (golden) mean, metrical measure; پيمان.

## 9

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

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

Notes:

- 1. Does not combine with any of the succeeding letters
- 2. Combines with preceding 9, --, ), 6 as 0, 0, 0, 6

Examples:

- (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. أو (chand): how much, how many, how long, of what length or duration, some, any indefinite quantity; چند.
- 3. جنار ;۲۹ (chînâr): the poplar tree, plane tree, the sycamore; چنار.
- 4. حالح (chûnîh / chêgûnîh): abstract noun from الح (chûn): quality, qualification, description, whereabouts, peculiarity; چگونگی = کیفیت.

## 2

Sound: gh

ق :Modern Persian equivalent

Examples:

- 1.  $\mathcal{Q}$ (lagh / ragh): the numerical cypher for 1000; one thousand; هزار.
- 2. **ﷺ** (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; مغاک، مخ
- 3. 🗲 (mogh / magh): a magi, a mobed, one who pratises magism; مخ.
- <u>4.</u> (aghriya / aghrâya): this word is derived from meaning: top, head, summit, pertaining to top, pertaining to summit, topmost, of the first quality, the principal one.
- 5. げで乳(vaghtân): a head (of a good being), as opposed to しょう (kamâr) head of an evil being.

#### Letters mixed

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

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## Phrases & Words

- 1. **~~** らってい (Aûhr-mazd): The Supreme Creator, Lord Ormazd, of Zoroastrian philosophy. Formerly read as Anhômâ.

- 4. 🔁 (dîv): satan, Dev, a demon, an evil spirit; ديو.
- 5. المحتاف (yazišn): to worship, part of Zoroastrian sacred texts known as Yasna: a sacrifical prayer with offerings of Hom; يسنا.
- 6. (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 Haptaŋhāiti يسنا هفت هات (Y. 35.4) are rendered in Pahlavi as such:

امنش نیک) ۱۲۵۲۴۶ (humînišn): good thought (منش نیک)

الالاانانيك) (hukûnišn): good deeds (کنش نیک)

(گویش نیک) (hugôîšn): good speech (گویش نیک)

Also see HUMATA H $\overline{U}XTA$  HUVARŠTA for more information.

## **Common Persian Names**

الملك علي: 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.

(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 الالامريد ٽريد ٽريد ڪريد ۽ سريد (srôsh-î-ahlôb): holy srosh; metaphorically means "obedience", "humility"; سروش.

المكن (Marva): name of the third of the goodly created places by Ahura Mazd according to Vendidad I: the modern "Marv", "Margvan" of the clasics; مرو، مهرو، مهرو،

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

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

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

🗝 👉 (yâsmen): a jasmine or jassemine, a kind of flower; ياسمن.

الك (vištâsp): one whose wealth consists of horses; name of the king of the Kananian dynasty, during whose reign Zoroaster propagated the Mazdayasnan religion; گشتاسپ.

ال<sup>س-و</sup>تاز (nîyânišn): praise, thanksgiving, adoration, benediction, bowing to salutation, obligation; نيايش

باران (vârân): rain; باران.

لإلال (gêhân): the world, the earth, the material world, property, estate, also sometimes used in the sense of man-folds or settlements; جهان، گیتی، گیهان.

**• الله:** (sâyak): shade, shadow; سايه.

ستایش (stâyišn): to praise, to glorify) هم سورانی.

کرہ: (star): a star, a constellation; ستارہ.

-👐 (yazdân): an epithet of God, one worthy of worship, praise, or sacrifice; يزدان.

درویش (daryûš): poor, indigent, a darvish, a monk, a mendicant; درویش.

.خنياگر ;khunâkgar): singer, a minstrel (khunâkgar).

اآسمان ;(âsmân): the sky, the heavens, the firmament).

سعوں (âsîm-âyîn): pertaining to silver; سيمين.

سكراف (Albôrz): name of the celebrated lefty mountain-range of Persia, whose highest peak is Mt. Damavand, south of Caspian Sea; may be read as (harburz); البرز. الاس (Rašna): The angel Rašna presiding over truth & justice and dealing cut reward and punishment at the chinvat Bridge; رشن، رشنا.

المشن، رامش (ramišn): verb, to give joy, delight, pleasure, cheer, joy, merriment; رامشن، رامش

رُح (zand): great, vehement, powerful; a village, a town, or a city, a borough, a district; a heretic, a non-believer in Zoroastrian religion, a revolter against true religion; meaning or interpretation of a text, commentary of Avesta text in Pahlavi, explanation, interpretation; iterpretation; يزيد

العن (zartûšt): name of the prophet of ancient Iran, whose creed is followed upto this day by Zoroastrians in India (Parsees) and Iran, the prophet flourished during the reign of the old Kyanian monarch Gushtaspa, who with his family was the first to accept Zoroastrianism; زردشت، زردشت

کاوس، کی کاوس; King Kaus, the second King of Kayanian Dynasti; کاوس، کی کاوس).

مینو، مینوی ;mînôy): spiritual, heavenly, invisible, a spirit, a spiritual being.

مرواريد ;morvârît): a pearl مرسوم.

ຍມ - ບຼາຍ (Pôrûšasp): a proper name, the name of the father of Zarathustra, composite word of - ບຼາຍ full, leaden with + ບມ- (asp) horse, that is to mean, having a large flock of horses; پوروشسپ.

برنا (pûrnây / pûrnâîk): a full grown young man, a young man of full age; بُرنا.

ເບບຼ່າບ່າຍ (Pêšdât): the title of Hoshang, the King next to Gayomard, whence his successors were called Pesdatyans until the accession of Kari-Kavat, the founder of Kai or Kayanian dynasty. The word may mean from ບ່າຍ before + ເບບ created, or justice or creed– those believing in the creed, in vogue previous to that of Zoroaster, or previous rulers or administrators, or first established (rulers); ييشداد.

جمع (pîrûz): Successful, victorious; فيروز، پيروز (pîrûz): Successful, victorious; فيروز،

بارس (Pârs): The provice of Fars in Persia (Iran); پارس.

کروہر (frôhâr): the guardian angel or spirit, a spiritual prototype; فروھر.

ن (parîk): a winged figure, a fairy, a witch, a sorceress; in Avesta it means a demoness, a creature of Angra-Mainyu, whilst div is Masculine; پری.

الع<sup>(</sup>ف(Frêtûn): Feredun (proper name), the name of an illustious monarch of the Pisdatyan family; فريدون

اجركى (frakh): prosperous, auspicious; فرخ.

ບບມາບັບ (Frâsîâp): name of an unjust and tyrannical Turanian King, who incessantly troubled Iran, and had an hereditory enmity with the Kings of Iran; افراسياب.

-ಅಳು (frâhang): wisdom, learning, science, knowledge, intellect; فرهنگ.

فرزانه (farjânak): wise, learned, noble, a wise man, an honourable man; فرزانه.

ואָשָּאָ (patmân): measure, standard, regulation, moderation, plan, design, rule, proportion, estimate, compact, agreement, golden mean, metrical measure; ييمان.

## 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

## References

- 1. Kapadia, D. D. (1953). Glossary of Pahlavi Vendidad. Shahnamah Press Bombay.
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