

**‘And the people of Hellfire speak Bukharan’:
A sociolinguistic perspective on the Middle Iranian languages in the Islamic period***

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*abġaḡu l-kalāmi ilā llāhi l-Fārisīyatu wa-kalāmu
š-šayāfīni l-Khūzīyatu wa-kalāmu ‘ahli n-nāri
l-Buxārīyatu wa-kalāmu ahli l-ġannati l-‘Arabīya*

“The worst language in God’s view is Persian, the devils speak Khūzī, the people of Hellfire speak Bukhāran, and the people of Paradise speak Arabic.”¹

How do value judgements come to be attached to languages? When does a language or language tradition die out? How can scholars discern either of these processes in the ancient or medieval past? And how are the intersections of Arabic with the Middle Iranian languages not only obvious, but helpful both for the philologist or historian of Iranian languages and for the scholar of early Islam? These are some of the questions I intend to attend to in the following discussion...

Background

The Iranian languages form a branch of the Indo-European language family, and are usually divided into three chronological stages, helpfully called Old, Middle, and New. The Middle Iranian stage is usually assumed to cover the first millennium CE, more or less; the point at which a given language can be said to have proceeded to its ‘New’ stage varies by language, but is often associated with the arrival of Islam in that language area, and the adoption of Arabic script in writing. The attested Middle Iranian writing traditions are six in number—Middle Persian, Parthian, Bactrian, Chorasmian, Sogdian, and Khotanese—and of course there were probably several other such languages and dialects, but ones which were never written down. Fig. 1 shows these six in their “home” regions, though in several cases a language was used by groups well outside of its original area.

Chronologically, while the Middle Iranian languages are attested roughly over the entire first millennium CE, the extant text corpora aren’t evenly distributed over this time period. In fact,

* This paper is an attempt to sketch out a broad background eventually to be narrowed down mostly to the fate of Sogdian in particular, amidst the other Mir. languages. It will be a chapter of the book project—a social history of Sogdian—that I am embarking on. A version of this paper was initially presented to broad audiences, where considering the fate of the Middle Iranian languages more generally seemed appropriate. Part of my goal for this workshop is to stimulate discussion among Arabists and Islamicists and probe at our overlaps.

¹ A ḡadīth preserved by al-Maqḡisi, among others, see al-Maqḡisi 418.6-11.

the majority of Middle Iranian sources found in their homelands are quite late, most dating to the eve of the Islamic era if not during it. That is to say, though much of the time Middle Iranian is equated to “pre-Islamic”, the actual texts were produced in an Islamic context and indeed often reflect that. For instance, the largest Middle Persian text corpus, consisting of the classical Zoroastrian texts of theology, philosophy, and ritual, was composed squarely in the Islamic era, and several of the most important texts in 10th-11th century CE Baghdad itself.² It may be apparent that I am hinting at a tension in the way the sources are traditionally viewed: they are supposed to be pre-Islamic in nature and content, but are actually Islamic, and yet if Islam was a major rupture in Iranian history and in all these languages and literatures, how then did they survive into the Islamic era? I want to try to untangle these questions by tracing continuities in language traditions, how we can see them, and where we might look to understand why and how they disappeared. Here, I journey through a variety of texts in four of the Middle Iranian languages, interspersed with a historical sociolinguistic perspective on language use and transmission.

² For some examples of the growing recognition of this in Zoroastrian studies and productive interrogation of texts in their Islamic context, see Albert De Jong, “The Dēnkard and the Zoroastrians of Baghdad,” in *The Zoroastrian Flame: Exploring Religion, History and Tradition*, ed. Alan Williams, Sarah Stewart, and Almut Hintze (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 223–38; Kianoosh Rezania, “The Dēnkard Against Its Islamic Discourse,” *Der Islam* 94, no. 2 (2017): 336–62; Gianfilippo Terribili, “Dēnkard III Language Variation and the Defence of Socio-Religious Identity in the Context of Early-Islamic Iran,” *Open Linguistics* 3, no. 1 (2017): 396–418; Christian C. Sahner, “A Zoroastrian Dispute in the Caliph’s Court: The Gizistag Abāliš in Its Early Islamic Context,” *Iranian Studies* 52, no. 1–2 (2019): 61–83.

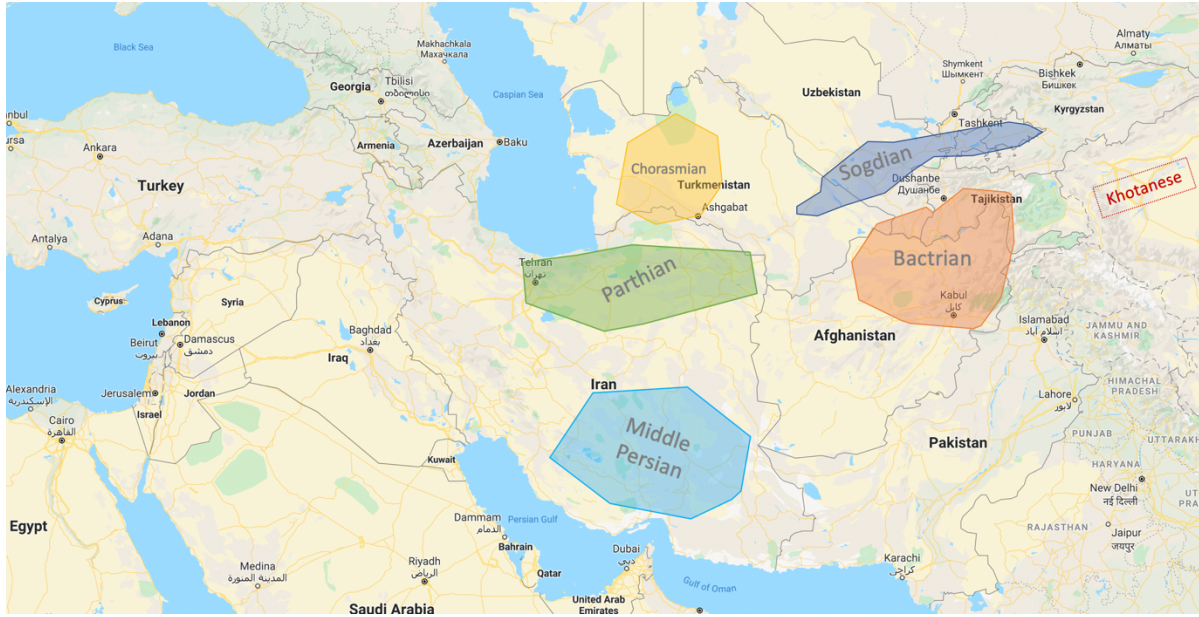


Fig. 1 The homelands of the attested Middle Iranian languages

Middle Persian

Let us begin with Middle Persian, probably the most familiar of any of these languages. It is only recently that evidence about Middle Persian as a written administrative language has come to light, with major finds of official documents from late Sasanian Egypt, and Tabarestan and central Iran in the first Islamic centuries.

These documents show directly a vast and complex administration with numerous types of officials trained in the difficult style of writing the so-called Pahlavi script. There must have been trained officials who could easily have been moved around the empire; this much is implied by the existence of Sasanian documents, on papyrus, from Egypt, despite the Sasanians' brief occupation of the country (~618-628 CE), lasting only 10 years. Most importantly, this administration was geographically broad while also decentralized, organized at the local or provincial level. This fact was of great import, for the Sasanian administration, or more precisely, the people who constituted it—the scribes, tax collectors, ration givers, astrologers, and so on—didn't disappear with the conquest of the empire by Arab Muslims in the mid-600s, but instead continued to work *in* Middle Persian for another century. The extant documents attest to this new context, of course. For example, there are a group of documents dealing with a figure called the *Ōstāndār*, a provincial governor of a region near what is now Qom, modern Iran, a

holdover from the Sasanian administration. In one (Berk. 62), a list of expenses, there is a payment—1 sheep—listed for the *‘āmil*, the Arab tax collector.³ In another document (Berk. 66), from a different group, provisions from public funds are allotted to a mosque; some have speculated that the mosque referred to there is indeed the Mašjid-i ‘atīq, the oldest mosque of Qom.⁴ Yet another example (Berk. 95) shows how local Persian officials interacted with higher, Arab officials, in that text, in what seems to be deliveries of culinary products to prepare for a feast for the *amīr*.⁵ All these documents have been dated to the last decade of the 7th century CE.

Berk. 62

*pad nāmag ī wēnag ... uzēnīd ī dūdāg ī ōstāndār
... xārīd ī kār ‘āmil rāy gōspand I*

“A public record ... of expense of the family of the Ōstāndār ... on behalf of the *‘āmil* who initiated collection, 1 sheep...”

Berk. 66

az ān ī ō bun ... grīw III ō mazgīt

“...from that which belongs to the public account ... (should be given) 3 measures to the mosque ...”

Berk. 95

*ka amīr ... ō namēwar āmad ud yazdānbānag
ōstāndār sūr ī kas-iz ud abārīg tāzīgān kas abāg
būdan xwadāy rāy framūd yaštan ... sik 3 dōlag
tarēnag-ēw zīrag wahāg gandum kabīz 2 gižnīz
nēm dēg wisp satēr I pad-iš dēg ān xrīd...*

“...when the Amīr...came to Namēwar and the Ōstāndār, protected by the gods, ordered to celebrate a banquet for people and the other Arabs ... vinegar 3 pails, *tarēnag one, cumin worth of 2 kabīz of wheat, coriander of half a satēr and all for 1 satēr per cauldron to be bought...”

Documents such as these attest to a perhaps unexpected fact: a new empire didn’t bring a new language overnight. People continued doing their jobs as they had been trained—but of course in a new context, as we can see by the intrusion of this *‘āmil* into an otherwise totally local Middle Persian financial document following older Sasanian norms, or by the addition of a Muslim institution, a mosque, as a recipient of a typically Sasanian system of public funds. The existence of such documents means that the class of people who used Middle Persian secular

³ Dieter Weber, “Villages and Estates in the Documents from the Pahlavi Archive: The Geographical Background,” *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 24 (2010/2014): 50–53; Dieter Weber, “Living Together in Changing Iran: Pahlavi Documents on Arabs and Christians in Early Islamic Times,” *Annales Islamologiques* 54 (2020): 153–55.

⁴ Philippe Gignoux, “Les documents économiques de Xwarēn,” in *Trésors d’Orient: Mélanges offerts à Rika Gyselen*, ed. Philippe Gignoux, C. Jullien, and F. Jullien, Cahiers de Studia Iranica 42 (Paris: Peeters, 2009), 90–91; Weber, “Living Together in Changing Iran: Pahlavi Documents on Arabs and Christians in Early Islamic Times,” 146–47.

⁵ Weber, “Living Together in Changing Iran: Pahlavi Documents on Arabs and Christians in Early Islamic Times,” 151–53.

writing did not disappear, at least for a while. These were the secretaries and scribes, known as *dibīrs*. And even after the administration had switched entirely to Arabic, this class of people still stuck around, coming to serve the Umayyad and later Abbasid administrations, where they were employed as *kātibs*, in addition to other Middle Persian-trained professionals such as astrologers. They adapted their skills and erudition to the new imperial context which employed them, and, in the process, some of them ultimately translated Middle Persian learning into Arabic, where it now survives.⁶ The famous narrative text *Kalīla wa-Dimna*, translated by Ibn al-Muqaffa‘ from a Middle Persian original in the 8th century, is of course the most famous example.⁷ Otherwise, Middle Persian writing only survived as the language of classical Zoroastrian writings, preserved by a small group of erudite priests invested in collating and compiling their religious learning even as their spoken language shifted to New Persian, and later still other languages in south Asia and beyond.

Finally, a sketch of Middle Persian such as this wouldn’t be complete without discussion of one of the most important passages preserving information about Iranian languages and writing traditions in the early Islamic world. This is Ibn al-Muqaffa‘’s report preserved in the famous *Fihrist* of Ibn al-Nadīm. Ibn al-Muqaffa‘ gives an account of the writing traditions of the Persians, saying that “the Persians have seven types of writing” (*li-l-furs sab‘atu anwā‘i mina l-khuṭūt*). Of these seven, only three are known to modern scholars. One is the script used for the Sasanian inscriptions in Middle Persian and Parthian on imperishable materials such as stone monuments or metal coins. The second is the *dēn-dabīrīh* “religious script”, used to write the Avesta (what we now call the Avestan script). And the third is the *nāma-dibīrīh* or “epistolary script”: what we now call the “Pahlavi script” (used for Zoroastrian texts in Middle Persian), complete with its system of Aramaic ideograms. These latter two have been preserved through the continued existence of the Zoroastrian priesthood up till the present day. The scripts of which we have no extant examples are those whose institutions ceased to exist: the scripts of the

⁶ For the essentials, see Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdād and Early ‘Abbāsīd Society* (London: Routledge, 1998), 25–60. For arguments about, and some reconstruction of, Middle Persian writing, see Kevin van Bladel, “Written Middle Persian literature under the Sasanids” (forthcoming).

⁷ The standard account is François de Blois, *Burzōy’s Voyage to India and the Origin of the Book of Kalīlah Wa Dimnah*, Royal Asiatic Society Prize Publication Fund 23 (London, 1990). For another example of MP learning rendered into Arabic, see Kevin Van Bladel, “The Arabic History of Science of Abū Sahl Ibn Nawbakht (Fl. ca 770-809) and Its Middle Persian Sources,” in *Islamic Philosophy, Science, Culture, and Religion. Studies in Honor of Dimitri Gutas*, ed. Felicity Opwis and David Reisman (Leiden - Boston: Brill, 2012), 41–62.

Sasanian kings, called in this report the *shāh-dibīrīh* “king’s script”, or the two separate scripts reportedly used for writing Middle Persian medicine, philosophy, and logic. And although they no longer exist, and scholars of Middle Iranian have dismissed this passage as exaggeration, I think it is warranted to assume that Ibn al-Muqaffa‘, who in addition even translated a work of Aristotelian logic from Middle Persian to Arabic, knew what he was talking about. Like others in his position, and like Ibn al-Nadīm’s contemporary informant Āmād the Zoroastrian priest explicitly stated, those who were trained in the Middle Persian sciences nevertheless rendered those works into Arabic, according to the conditions of their employment, the effect of which was, perhaps contrary to our expectations, to ensure their survival for another millenium.

Bactrian

In Bactria, lying between the Pamir and Hindu Kush mountain ranges, a local variety of the Greek script was used to write Bactrian, a legacy of the conquest of Alexander in the 300s BCE. Besides its use in monumental inscriptions of rulers, Bactrian was the language of local scribes or officials for all sorts of secular and religious documents. In fact, many of the extant Bactrian documents come from the multi-generational archive of a single family who lived in the Bamiyan area, modern-day Afghanistan. Over the course of about 100 years, various types of contracts and receipts are preserved in Bactrian alongside, for the final generations of the family, Arabic, the new administrative language of the region by the 750s.⁸

Institutions are generally not easy to see in documents such as these, since they aren’t meant to be descriptive and are often highly formulaic. On occasion, though, some of the structures within which documents like this were produced can be discerned. In Document F, a contract dating to around the year 470 CE, we can see where such a document would have been made (at court, located in a fortress) and in the presence of which authorities (a market inspector and a local, *ōstāndār*-like figure).

⁸ For the documents in Bactrian, see Nicholas Sims-Williams, *Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan, Vol. 2: Letters and Buddhist Texts* (London: The Nour Foundation, 2007); Nicholas Sims-Williams, *Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan, Vol. 1: Legal and Economic Documents (Revised Edition)* (London: The Nour Foundation, 2012)., for those in Arabic, see Geoffrey Khan, *Arabic Documents from Early Islamic Khurasan, Studies in the Khalili Collection* 5, 2007. On the overall chronology of these documents, see now Nicholas Sims-Williams and François de Blois, *Studies in the Chronology of the Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan, with Contributions by Harry Falk and Dieter Weber*, Veröffentlichungen Zur Iranistik 83 (Vienna: Verlag der ÖAW, 2018).

Doc. F

ναβιχτο μολρογο αβησαχοαντιγο αβο μο λαναγγο βαρο αβο βορζαιδο αβο λιζο αβο καδαγοβιδο
αλβαρο αζδηβιδο ζαροοηρο οιβριανο οδο πισο ταλμοζηνο οασαροβιδο

“...this sealed document of renunciation was written in the city of Lan, fortress of Burzawid, at the court of the governor, with the cognizance of Zar-Wer Wibriyan, and in the presence of Talm-Zen the overseer of the market...”

With the advent of Arabic and Islam, documents such as these shifted to Arabic, and show that the Bactrians for whom such documents were prepared operated within both older Bactrian and newer Arab-Islamic social and financial structures. A study of the scribes and official figures in these documents from Bactria, yet to be undertaken, would be able to begin to sketch out what the administrative class of late-Kushan/early-Islamic Bactrian society was like, whether their functions were similar to that of the Sasanian *dibīrs*, and to what extent they continued to operate after the arrival of Islamic rule. The point here is, there exist documents for such a study. And these documents have begun to be exploited for how they complicate and even counter history written on the basis of (later) Arabic and Persian chronicles and prosopographies.⁹ Lastly, we must note again that the Bactrian language did not disappear with the shift away from Bactrian *writing*: Arabic reports mention on several occasions, for example, that Bactrian speakers made up a significant portion of the Abbasid revolutionary army, to the extent that eventually a quarter of Baghdad was even named after them in the 9th century.¹⁰

Sogdian

Just to the north, the only corpus of Sogdian texts from Sogdiana itself comes from right in the middle of the Arab conquest of the region. This is the archive of Dhewashtich, the last king of Sogdiana, discovered at a remote fortress in upland Tajikistan where Dhewashtich was finally

⁹ For example, Arezou Azad, “Living Happily Ever after: Fraternal Polyandry, Taxes and ‘the House’ in Early Islamic Bactria,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 79, no. 1 (2016): 33–56.

¹⁰ For more on the importance of Bactria and its contribution to ‘Abbasid culture, see Kevin Van Bladel, “The Bactrian Background of the Barmakids,” in *Islam and Tibet - Interactions along the Musk Routes*, ed. Anna Akasoy, Charles Burnett, and Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim (Ashgate, 2011), 43–88.

captured by the Arab general Qutayba b. Muslim in about 721 CE.¹¹ Though also here the workings of the Sogdian administration are not well understood, and the documents do not contain much mention of scribes and the like, a pair of important documents actually allows us to infer something about the institutionalization of Sogdian writing. The first is a letter, in beautiful Sogdian script, *from* the Arab general ‘Abd al-Rahmān b. Šubḥ *to* Dhewashtich, dated to the year 719 CE.¹² Its very existence suggests a class of Sogdian scribes, some of whom must have defected to, been hired by, or otherwise come under the rule of the new Arab leaders of the region, scribes who could compose a Sogdian letter which aligns perfectly with the Sogdian epistolary tradition, except for two things, namely a Sogdian rendering of the Arabic phrases *bismillah* (in Sogdian, *parnām vaḡi dhāmdhānē* “In the name of God the Creator”) and *alḥamdu li-llah* (*əspās awēn vaḡi* “praise to God”). As if that weren’t striking enough, this letter has a counterpart of sorts—an Arabic letter *from* Dhewashtich *to* al-Jarrāḥ b. ‘Abdallah *from* about the same time.¹³ Clearly, either side could obtain a scribe for the language they required.¹⁴ What we can glean from this corpus, mostly of letters, is among other things the structure of a network of officials of late pre-Islamic Sogdiana and the types of documents they issued.

There exist no later documents as evidence of the continuation of Sogdian writing for administrative or other official purposes in the early Islamic period in Sogdiana itself. But there is an explanation for this. In recent studies, Michael Shenkar has shown that Sogdiana was not a singular, unitary state like the Sasanian empire, but rather a loose collection of city-states, each ruled by a civic council composed of aristocrats and merchants.¹⁵ Unfortunately, as Shenkar has argued, this made Sogdian civic institutions particularly susceptible to dissolution after conquest.

¹¹ For a reconstruction of these events based on a comparison of the Sogdian material with the records transmitted by al-Ṭabarī, see Frantz Grenet and Étienne de la Vaissière, “The Last Days of Panjikent,” *Silk Road Art and Archaeology* 8 (2002): 155–90.

¹² Edited in Vladimir A. Livshits, *Sogdian Epigraphy of Central Asia and Semirech’ye*, vol. III.IV, Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum, Part II (London: SOAS, 2015), 88–93.

¹³ The Arabic letter was edited by I. Krachkovsky & V. Krachkovskaya, “Drevneyshiy arabskiy dokument iz Sredney Azii” in Freiman, Aleksandr A., ed. *Sogdijskij Sbornik: sbornik statej o pamyatnikax sogdijского yaz’ika i kul’tur’i najdeny’ix na gore mug v tadžikskoj SSR* (Leningrad: Akademiya Nauk SSSR, 1934), pp. 52-90. For an updated analysis in the context of early Arabic documents and the advent of paper, see now Marina Rustow, *The Lost Archive: Traces of a Caliphate in a Cairo Synagogue* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 124–29.

¹⁴ Said Reza Huseini, *Thinking in Arabic, Writing in Sogdian: Arabic-Sogdian Diplomatic Relations in the Early Eighth Century* (Brill, 2022).

¹⁵ Michael Shenkar, “The Origin of the Sogdian Civic Communities (Nāf),” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 63 (2020): 357–88.

By the mid-8th century, traces of Sogdian civic life in Sogdiana seem all but gone.¹⁶ Sogdian writing then survives only in places outside of Sogdiana where other kinds of institutions maintained it, for example, in the Manichaean communities of Central Asia and China, or in the Buddhist communities of the Tarim Basin, both up until about the early 11th century CE.¹⁷

Language Perspectives

The previous section was just a glimpse of some of the existing Middle Iranian textual corpora and the institutions underlying their existence. What I hope you can get a sense of are some of the questions I'm interested in asking: who were the people whose function was to learn writing and create these documents? What kinds of official contexts did they operate in and what else did they write? And, ultimately, what happened to them after the Islamic conquests? Although I'm a philologist, I'm interested here in asking *sociolinguistic* questions of the limited bodies of evidence we have for Middle Iranian and thinking about what the existence of written documents means about the social dynamics of a language.

We can imagine, for example, that Middle Persian was a language that had a fair amount of people using it in daily life, and probably an additional number of people who were trained to use it for official purposes but spoke some other Iranian language as their first language. But government jobs required Middle Persian, so people learned it. Since not only did government offices use it, but also the powerful and wealthy Zoroastrian priestly class, not to mention the ruling kings themselves, we can imagine that the high social status and privilege of Middle Persian users conferred high social status on the language itself. Moreover, material resources were dedicated to using Middle Persian: the training of scribes, the preparation of writing materials, and the various types of things needed to archive, copy, and circulate all these

¹⁶ Michael Shenkar, "The Arab Conquest and the Collapse of the Sogdian Civilization," in *The History and Culture of Iran and Central Asia in the First Millennium CE: From the Pre-Islamic to the Islamic Era*, ed. Deborah G. Tor and Minoru Inaba (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2021), 95–124. The social unrest which plagued the area for a stretch of time in the early Islamic centuries does not seem to have left behind material in Sogdian, nor foregrounded a specifically 'Sogdian' identity including language, see e.g. Yury Karev, *Samarqand et le Sughd à l'époque 'Abbāside. Histoire politique et sociale* (Paris: Association pour l'avancement des études iraniennes, 2015).

¹⁷ The continuation of Sogdian writing in sites such as Turfan and Dunhuang in Christian, Manichaean, and Buddhist communities, is a separate topic which will be tackled in a separate chapter of the planned book under the rubric of Sogdian as a vehicle of religious literature. Of course, the story of its continuity in those communities is one of institutional survival, too.

documents. Because of its high status, non-Persians who learned Middle Persian probably obtained some amount of respect from those who didn't learn it. In sum, what sociolinguists call the “vitality” of Middle Persian was probably quite high in the Sasanian empire.

But where the concept of “vitality” is really useful is in comparing multiple languages which exist in the same social spaces. By the mid-7th century the Sasanian empire was effectively conquered, and by the early 8th century places like Bactria and Sogdiana came under Muslim rule as well. While the arrival of Islam and Arab government is usually viewed as a rupture or break with the pre-Islamic Iranian past, what this meant in reality varied. As briefly pointed to, Middle Persian continued to be used by various local officials for at least a century for the production of original documents, and Middle Persian education must have continued to exist for even longer, since Middle Persian speakers trained in literature and lore continued to furnish secretaries, administrators, and scholars for Muslim rulers until even the 9th century. But, the social status of Middle Persian must have been diminished during this period, and there is even evidence that the transmission of Persian was threatened in places. A new and significant number of Arabic speakers were also now present.

Let us back up a bit in time, and move to yet another Middle Iranian-speaking realm: Chorasmia (Ar. Khuwārizm). Here, in contrast to Iran or Bactria, knowledge of writing seems to have been totally lost with the Arab conquest of the region. In his famed *Chronology* (*al-āṭār al-bāqiya ‘an al-qurūn al-xāliya*), written in the early 1000s CE, the Chorasmian polymath Abu Rayḥān al-Biruni (d. ~1050) describes that the early 8th-century conquests effectively destroyed all the institutions of writing and learning in Chorasmian such that by his time it was no longer possible to access the information of original Chorasmian texts.¹⁸

وكان قتيبة أباد من يحسن الخط الخوارزمي ويعلم اخبارهم ويدرس ما كان عندهم ومزقهم كل ممزق فخبثت لذلك خفاء لا يتوصل معه الى معرفة الحقائق ما بعد عهد الإسلام به.

“Qutayba [bin Muslim] had extinguished and totally ruined those who knew how to write the Chorasmian writing, who knew their history and who studied their sciences. In consequence these

¹⁸ Eduard Sachau, trans., *The Chronology of Ancient Nations* (London: William H. Allen, 1879), 42. Al-Biruni's separate treatise on the political history of Chorasmia, *Kitāb al-musāmara fī akhbār Khuwārizm* (Tales about the Affairs of Khwarizm) is lost and now known only from quotations in other works. The pre-Islamic writing system of Chorasmian was derived from the Aramaic script, as with other Middle Iranian writing traditions. Quite a few examples have been uncovered from 20th-century excavations in historical Chorasmia; the estimated chronology of the extant texts seems to confirm al-Biruni's claims.

things disappeared to the extent that, since the time of Islam, it is impossible to obtain an accurate knowledge (of the history of the country).”

But while writing of official Chorasmian in its native script may have been stopped suddenly, this nevertheless did not lead to Chorasmian disappearing entirely as a spoken language. Indeed, even 400 years *after* these events described by al-Biruni, Chorasmians began to use the Arabic script to write Chorasmian. These texts, as far as we know, were largely limited to providing access for Chorasmian speakers to Arabic as the legal and literary language, and consisted mostly of Chorasmian translations or glosses provided to texts such as the legal compendium *Qunyat al-Munya* or the dictionary *Muqaddimat al-Adab*.¹⁹ Chorasmian resurfaces for a brief heyday, but only in relation to the dominant *written* language, Arabic.

In other words, in each of these regions, new political contexts affected the institutions using Middle Iranian languages in various ways. Some continued as before for a time, some didn't continue at all, and some continued but in a new language—Arabic. And that is why there is a great deal of information on the Middle Iranian languages to be found in Arabic sources. It often comes as a surprise to scholars of Middle Iranian that early-Islamic Arabic sources have something to say on this matter; it also still comes as a surprise, though less often, to scholars of Arabic that the information given in these sources on the diversity of Iranian languages points to real languages with extant textual corpora. This is only so because Arabic sources in general, many of which were written by people who actually spoke Iranian languages, have been systematically overlooked by specialists in Middle Iranian. It's hardly an exaggeration to claim that most major Arabic writers of the first few Islamic centuries have something to say, whether in passing or in detail, about Iranian and other languages of their time. To round out this discussion, therefore, I want to turn to a few selected passages from Arabic sources from around the 10th-11th centuries, passages which shed some light on the situation and perception of Iranian languages of the time.

In the *History of Bukhara*, a chronicle composed by Abū Bakr al-Narshakhī (d. 959) in Arabic around 940 (then translated into Persian about 1130; the Arabic original is now lost), an anecdote about the early days of Islam in Sogdiana is related. Al-Narshakhī relates that Qutayba,

¹⁹ See for example David N. MacKenzie, “Khwarazmian Language and Literature,” in *The Cambridge History of Iran III/2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1244–49; David N. MacKenzie, “Khwarezmian in the Law Books,” in *Études Irano-Aryennes Offertes à Gilbert Lazard*, Cahiers de Studia Iranica 7 (Paris: Peeters, 1989), 265–76.

the same one responsible for the conquest of Chorasnia, built a congregational mosque in Bukhara around 712 CE, but had to offer the financial incentive of two dirhams to get the reluctantly Muslim Sogdians to attend Friday prayer. Al-Narshakhī then notes something quite interesting about how prayer was done in early Islamic Sogdiana.²⁰

و مردمان بخارا باول اسلام در نماز قرآن پارسى خواندندى و عربى نتوانستندى آموختن و چون وقت ركوع شدى مردى بودى كه در پس ايشان بانك كردى نكنبيا نكنبيت و چون سجده خواستندى بانك كردى نكونيا نكوني.

“The people of Bukhara, at the beginning of (their conversion to) Islam, read the Qur’ān in Persian during prayer, for they were unable to understand Arabic. When it was time for the *rukū* ‘a man behind them shouted *nikambyā nikēmbt* [Sogdian for “bow down”], and when they wanted the *suğūd*, he shouted *nikūnyā nikūnī* [Sogdian for “lie down”].”

Al-Narshakhi’s account of prayer in Bukhara doesn’t just show us that Sogdian was spoken there in 712. Of course it was; Sogdian didn’t disappear overnight. More importantly, this account shows us that conditions are changing. We can already see how a new hierarchy of languages is in place. The new ruling elite uses Arabic, and congregants ultimately should know Arabic as well for praying correctly. But since they haven’t yet been able to acquire Arabic, Persian will do. This suggests that some form of Persian had a role in the spread of Islam to this region, and that at least some people in Bukhara knew some Persian.²¹ But the general populace knew neither, and needed instructions in Sogdian, the local language, in order to perform the movements of prayer at the right time. This early 8th-century hierarchy foreshadows the linguistic situation of Bukhara only a few centuries later in the 10th: Arabic, the language of religion and scholarship, Persian, the language of many people in the city itself and a growing language of literature, and Sogdian, no longer written in the area, the language of rural districts

²⁰ Richard N. Frye, trans., *The History of Bukhara* (Cambridge, MA: Medieval Academy of America, 1954), 48-49 with note 184 on pp. 135-136. For an updated reconstruction of the conquest of Bukhara itself, see now Sören Stark, “The Arab Conquest of Bukhārā: Reconsidering Qutayba b. Muslim’s Campaigns 87–90 H/706–709 CE,” *Der Islam* 95, no. 2 (2018): 367–400.

²¹ This point may seem like stating the obvious to scholars of Arabic and Islam. But there is no evidence that (Middle) Persian was commonly known at Bukhara in the 8th-century, much less that it was there a language of religion, literature, or governance. It is far more likely for Sogdians of this time to have been familiar with (Old) Turkic varieties of the Central Asia steppe.

But I would prefer insulting in Arabic to praising in Persian! He who has ever engaged with a book of science translated into Persian will know the truth of my words —how its elegance disappeared, its sense darkened, its visage blackened, and its usefulness was voided. For this language (Persian) is only fit for reciting the legends of kings or bedtime stories.”

Even though al-Biruni was at pains to record details of Chorasmian history and culture in this and other works, this passage makes clear that there was for him an unassailable hierarchy of languages. In addition, to him each language has certain characteristics which contribute to its place in this hierarchy: Arabic is clear, useful, elegant and thus suited for science; but Persian is unclear, lacks sense and usefulness, and thus in the end suited only for unserious pastimes like legends or stories. Chorasmian appears almost totally worthless against these two.

But individuals’ views of languages, including their own, are not as idiosyncratic as we might like to believe. Rather, it is a tenet of sociolinguistics that they are conditioned by pre-existing attitudes reflecting social hierarchies, prejudice, and so forth. Al-Biruni’s view of his own mother tongue should reflect a more widely-held view of Chorasmian. If he viewed it negatively, we could surely count on others, especially speakers of languages higher up on the scale, to do the same. And there are several such reports. Al-Maqdisi commented simply that in contrast to a more widely-known language like Persian, of which even he had some knowledge, “the language of the people of Chorasmia is incomprehensible (*lā yufhim*)”.²⁶ But the noted traveler Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān could hardly contain his contempt, writing in his travelogue, that “The Chorasmians are the most barbarous of people, both in speech and customs. Their language sounds like the cries of starlings...and the croaking of frogs (*kalāmuhum ‘ašbaha šay’in bi-šiyāḥi z-zarāzīr ... bi-naqīqi ḍ-ḍafādi ‘*)”.²⁷ Interested as al-Biruni was in the history and customs of his own people, he had no choice but to learn Arabic in order to record them. Even his now-lost work on the history and customs of Chorasmia, for example, was written in Arabic.

Al-Biruni’s comments also give us some insight into the values attached to Persian. Though from about the year 1000, they echo sociolinguistic attributes of Arabic and Persian from well before. In the 9th and 10th centuries, there seems to have been a relatively pervasive association of Arabic with masculinity, learning, and correct religion, on one hand, and Persian with femininity, domesticity, and even corruption, on the other. This is well-attested and has been thoroughly discussed by scholars such as Travis Zadeh in his lengthy work *The Vernacular*

²⁶ Basil Anthony Collins, trans., *The Best Divisions for Knowledge of the Regions* (Reading, 1994), p. 272.

²⁷ Ibn Faḍlān, *Risālat Ibn Faḍlān*, edited by Sāmī Dahhān (Damascus, 1959), 82.

Qur'an.²⁸ Among these are reports such as those attributed to the second caliph ‘Umar b. al-Khattab saying that the teaching of Persian decreases manliness, or a hadith revealing that “God uses Persian when he wants to reveal a matter involving tenderness or contentment (*līn/riḍa*), while he uses Arabic for something involving harshness or anger (*shidda/ghaḍab*)”. Al-Biruni’s separation of Arabic for science and Persian for legends and bedtime stories, which by the way is a type of literature which contemporary sources show women as transmitting, seems to be in this vein.²⁹

To round out this discussion, I’d like to reflect on the (non-traditional) ḥadīth preserved by scholars such as al-Maqdisi and others serving as this paper’s epigraph.

*abḡaḍu l-kalāmi ilā llāhi l-Fārisīyatu wa-kalāmu
š-šayāḡīni l-Khūzīyatu wa-kalāmu ‘ahli n-nāri
l-Buxārīyatu wa-kalāmu ahli l-ḡannati l-‘Arabīya*

“The worst language in God’s view is Persian, the devils speak Khūzī, the people of Hellfire speak Bukhāran, and the people of Paradise speak Arabic.”³⁰

This ḥadīth obviously presents some strong value judgements. But it is valuable for our interests because it must represent some specific social and historical reasons, reasons which we can track, for these judgements. The dichotomy it presents is of course reminiscent again of al-Biruni’s perspective: the best language (Arabic) versus all other languages, of which Persian here is the worst. (It does make you wonder though if an Arabic speaker goes to hell, would they start speaking Bukhāran immediately?) But to someone like al-Muqaddasi, we can also see how this makes some sense. Persian and Bukhāran (by which he probably means a kind of Sogdian) were, for the moment, no longer languages with distinguished written traditions, either secular or religious. Speakers of those languages participated in the wider worlds of literature and religion by learning Arabic, while Arabic speakers not only expected them to do so, but also may have associated Persian and Sogdian with various stigmas, of which we have seen hints. This passage also represents some scholarly limits: scholars of Arabic haven’t thought much about what Khūzī was, for example, while scholars of Iranian languages didn’t know what to make of Bukhāran

²⁸ Travis Zadeh, *The Vernacular Qur’an: Translation and the Rise of Persian Exegesis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²⁹ But continues by the way to this day, for example, Hamid Dabashi speaks of Persian’s “effectively feminine disposition” in contrast with the “commanding and strict” Arabic in his work *The World of Persian Literary Humanism*.

³⁰ A ḥadīth preserved by al-Maqdisi, among others, see al-Maqdisi 418.6-11.

because Sogdian is supposed to have died out by this time.³¹ Much later, in the 14-15th centuries, people use this ḥadīth to talk about Persian specifically and no longer have any clue what Khūzī or Bukhāran are. And eventually, as we now know, people began writing Persian in the Arabic script and Persian institutions of writing developed and gained prestige. But this shift back to Persian and the rise of New Persian as an international literary vehicle in the centuries following, is a different, although related, story. This passage is also a good example of the familiarity classical Arabic writers had with local languages, though both Arabists and Iranists have neglected it because of their older assumptions that languages such as these died out full stop with the conquest. Indeed, there exist many Arabic reports which could be gathered for the purpose of simply showing that languages such as Chorasmian or Sogdian continued to be *spoken* for centuries.³²

In this sketch of a paper, I've tried to show one way of looking at the Middle Iranian sources which allows us to give attention especially to the social context of their writing, and how a variety of information about Middle Iranian languages can be recovered by looking at Islamic sources. For me, these are both part of the same story, that of the social history of the Iranian languages—which means an account of those languages' *speakers* and not just of official texts which preserve the language. Hence, any and all reports about the languages and their speakers are of value. This allows us to see how various spoken languages survived much longer than we think, and that underneath all of the literature produced in Arabic, and then in Arabic and (New) Persian, the Iranian linguistic diversity of the time must have been at least as rich as it is now. But this also has broader ramifications. It sheds light on the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the time, helping to pluralize and complexify our idea of the early Muslim communities of Iran and Central Asia. By attempting to read the sources we have differently, and taking full advantage of hitherto unavailable sources, I hope that we can arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the social context of these languages, one which can then in turn be brought to bear on the renewed interpretation of these texts.

³¹ It has been argued convincingly that Khūzī is a very late, and highly stigmatized, form of Elamite: Kevin T. Van Bladel, "The Language of the Xūz and the Fate of Elamite," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 31, no. 3 (2021): 447–62.

³² Two examples are Ibn Sīnā on Chorasmian and al-Fārābī on Sogdian: Adam Benkato, "Ibn Sīnā's Remarks on Khwarizmian Phonology," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 31, no. 3 (2021): 433–45; Ahmed Tafazzoli, "Three Sogdian Words in the Kitāb Al-Huruf," *Bulletin of the Iranian Culture Foundation* 1, no. 2 (1973): 7–8.