



# Late Achaemenid Scribes and Old Persian Language

On judging conservation, innovation and error in a tiny handful of texts

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# Old Persian Royal Inscriptions

- Ca. 100-120 inscriptions of various length
- Darius I (522 BCE)–Artaxerxes III (338 BCE)
- “Regular” Old Persian: Darius-Xerxes (until 465 BCE)
- Late Old Persian: Artaxerxes II (since 404 BCE), ca. 25 texts
- The gap between these two stages is around 60 years, i.e. the life of a (lucky) individual at that time

# Late Old Persian as a “corrupt” language

- Since the discovery of the first LOP inscriptions, scholars noticed some apparent “errors” in the language
- The *communis opinio* is that LOP texts were written by scribes who did not know anymore the “correct” OP language because they spoke a different, later language
- This implies that in 60 years the language had changed so much that scribes had to learn “correct” OP as a dead language, and in doing so they did numerous mistakes

# Christian Lassen (1840)

«Ich glaube nämlich aus diesem Abschnitte der Inschrift allerdings folgern zu dürfen, dass **in der Periode zwischen Xerxes und Artaxerxes II. die Altpersische Sprache schon grosse Fortschritte in der Entartung von ihrem ursprünglichen Organismus gemacht hatte ...** Ich glaube also, dass man zur Zeit des zweiten Artaxerxes schon oft die Flexionen vernachlässigte»

Lassen, Ch. (1840) “Ueber einige neue Keil-Inschriften der einfachsten Gattung”, *ZKM* 3, 455ff.

# Wilhelm Brandenstein (1956)

«Es handelt sich nämlich dabei meist um **mißlungene Versuche, der gesprochenen Sprache ein klassisches Gewand zu geben. Sie sind Beweise dafür, daß man damals schon Mittelpersisch sprach**»

Brandenstein, W. (1956) “Arica” in *Μνήμης Χάρτιν. Gedenkschrift Paul Kretschmer*, vol. 1, Wien, 53

# Rüdiger Schmitt (1999)

«Auf der Basis dieses gesprochenen jüngeren, spätachaimenidischen Altpersisch hat man seinerzeit nun offenkundig versucht, den Wortlaut von Inschriften zu formulieren, die dem epigraphischen Formular der ‘klassischen’ Zeit entsprechen»

Schmitt, R. (1999) *Beiträge zu altpersischen Inschriften*, Wiesbaden, 94

# No space for diachrony

- In such a perspective, no attempt is made at a reconstruction of the internal diachrony of the Old Persian language
- The sudden transformation of Old Persian into (Proto-)Middle Persian in a couple of generations is unlikely from a glottochronologic point of view
- The texts are few and short, and much more caution is needed in evaluating the material

# A new approach to Late Old Persian

- Some new findings about the philological and textual interpretation of some LOP inscriptions can help change this approach
  - Elimination of some (grammatically faulty) inscriptions which are demonstrably modern forgeries (Fattori 2022a)
  - Improved reading of some texts recognising that they have been copied from a *Vorlage* in Aramaic script (Fattori 2022b)

# Modern Forgeries

- Ca. 10 metal objects allegedly found in Hamadan
- Suspect finding circumstances
- Written in an unusual “font”, resembling the printed version of OP cuneiform in 1900<sup>th</sup> cent. manuals
- Collage-like compositions made of formulae with morpho-syntactic errors in junctions



# Aramaic drafts

- Already foreseen by Herzfeld and Gershevitch
- Errors which cannot be due to phonetic developments
- Wrong vocalization or conversion of ambiguous Aram. graphemes

Aram. \*<šytm> → <š-a-y-t-a-m> (error in A<sup>3</sup>Pa) instead of <š-i-y-a-t-i-m> “peace”

Aram. \*<’pdm> → <u-p-d-a-n-m> (error in A<sup>2</sup>Hd) instead of <a-p-d-a-n-m> “palace”

Aram. \*<hš’> → <h-š-a> (error in A<sup>2</sup>Sd) instead of <h-c-a> “from”

# A new approach to Late Old Persian

- With this improved understanding of the inscriptions, we can attempt to study Late Old Persian in a truly *historical* perspective:
- How late is Late Achaemenid Persian really?
- What are the detectable aspects of linguistic change it is undergoing?
- 2 examples: depalatalization  $\check{s}t > st$ , re-morphologization of the ending *-m*

$\check{s}t > st$

<a-d-m : n-s-t-a-y : a-p-d-a-n-a : i-m-m : a-k<sup>u</sup>-u-n-i-y> (A<sup>2</sup>Sa)

Schmitt (1999, 2009) *adam niyastāyam apadānam imam akunai* “habe ich angeordnet, diesen Palast (wieder) zu errichten”

- Not a transcription, but rather a reconstruction with textual emendations!
- \**niyastāyam* is the expected non-RUKI form, but already in Darius’ texts we find *niyaštāyam* with generalization of RUKI. The postulation of a so conservative form in a late text is chronologically problematic

$\check{s}t > st$

Ir. \**niyastāyam*



OP *nīyaštāyam* (Darius)

[levelling of the stem based on RUKI-forms]



OP *nīštāyam* (Xerxes)

[contraction *iya > ī*]



LOP *nīstāya* (Artaxerxes II)

[loss of final *-m*; depalatalization  $\check{s}t > st$ ]

š̌t > st

Other traces of š̌t > st in the OP corpus

- *ufrasta-* “well punished” (DB I: 22) alongside *ufrašta-* (DB IV: 38, 66, 69) < \**hu-frać-ta-*.
- *vinasta-* “damage” for \**vinašta-* (DNb, vb. *vinaθ-* “to harm, damage”) < \**vi-nać-ta-*, Parth. *winašt* “damaged”.
- *rāsta* “right” for \**rāšta-* (DB, DNa, DNb, XPl) < \**rāj-ta-*, Av. *rāšta-*

$\check{s}t > st$

- The dominant view is to regard these OP examples as divergent dialectal developments of Ir. \* $\acute{c}t$ , but this does not apply to LOP *nīstāya*
- It is well-known that MP shows the same phenomenon:

MP *frēstag* “messenger” vs. Parth. *frēštag* “id.”

MP *naxwist* “first” vs. Parth. *naxwišt*

- The most obvious explanation of data is that the depalatalization  $\check{s}t > st$  was **spreading across the lexicon of OP during the Achaemenid period**

# The ending *-m*

- Phonetic tendency towards deletion of final *-m*

## Xerxes

- *t<sup>u</sup>va* “you” <t<sup>u</sup>-u-v> instead of *tuvam* <t<sup>u</sup>-u-v-m> (XPh)
- *apara* “afterwards” <a-p-r> instead of *aparam* (XPh)

## Artaxerxes II

- *ab<sup>i</sup>yapara* “afterwards” instead of \**ab<sup>i</sup>yaparam* (A2Sa, compare *apara* in XPh)
- *akuna* “I did”, thematized Impf.1.Sg. instead of *akunavam* (A2Sa, A2Ha)
- *nīstāya* “I ordered”, Impf.1.Sg. instead of *nīyaštāyam* (A2Sa)

# The ending *-m*

Schmitt (1999, 2000):

- Xerxes: engravers' mistakes  
→ emendation “t<sup>u</sup>-u-v<-m>; a-p-r<-m>”
- Artaxerxes II: scribes' erroneous restitution of a lost final syllable  
→ transcription of the “correct” form: *abiyaparam*, but *akunā* (?)



# The ending *-m*

A morpho-syntactically meaningful analysis

# The ending *-m*

Masculine nouns of the old *a*- and *ā*-declensions retain a single *m*-less ending *-ā* to mark both the subject and the direct object:

- *upa Rtaxšačā n<sup>i</sup>yākā-ma(i)* “under Artaxerxes my grandfather” (A<sup>2</sup>Sa).
- *mām Rtaxšačā xšāyaθ<sup>i</sup>yā* “me, Artaxerxes the king” (A<sup>3</sup>Pa).

# The ending *-m*

Old neuter nouns preserve an ending *-m*. It thus seems that **morphological pressure** contrasted the purely **phonological** tendency to final *m*-deletion. The morphological nature of such a phenomenon is confirmed by the **extension of the ending *-m* to the demonstrative *imam***, where it is etymologically unexpected. The agreement between nouns and adjectives with the ending *-m* is fairly regular, and often accompanied by the neuter relative *taya*:

- *imam apadānam ... aθangainam* “this palace made of stone” (A<sup>2</sup>Hb, A<sup>2</sup>Hd).
- *imam hadiṣ utā imam ustacanam taya aθangainam* “this palace and this staircase made of stone” (A<sup>2</sup>Sc).
- *imam hadiṣ taya jīva-di par(i)daidam adam akunavam* “this (is) the palace that, during my lifetime, I built as (my) ‘paradise’” (A<sup>2</sup>Sd)

The background of the image consists of two horizontal bands of ancient Egyptian reliefs. The upper band shows several male figures in traditional Egyptian attire, including kilt and sash, with their arms raised in a gesture of offering or praise. The lower band shows a similar group of figures, but with more detailed facial features and some wearing head coverings. The entire background is rendered in a light, monochromatic tone, creating a subtle, textured backdrop for the central text.

Thanks for your attention

# Bibliography

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