

PERSIAN LITERATURE – Ancient Period

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Overview Ancient Persia of the Achaemenid period (550-330 B.C.E.) was notable for its architecture, its city planning, its transportation networks, and above all for its distinguished rulers, Cyrus, Darius, and Xerxes. Notably, though, there is almost no ‘literature’ remaining from early Persian culture: instead there are a few notable inscriptions, and some vestiges of religious literature, from Zoroastrian texts, which found their way to India in the Sassanid period (224-651 C.E.).

The context of ancient Persian literature External factors contributed to the paucity of early Persian literature--in a culture which was eventually, in the Middle Ages, to prove one of the world’s richest periods for poetry and philosophy--names like Firdausi, Hafiz, and Rumi only open the dramatic story. One historical ‘cause’ of this ancient literary paucity was the so-called Destruction of the Library at Persepolis, the capital of the Achaemenid Empire, in 330 B.C.E. That disastrous move, sparked by Alexander’s desire to avenge Xerxes’ ravaging of Greece, a century and a half earlier, deprived the historical record of what was surely a treasure of Zoroastrian literatures, and presumably of non-religious texts. One would hardly expect a complete absence of imaginative literatures in Persia, given the richness of such literature at early stages of Egyptian and Mesopotamian culture.

Zoroastrian texts Many of the texts of the *Avesta*, the chief scripture of the Zoroastrian religion, surely date from close to the time of the prophet Zoroaster (b. ca. 1000 B.C.E.), probably at that stage in oral form. This exalted religious-poetic material passed down, in both oral and written forms, throughout the first millennium B.C.E. in Persia; much of it however was lost forever in the destruction of Persepolis; and a sizeable body of Zoroastrian texts were transported to India, during the Sassanid period (224-651 C.E.). While the dating of this noble literary-religious form, in Persia itself, remains shaky, we know much more about eventually thriving Zoroastrian communities of India, where the Parsis have from early in our era cultivated reading and worship of the *Avesta*.

The Behistun Inscription The Behistun Inscription was carved during the reign of Darius the Great (522-486 B.C.E.) into the side of a cliff on Mount Behistun. There is a relief sculpture, showing the King and his forces, and a text, in three languages, which has served as a kind of Rosetta Stone for the interpretation of early Persian cuneiform scripts. The inscription text, in each language, describes the exploits and victories of Darius, while at the same presenting a stylized autobiography of the great monarch, highlighting the nobility of his birth and the power of his royal rule. ‘Literature’ of a sort, for sure, in the frigid kingly style of the conqueror.

Readings

Hinnells, John, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora: Religion and Migration*, Oxford, 2005.

Curtis, J. and Tallis, N., eds., *Forgotten Empire: The World of Ancient Persia*, Berkeley, 2015.

Discussion questions

Ancient literatures are on the whole preserved in only fragmentary form. What kinds of problem does this situation present, for the construction of the history of ancient literature?

What kind of literary values can we extract from formulaic inscriptional evidence? Is there a unique aesthetic embodied in a monarchical inscription?

Three different languages appear on the Behistun inscription in columns of 100-500 words each; what can we learn about the ancient Persian literary mind from the ways those columns translate the same laudatory message about Darius?