Old Persian in Aramaic script
Scribal expertise and official authority in the Late Achaemenid Period
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The Old Persian inscriptions of the Late Achaemenid Period (end of 5th-mid 4th century B.C.) show a number of anomalous forms, which are usually attributed to the evolution of the Old Persian language towards a stage more similar to that of Middle Persian. However, it has long been observed that some unexpected forms cannot be attributed to a linguistic change and should rather be explained as the result of the interference of a graphic system different from Old Persian cuneiform. In particular, E. Herzfeld (1938 *passim*) and I. Gershevitch (1964: 33f.) proposed that some spelling errors should be attributed to the transliteration from a draft written in Old Persian language but in Aramaic script. In Fattori (forthc.) I collected extensive philological evidence in support of this idea.

In this paper, I would like to draw the attention on the historical reasons which may have caused the need to resort to an Aramaic draft in the production of Old Persian inscriptions only in the Late Achaemenid period. In my view, this is due to the fact that in the 4th century B.C. the official scribes endowed with the authority required to compose the text of royal inscriptions were not trained anymore in writing cuneiform texts with a stylus on clay tablets, as happened at the time of Darius I, and could only write down the text of the inscriptions in Aramaic characters written on parchment or papyrus. Consequently, the transposition from Aramaic to cuneiform characters was entrusted to technicians who were not necessarily part of the royal chancellery and sometimes were not able to properly transliterate the draft.

This change in the training of official scribes reflects the gradual abandon of Elamite (written in cuneiform on clay) as the standard language of local administration and the resulting decline of the technology of cuneiform writing in the whole empire. This is indeed an epoch-making change because cuneiform writing had been the most widespread writing technology both for monumental and administrative purposes in all the great Near and Middle Eastern empires of antiquity, and after the Achaemenids it survived only in some marginal local traditions (e.g. in Hellenistic Babylonia). In the following centuries, up to the present day, the writing culture of those regions was going to be dominated by the Aramaic alphabetic script (or its descendants), the advantages of which were manifold, including the possibility of writing on lighter and easily transportable materials and the much easier learning process, which only required to memorize 22 letters rather than hundreds or even thousands of syllabic signs and logograms.

This case study can serve to illustrate the dialectical relationship existing between practical factors and symbolic purposes in the evolution of writing culture. As was said, the dismission of cuneiform writing most probably started in administrative context for practical reasons, but the royal chancellery kept producing trilingual royal inscriptions in cuneiform (Old Persian, Elamite and Akkadian), even though it required a greater effort for lack of competent professionals, only because that script was perceived as the most appropriate medium for the representation of royal power. In the end, the definitive death of cuneiform as the "royal" script *par excellence* was caused by the fall of the Achaemenid empire and its substitution with the Greek-speaking (and writing) Macedonian empire. I believe that this is a good example of the pivotal role of political and symbolic factors in preserving older writing traditions, which are often strong enough to resist the pressure of technological innovation.

Select bibliography
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