

OLD IRANIAN Language

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I. Old Persian is known by inscriptional texts found in Persis, at Persepolis and the nearby Naqsh-e Rostam and Murghab (Pasargadae); in Elam, at Susa; in Media, at Ramadan and the not too distant Behistan and Elvend; in Armenia, at Van; and along the line of the Suez Canal. They are mainly inscriptions of Darius the Great (521-486 B.C.) and Xerxes (486-65); but others, mostly in a corrupted form of the language, carry the line down to Artaxerxes III (359-38).

II. Avestan is the language of the Avesta or sacred writings of the Mazdayasnians, known also as Parsis (i.e. Persians) and as Zoroastrians or followers of Zoroaster, the prophet who proclaimed the religion. It consists linguistically of two parts: an older part containing the Gatha's or metrical sermons of Zoroaster himself, and the Later Avesta, differing in a number of linguistic features from the Gatha's. Zoroaster himself came from the northwest, but his successes in converting to his faith were made in the northeast, in Bactria; it is therefore disputed as to whether Avestan is a northwestern or a northeastern language. It is noticeable that it agrees rather with Median than with Old Persian, but this is not decisive.

III. Among the less known Old Iranian languages the most important was Median, known only from glosses, place and personal names, and its developments in Middle Persian, apart from borrowings in Old Persian, which are of considerable importance for the understanding of Old Persian itself. Others were the language of the Carduchi, presumably the linguistic ancestor of modern Kurdish; Parthian, later the language of a great empire which contended against Rome in the time just before and after the beginning of the Christian era; Sogdian in the northeast, the ancestor of the medieval Sogdian; Scythian, the language or languages of the various tribes known in Old Persian as Saga, located to the east of the Caspian and north of Parthia and Sogdiana, but also to the west of the Caspian on the steppes north of the Euxine Sea.

Here is the photo of text by Xerxes (486-65); King of Persia on the Gate of All Nations in Persepolis: