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# Middle Persian & Pahlavi script

# A Tiny Introduction

Sep 15, 2022 • Reading time: 19 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).

1

Sound: n, v, r, u, û, o, ô, rarely l

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

# Examples:

- 1. I (û): a conjunction, meaning and, or; J.
- 2. III (van): a tree, forest, jungle
- 3. و (nêvak): good, beautiful, virtuous; نیک
- 4. الاحار (nihān): secret, concealed; نهان.
- 5. کوا (vafra): ice, snow, hail, sleet; برف

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

ى، د، ج، گ Modern Persian equivalents:

#### Notes:

- 1. In the body of a word it retains its form الله before الله عن الله before الله عن الله and الله in all other cases it lapses into عن الله عن الله
- 2. ل (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, 10, 4 and with all succeeding letters except 1, \_\_\_\_, 6 where it takes the forms 5, \_\_\_\_, 4.
- 4. J used as the numeral "one" when it follows a substantive, e.g. مردی (gabrâ-ê) a man; المردی (gabrâ-ê) a man; مردی
- یک هزار ;e-raz): one hundred) بیک صد (ê-rag): one thousand) د (e-rag): one thousand) عدار (a-rag): one thousand

## Examples:

- 1. على (dîv): 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. (pûsar mâtar), and it is the rule that a 🛎 (zak) or ນ 🛎 (zak-î) is added before the two words, so: ງ ເວລk-î pûsar mâtar)
- 4. It is also used as a rendering of Avesta relative pronouns より, 一切, ゃっちり, ゃっちり, who, which and what.

# -to / by

Sound: s

س :Modern Persian equivalent

#### Notes:

- 1. The ט 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), ווי-ט-פייב (vînâs-kâr) ווי-ט-פייב (vînâs-kâr)
- 2. The で form of this letter is also used when before ), 6, 1, e.g. ゃし (sût), ずんい (aṣṃân)
- 3. The 🖰 form of this letter is also used to represent the numerical cipher 40, forty 🖰 🚓 (chêhal); چهل

#### Examples:

- 1. ביי (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 עליים בייים בייים (srôsh-î-ahlôb): holy srosh; metaphorically means "obedience", "humility".:
- 2. اصفهان (spâhân): The city of Ispahan, former capital city of Iran; اصفهان

# ريد

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:

- 1. شوى، شوهر (šûi): a husband; شيوى، شوهر.
- 2. الثعالا (šôstan): to wash, to cleanse, to purify; شستن.

3. كوات (šikôh): pomp, grandeur, majesty, dignity; شكوه. Sound: a, â, kh, h آ، خ، ه :Modern Persian equivalents Notes: 1. Can be used as a prefix, denoting "not" or negation, e.g. לוש"ל (a-vînâs): sinless. Examples: 1. 뚝 (hû): a prefix indicating "good", "well"; opposite of づく (dûš) bad 2. ゅく (hû-mat): good thought 3. ایران (aîrân): the home of the Aryans, the Iran proper; ایران 4. مستى (aêtîh): existence, being; هستى Sound: b, ê ب، ی :Modern Persian equivalents 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 5, -U, -v, -, 5. Examples: 1. ال (bûn): basis, root, beginning, bottom, foundation, extremity, end, origin; يبن 2. ال الهُوْمُ بوي (bôî): to smell, fragrance , smell, perfume, scent; بو، بوي 3. العالى (ham-bast): bound together, connected together; هجېست. 4. کرادر (brâtar / brât): brother) برادر Sound: r. l ر، ل Modern Persian equivalents: ر 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  $\frac{1}{2}$ , e.g.  $\frac{1}{2}$  (akhar). 3. Used as the numerical cypher for number 20 (li = bist); بيست 4. Used as the first person singular pronoun (li=men): I, me, my, mine; من . Examples: 1. کر (rûi): face, feature, countenance; رو، روی 2. كم و بيش، پيش و پس، اول تا آخر (levîn-û-âkhar = pêš-pas): more or less, before and after, first to the last; كم و بيش، پيش و پس، اول تا 3. (rat): lord, master, spiritual chief, principal, a Dastur or high priest; 4.  $\mathcal{L}$ (lagh / ragh): the numerical cypher for 1000; one thousand; هزار 5

Sound: z

Modern Persian equivalents: 3

#### Notes:

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

## Examples:

- 1. 🗲 (zan): a woman, a female, a wife; زنيدن or زادن (to give birth) from Avesta.
- 2. کو (zand): great, vehement, powerful; ند
- 3. ک**ټالون-** يندگی) (zîvandakîh): Abstract; life, existence; زندگی
- 4. کد (zar): gold; نړر.
- 5. عن (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) ن. Also, as explained before, عن المنافقة are used in the beginning of a genitive construction where the izafat عند المنافقة (zak-î-li-môrv): من المنافقة (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.٩٤٩ کرده واحاوی or عربه المحاوية على المحاوية على المحاوية على المحاوية على المحاوية المحاو
- 2. It is also used as a diminutive suffix, e.g. عالا (pûsarak) يسرک

#### Examples:

- 1. الا (kanû): now, at present, yet, still; كنون
- 2. کوټه خرد (kûtak-khrat): short-witted, foolish, silly; کوټه خرد
- 3. المجاه (kînîtan): Denominative verb from المجاه (kîn) malice; to bear malice to, to take revenge on: کین گرفتن
- 4. عندان (kakâ): a tooth, teeth; Semitic equivalent of الاقلام) بالاقلام (dandân) دندان
- 5. 69 (kam): less, little, small, a few, scarce, deficient; کے.
- 6. كد بانو. (katak-banûk): the mistress of the house, mater-familias. كد بانو
- 7. 🇝 المحتاع على (katak-khûtâi): the master of the house, pater-familias, a chief. كد خدا

#### 6

#### Sound: m

Modern Persian equivalents: ج

## Notes:

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

# Examples:

- 1. المو، موى بالم (mûy): hair; مو، موى
- 2. گُره (mang): a narcotic drug made from hemp-seed, hen-bane, a drug used for abortion, Cannabis Sativa; منگ، بنج
- عمينو، مينوی (mînôy / mînúg): spiritual, heavenly, invisible, a spirit, a spiritual being; مينو، مينوی
- 4. はない (mâhmân): a guest, a visitor, one who is entertained; as adjective satisfied, pleased, gratified, agreeable,

welcome; مهمان.

5. III (Mitra): the name of an Yazat: Meher Yazad; presiding over light, also over faith, friendship and contracts; .....

# p

Sound: t, d

ت، د : Modern Persian equivalents

#### Notes:

- 2. Always appears whole in any formation.

#### Examples:

- 1. اله (tan): body, person, the corporal body as distinguished from ورايع the spiritual body; يتن
- 2. ماالاً (tanand): a spider, a cobweb; تتنده، تنندو
- عريدن; (tôjîtan): to atone for a sin, to expiate, to undergo punishment, to plunder, to assault; توزيدن
- 4. عال ۱۳۵۴ (tûbânkar): rich, powerful, able, opulent, competent; توانگر.
- 5. 🗝รูบุรุษารู (khûn-tachišnîh): flowing out of blood.

# 9

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

(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:

- 2. كاك (pûst): the skin, a hide, a covering, a coating; يوبىت
- 3. كان (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
- عامج (frazand): an offspring, child, son, progeny; فرزند.
- 5. איני (patmân): measure, standard, regulation, moderation, plan, design, rule, proportion, estimate, compact, agreement, (golden) mean, metrical measure; ييمان.

# 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 3, -v, -), 6 as 0, 0, v, 66

#### Examples:

1.  $\P$  (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. عند (chand): how much, how many, how long, of what length or duration, some, any indefinite quantity; عند
- 3. کسلام (chînâr): the poplar tree, plane tree, the sycamore; چنار
- 4. المان (chûnîh / chêgûnîh): abstract noun from ان (chûn): quality, qualification, description, whereabouts, peculiarity; عينيت = كيفيت = كيفيت.



Sound: gh

ق :Modern Persian equivalent

# Examples:

- 1. ﴿(lagh / ragh): the numerical cypher for 1000; one thousand; هزار.
- 2. **½** (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، مغ
- 3. 🌿 (mogh / magh): a magi, a mobed, one who pratises magism; مـغ
- 4. \_\_\_\_\_\_ (aghriya / aghrâya): this word is derived from سيور meaning: top, head, summit, pertaining to top, pertaining to summit, topmost, of the first quality, the principal one.
- 5. אריין (vaghtân): a head (of a good being), as opposed to (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. 一もずず (Aûhr-mazd): The Supreme Creator, Lord Ormazd, of Zoroastrian philosophy. Formerly read as Anhômâ.
- 2. اهرمن، اهریمن (Aharman) المجمها, is the destructive / evil spirit in Zoroastrianism. The name is traditionally written upside down.
- 4. ځل (dîv): satan, Dev, a demon, an evil spirit; ديو.
- 5. เรียย์ (yazišn): to worship, part of Zoroastrian sacred texts known as Yasna: a sacrifical prayer with offerings of Hom;
- 6. كالماع (ahlâyîh = aša): abstract noun for (ahlôb) righteous, i.e. truth, righteousness, holiness, sanctity, Asha; اَشَا

### 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)

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

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

Also see HUMATA HŪXTA HUVARŠTA for more information.

# Common Persian Names

الات سي (vahârâm): 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.

עלים" (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 עלים ביי עלים (srôsh-î-ahlôb): holy srosh; metaphorically means "obedience", "humility"; ...

المح (Marva): name of the third of the goodly created places by Ahura Mazd according to Vendidad I: the modern "Marv", "Margvan" of the clasics; موه، مهره، مهره، المعادية

سعون (mahest): the greatest, the grandest, the highest, the longest; مدين

مينو، مينوى (mînôy / mînúg): spiritual, heavenly, invisible, a spirit, a spiritual being; مينو،

انحی (frakh / frakho): prosperous, auspicious; فرخ

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

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

ናርያ (vohûman): of good mind, the supreme intelligence, the Angel or personification of the good mind, Behman Ameshaspend; بهمن.

الم دو الكالة (nîyânišn): praise, thanksgiving, adoration, benediction, bowing to salutation, obligation; نيايش

اس (vârân): rain; باران.

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

ىسايە ;sâyak): shade, shadow) فىسايە

ستایش (stâyišn): to praise, to glorify; ستایش

עטושט (spêndât): name of the son of King Vištâp (Gustâsp), the Kiyanian king during whose reign Prophet Zoroaster flourished and proclaimed the religion; اسفندیار.

ر (star): a star, a constellation; ستاره.

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

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

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

اَسمان ;asmân): the sky, the heavens, the firmament أسمان .

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

ميكوان (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

المجاتكا (bâmdâtân): of the family of Bam-dat; Bamdat was the ancestor of the family to which Mazdak, the notorious minister of Kobad belonged, from (bâmdât) meaning day-break, dawn; بامداد.

(Rašna): The angel Rašna presiding over truth & justice and dealing cut reward and punishment at the chinvat Bridge; תְּמִיטׁ, رְמִּשׁוֹ

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

(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; وند

المان (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.

حلوس، کی کاوس (kâûs): King Kaus, the second King of Kayanian Dynasti; کاوس، کی کاوس

مينو، مينوي (mînôy): spiritual, heavenly, invisible, a spirit, a spiritual being; مينو،

مروارید ;morvârît): a pearl مروارید

פוליט־עט (Pôrûšasp): a proper name, the name of the father of Zarathustra, composite word of שרשים (esp) horse, that is to mean, having a large flock of horses; پوروشسپ

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

שנים (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 שים של before + של before + שים before + before + שים before + bef

عورز، پیروز (pîrûz): Successful, victorious; فیروز، پیروز

بيارس (Pârs): The provice of Fars in Persia (Iran); بيارس

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

ນາ ບ (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; ເຊັນ

الموسي (Frêtûn): Feredun (proper name), the name of an illustious monarch of the Pisdatyan family; فريدون

افرخ (frakh): prosperous, auspicious; فرخ

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

-ಅ५೮೦೮ (frâhang): wisdom, learning, science, knowledge, intellect; فرهنگ.

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

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

# Persian Calendar Month Names

עלטר (Farvardîn): same as וְלְיּפֹרְע (farvartîn), belonging to Farvar or Fravashi, the name of the 1st month & 19th day of every month of Zoroastrian Year; فروردين.

(arta vahišt): name of the second Amahraspand (divine deity) in Zoroastrianism, "right"; اردیبهشت.

مرداد ; amôrtat): immortal, name of the sixth Amahraspand (divine deity) in Zoroastrianism; مرداد

آبان (âbân): eighth month of the Zoroastrian calendar; آبان.

الالالامة (vohûman): of good mind, the supreme intelligence, the Angel or personification of the good mind, Behman Ameshaspend; بهمن.

(spend-armat): name of an Amesha-spenta who has special charge of the Earth and women: sometimes it is the mother Eart, it is also the name of the 12th month of the year and also the fifth day of the month of Zoroastrian Calendar; اسفند، اسيندارمد.

# 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
- Persian to Pahlavi Dictionary by Bahram Farehvashi: a dictionary from modern Persian to Pahlavi (only includes transliterated Pahlavi)
- Bundahiśn Dictionary by Mehrdad Bahar: a dictionary from Pahlavi to Modern Persian
- Name'e Pahlavi: Self-taught Pahlavi by Fereydoon Janidi: A book for self-taught Pahlavi in Persian
- Small Dictionary of Middle Persian: A small dictionary of Middle Persian words, along with their Modern Persian equivalent and transliteration
- A Concise Pahlavi Dictionary by McKenzie: A small dictionary of Middle Persian words, along with their Modern Persian equivalent and transliteration
- An Old Zand-Pahlavi Glossary by Hoshang Jamaspji Asa: An Avestan to Pahlavi dictonary
- Parsi Anjoman: a website and community full of resources dedicated to preservation of Persian language

# References

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

