

Orality in Zoroastrianism

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The Achaemenid empire being so widespread, it is not surprising to find that its main language of administration was neither Persian nor Elamite, but Aramaic, the Semitic *lingua franca* of Mesopotamia, Syria and Palestine. The Bisitun inscription states directly that the form of written Persian used there was new, developed at Darius's own orders for that specific purpose. One wonders "if the Achaemenids did not prefer any record of events other than their own inscriptions. The absence of the native historical writing for the Achaemenids can be explained by the fact that no histories as such have survived from the Egyptian, Hittite or Assyrian empires either.

The point that Michael Axworth raises on this regard seems to have been missed by most scholars: "To ourselves, at our great remove of time, awash with written materials every moment of our working lives, dominated by the getting and spending of money, a human system that was largely non-literate and operating for the most part on the basis of payments in kind, no cash, even if it be a great empire capable of stunning monuments and great sculptural art, seems primitive. But the history of human development is not simply linear. It is not quite right to see the oral tradition of sophisticated cultures like that of Mazdaism as unreliable, flawed or backward, something we have gone beyond. The Persians were not stupidly trying, with the wrong tools, to do somethings we can now, with the right tools, do incomparably better. They were doing something different, and had evolved complex and subtle ways of doing it very well indeed, which our culture has forgotten. To try to grasp the reality of that we have to step aside a little from our usual categories of thought, for all the apparent familiarity of Mazdaean concepts like angels, the day of judgement, heaven and hell and moral choice. The Achaemenid Empire was an Empire of the Mind, but a different kind of Mind." (*Empire of the Mind: A History of Iran*, Hurst & Company, London, 2007, pp. 23-24).