Written Middle Persian Literature under the Sasanids

Kevin T. van Bladel

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by

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I had submitted the written paper for publication in a collective volume in 2019. I thank the anonymous reviewers who approved it then for an academic press. It became clear in 2023, however, that the projected volume would not appear as planned, so I submitted this essay instead to *JAOS*, where it underwent another anonymous review. I thank this second round of reviewers and, especially, Stephanie Jamison and Peri Bearman, for their extensive feedback, pointers, and encouragement. The paper, as originally accepted elsewhere, and augmented further in my effort to satisfy multiple sets of reviewers and responses delivered to me orally and in writing, had become too long to be received in a regular issue of *JAOS*, but I am grateful to Peri Bearman and Stephanie Jamison for accommodating it in the AOS Essay Series, where it now appears. Thanks lastly to Erika Zabinski for preparing the index.

1
The Problem

In the last few decades it has become a common view in the study of pre-Islamic Iranic languages—more usually called Iranian languages among specialists—that literature in these languages was overwhelmingly not written but oral.[1] That is, it was spoken literature maintained only by repeated performances. In his 2006 article on pre-Islamic Iranian literature in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Philip Huyse wrote,

> Until the late Sasanian period, pre-Islamic Iran was mainly an oral society. As a result, Iranian "literature" was for a long time essentially of oral nature as far as composition, performance, and transmission are concerned. Many products of this oral type of literature (whether in verse or in prose) have thus not survived to the present day or were committed to writing only many centuries after their original composition.[2]

In a later study Huyse repeated some of this and added, "As a matter of fact, Iranians remained very sceptical about writing until the Islamic period [. . .]."[3]

A further sample of such statements, each with slight variations, will illustrate how common this view has become in the last few decades. For example, in 2009 A. de Jong expressed the view, "If, for comparative purposes, we are to consider the role that books played in Sasanian Iran, one might expect to be told that books played no role whatsoever in pre-Islamic Iranian societies, because there were none. As we shall see, there is a lot of truth in that [. . .]."[4] Also in 2009, M. Macuch's essay on Zoroastrian Middle Persian literature, in the survey volume *The Literature of Pre-Islamic Iran* that she coedited, cites the oral character of Middle Persian literature as one of the three main reasons that an abundance of it did not survive to reach us: not only oral poetry but "other genres of secular literature" were lost because they were oral texts.[5] The Islamic conquest is, in her view, to blame for transmitters of secular literature failing to transmit it *viva voce*.[6] In another 2009

1. See Perry 1998: 517 on the usefulness of the distinction made by the term Iranic, further discussed in 1.A, below. "Iranic" was used in earlier publications such as Windfuhr's 1979 history of the study of Persian grammar.
2. Huyse 2006: 410.
3. Huyse 2008: 142.
4. De Jong 2009: 29. To his credit, de Jong wishes to qualify this view and emphasizes that Middle Persian literacy existed in the Sasanian domain, though he holds that writing was used neither for religious nor for literary purposes.
5. Macuch 2009: 119: "What has already been said with respect to minstrel poetry was probably true of other genres of secular literature."
6. Macuch 2009: 119.

publication P. O. Skjærvø wrote that "the primarily oral nature of the ancient Iranian literature is an established fact."[7] Testimonies to this current belief in "ancient Iranian orality" and booklessness could be multiplied.[8] Many leading scholars of ancient Iranic languages and texts thus hold that the "ancient Iranians" were not a particularly literate people.[9]

There have been implicit dissenters from this relatively recent hypothesis of an "ancient Iranian orality" so pervasive that it interfered with the development of written literature. Already by 1885 Th. Nöldeke recognized that "there was once a not quite inconsiderable profane literature" in Pahlavi, the term he used for written Middle Persian and which he defined as "a kind of writing."[10] In the first modern attempt at a comprehensive survey of Middle Persian literature, E. W. West asserted, in a passage about Middle Persian writers, writing, and copies of books, "There is every reason to believe that an extensive Pahlavi literature, in all branches of knowledge, had come into existence before the end of the sixth century."[11] C. Cereti assumes the existence of "what must have been a very rich and [high-quality] secular literature known to have blossomed under the Parthians and the Sasanians," of which only a small sample is preserved in one manuscript;[12] F. de Blois writes, "It is clear that a very large amount of literature, encompassing both scientific writings and *belles lettres*, was translated from Greek and Sanskrit [into Middle Persian] in the Sasanian period";[13] and A. Panaino argues that, alongside the importance of "orality" in the

7. Skjærvø 2009: 283. Skjærvø uses this "established fact" to exclude other possibilities, deeming it "unnecessary to complicate" the account of ancient Iranian textual transmissions with the "assumption" of "written transmission."

8. E.g., Wiesehöfer 1996: 134: "early Iranian culture had always been predominantly oral"; Shahbazi 2003: 326, 327: "Despite written records, Iranian historiography really flourished only in oral form"; despite "isolated attempts at approaching written historiography [. . .] oral historiography flourished"; Kreyenbroek 2013: 21: "the largely—though of course by no means exclusively—oral character of the pre-Islamic culture of Iran." Kłagisz 2014: 151: "most" Middle Persian texts existed first as "unwritten and only later were written down"; Vevaina 2015: 169, contrasting the "largely oral pre-Islamic period and the highly literate Islamic period in Iran"; Utas 2021: xxiii: "Since time immemorial, the literary heritage of Iran had mainly been transmitted orally. This goes not only for songs, poetry, epics, and narratives, but also for religious texts. Only chronicles and administrative-economic texts were regularly put to writing"; Shenkar 2023 (quoted from the English summary, p. viii): "From the dawn of their history, the ancient Iranians preferred to transmit their literary and religious compositions orally." An early forerunner to these notions is found in Herzfeld's statement of 1924 (1: 35) that "the Persians did not begin to write their own history before the reign of Khusrau I. Up to his time there was nothing but oral tradition, beside the documents guarded in the Royal treasuries." Herzfeld's assumption is based on the nonsurvival of texts, a problem addressed below.

9. The notion of pervasive orality and lack of interest in literary writing among ancient Iranians tends to be articulated as remarks amidst other important contributions, not all of which are undermined by my argument here. There appears to be no published paper that has the goal of demonstrating this oral culture of booklessness. It has been taken for granted through the gradual accumulation of scholarly remarks to this effect.

10. Nöldeke 1885: 136, 134.

11. West 1896–1904: 80.

12. Cereti 2009.

13. De Blois 2008: 1197.

Sasanian kingdom, "a high level of multilingual literacy was mastered, at least in certain professional strata of Persian society."[14] Nevertheless, the strong view of an "ancient Iranian orality"—that there was an absolute preference for oral literature combined with a lack of interest in, or even opposition to, written literature—is widespread. It deserves scrutiny, especially when specialists disagree with each other indirectly in this way.

The first argument of the present essay is that the case for orality has been overstated to the point that it is incorrect. Of course, oral literature existed among speakers of ancient Iranic languages. Oral literature is probably universal to human societies. It is interesting and informative to find traces of oral formulation in written texts, when that is possible. But the existence of a lively oral literature and of written texts based on oral literature, which I do not contest, does not preclude the simultaneous existence of a rich, perhaps even abundant literature originally composed in writing but now lost. The second argument is that there was much written literature in Middle Persian during the reign of the Sasanid dynasty and that its nonsurvival is best explained not by a theory of pervasive "orality" and widespread disinclination to use writing for literature, but by reference to its material medium and environment and the failure of institutions to preserve it, as such conditions preserved more literature in other ancient languages. Before turning to these arguments, however, it would be helpful to define some terms and draw some distinctions—both in no way comprehensive—for clarity.

A. Ancient Iranians and Ancient Iran

Ancient Iranian, as in "ancient Iranian oral literature," has been mostly a vague term of convention since the nineteenth century. Its use as a premise makes assertions about the literary preferences of "ancient Iranians" over many centuries rather shaky, despite many treatments of ancient Iran as a concept having appeared; these tend to focus on the use of the term "Iran" through the ages, not on the development of the modern usages, in which philologists have played a leading role.

The idea of "ancient Iranians" began with linguistic classification. In the nineteenth century European philologists developed new scientific methods, soon enough called comparative philology, to establish decisively the existence of language families and to demonstrate the relationship between their member branches systematically according to the regular patterns of agreements and discrepancies between them. In 1836, in a landmark work contributing to the decipherment of Old Persian cuneiform writing, Christian Lassen suggested the term *iranische Sprachen*.[15] At that time, Iran was not a name used in Europe for a contemporary country. Specifically, Lassen dubbed Persian, Kurdish, and Afghan (Pashto), along with Old Persian and Avestan (then known as Zend), collectively as *iranisch*, to distinguish them as a sibling group among the *arisch* languages, which included also Indic languages like Sanskrit and Pali. His choice of the name *iranisch* re-

14. Panaino 2017: 500.

15. Lassen 1836: 181–82, also with such expressions as "so auch innerhalb des Bezirkes, welchen wir das Iranische Sprachgebiet benennen dürfen."

flected a specifically Persian form of an ancient endonym of the speakers of the Iranic languages, *arya*, the word from which the modern name Iran evolved.[16] Simultaneously he also divided the Iranic languages, for the first time, into three historical stages with loosely defined eras: Old, Middle, and New.[17] The tripartite division—old, middle, and new—was not new. It had already been used by J. Grimm for his influential *Deutsche Grammatik*, which included all the languages we now call Germanic, from ancient Gothic to modern English.[18] The tripartite historical division reflects the much older European periodization of time into ancient and modern ages, between which fell the Middle Ages.[19] By 1840 the *iranisch* language category used by Lassen was enshrined in a volume of the massive German *Allgemeine Encyclopädie der Wissenschaften und Künste* (1818–89), where the Iranic languages are featured with that name.[20]

There is a solid argument for using the term Iranic in English for the languages of this family, rather than Iranian, which, as was noted at the outset of this essay, is conventional in English today.[21] We distinguish the Germanic languages from German nationality and ethnicity and the German language to avoid calling all the Germanic languages, including English, "German." We say Turkic for a group of languages to avoid confusion with the Turks of the Republic of Turkey (Türkiye), whose language is called Turkish in English. We say Indic to distinguish a family of languages and the texts composed in those languages from the generality of Indian people and things. Thus, Iranic languages for the family of related languages would avoid the connection with the country called Iran and Iranian nationality, as well as calling speakers of Iranic languages "Iranians." Granted, the term Iranic will not be free from difficulties. There is a substantial scholarly literature on the problems in the historical use of the category "Germanic," for example.[22] But in general, it would seem useful to separate the Iranic languages from Iranian phenomena, which I will do here except when characterizing the views against which I am arguing, which employ the term Iranian.

The convention of Old, Middle, and New Iranic languages, first used by Lassen, observes loosely the chronological order of their earliest respective attestations. Old Iranic includes the two languages represented in substantial texts, Old Persian and Avestan. Old

16. Lassen 1836: 105–6.

17. Lassen 1836: 181–83. He also began to use the term "Iran" for the region in which the Iranic languages were used, and he divided them into two dialectally distinct but closely related groups: the Median-Persian on one side and the Sogdian-Bactrian on the other (pp. 12–13). This was the inception of the categories of Eastern and Western Iranic languages, which prevailed until the recent analyses of Korn 2016.

18. Grimm 1819.

19. On the development of the trio of periods ancient, medieval, and modern, see Clark 2014.

20. Pott 1840: 46–61. On page 1 of the article Pott writes that the name "medopersisch" for this group would be unfortunate and that one may call these languages "iranisch," "wenn man wollte" ("if one wants").

21. Perry 1998: 517.

22. See Harland and Friedrich 2021; Țăranu 2021.

Persian was used in royal inscriptions of the Achaemenid Persian kings from the sixth to the fourth century BCE. Avestan was the language of Zoroastrian liturgy, hymns, and other texts, represented in at least two linguistically distinct historical stages, composed at an unknown but very ancient period and preserved orally until it was written down in a specially devised script in the first millennium CE. The Middle Iranic languages were those attested later, before the seventh-century CE advent of Islam, such as Middle Persian, Parthian, Bactrian, and Sogdian—although all these continued to be attested in the Islamic era too. Anything later has been regarded as "New" Iranic, including New Persian, the main form of Persian attested in writing by the ninth and tenth centuries CE and still widely used today, as well as Kurdish, Pashto, and other modern languages of this family.

Alongside the convention of Old, Middle, and New Iranic, a parallel chronological classification evolved in the general study of the Near East, by which all the history of the region before the seventh century, when the first Islamic empire was created through conquest, is regarded as "ancient." In effect, the death of the Prophet Muḥammad in 632 is approximately the end of the "ancient period" of the Near East. Therefore, both the Old and the Middle Iranic languages, although they are granted two linguistic periods, are simultaneously known as the "ancient Iranian languages." The assertions about "ancient Iranian orality" thus refer implicitly, by convention and in practice, to all these languages.

Beginning from the linguistic classification, however, specialists in Iranic languages have also assumed a historical social reality with a national character: a vast and variegated yet unitary "Iranian people." This kind of assumption, already present with Lassen's early work,[23] was normal in linguistic scholarship of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: a language was assumed to match, one to one, a nation with a distinctive character, settling in or inhabiting a specific territory in primordial times. Accordingly, it was assumed that the prehistoric ancestor language of several attested related languages did the same.[24] The speakers of the common Iranic ancestor language were, by the same thinking, a nation, the primordial Iranians. By virtue of the relationship between the languages they spoke, the speakers of the Iranic languages were assumed to be close kin with one another, sharing a common culture, even when their languages were different from one another to the point of mutual incomprehensibility, they lived under different governments, practiced different religions, and followed different ways of life, across millennia. F. von Spiegel's landmark three-volume *Ēranische Alterthumskunde* (1871–78), in which he asserts that "Iran" was a comprehensive entity binding people, culture, language, and land into an ideal unit, is an example.[25]

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23. Lassen 1836: 105; on p. 183 he refers to "the national development of the Iranian peoples" ("die nationale Entwickelung der Iranischen Völker").

24. Thus, Grimm (1818: xxvi), in the first edition of his *Deutsche Grammatik*, covering all Germanic languages, refers to "ancient times, when our residence was still in Asia," on the theory that speakers of the Germanic languages had migrated in prehistoric times from Asia.

25. The term Iranian as a linguistic designation was not as ambiguous since at the time the country was known as Persia. See the lament of Yarshater 1989 about the official change of Persia's name to Iran for international use in 1935 and the "terminological confusion" that has ensued. Yarshater

A large region, "ancient Iran," was thus hypostasized from the idea of ancient Iranians; even the vast Persian empire of the Achaemenids has at times been understood as a unitary state of "Iranians," although it encompassed many other ethnic groups who used non-Iranic languages. As X. de Planhol wrote,

> Iranian culture is inseparable from the geographical space within which it was formed and crystallized, and from which, during the Achaemenid period, it expanded considerably to bordering regions. [. . .] This culture was a stable one, rooted in a well-defined, if not already clearly delineated, geographical environment.[26]

Thus, ancient Iranians (a people) and ancient Iran (a variably defined region) became entrenched as terms of convention. With such wriggling contours, "ancient Iranian," as an expression among scholars, refers to a large group of people, the different languages they used, their different cultures, the lands they inhabited, their religion—all of these things and more. "Ancient Iran" is a modern field of study putatively defined by languages but frequently used to imply an enduring ancient nation with distinct national characteristics.[27]

When specialists assert, therefore, that "ancient Iranians," or "ancient Iran," constituted an "oral society," such a claim has stood on remarkably loose conventions. Such widely employed conventions put scholars who revisit related problems at a disadvantage. There is, therefore, a methodological discrepancy between my stance and that of the views I am addressing. For this reason, rather than addressing "ancient Iran"—a concept embedded in the idea of "ancient Iranian orality"—further, I will instead address specifically Middle Persian literature, and specifically in the period of the Sasanid monarchy, which lasted from the third to the seventh century CE. This is suitable partly because the kingdom of the Sasanid Persians is typically at the center of the discussions of ancient Iranian literary orality. It is also the setting in which some of the proponents of ancient Iranian literary orality are willing to make some concessions or qualifications to their blanket assertion. My analysis will dwell on that frontier.

B. What Counts as Literary?

In general, supporters of the theory of exclusively oral literature in "ancient Iranian" languages do not define "literature" or the "literary."[28] This makes the view that ancient Iranians were disinclined to write literature more precarious, internally inconsistent, and

(d. 2018) nevertheless promoted the all-encompassing use of the terms Iran and Iranian as editor of the *Encyclopædia Iranica* (1982–).

26. De Planhol 2004: 204.

27. See Zia-Ebrahimi (2016) on aspects of the early history and ramifications of this concept.

28. Huyse (2006: 410) reserves undefined aesthetic criteria for the definition of literature when he states, "Because of the oral character of pre-Islamic Iranian literature and the restricted use of writing, little of what has come down to us in written form can therefore be considered to be literature in its narrow sense as belles-lettres."

difficult to address. Nevertheless, a convention is apparent. Modern scholars of ancient Iranic languages have long accepted in practice that nearly any text may be considered "literature" for basic purposes, but they tend to insist that this literature lacked "literary" qualities, while leaving those qualities undefined.[29] The most widely posited exception is that "ancient Iranians" wrote for "practical" rather than literary purposes,[30] the implication being that literature of a literary kind is not practical. In effect, the postulation is thus contradictory: none of the written texts are truly literature, in the sense that they are not "literary," but they are simultaneously all literature in a survey of the written texts. It is not only because so little survives in ancient Iranic languages that it has been deemed preferable to enlarge the scope of literature to include, for example, royal inscriptions—which do employ many stylistic figures of a character usually called literary.[31] It is also because it is usually a mistake to apply aesthetic and generic criteria established by one group of traditions (in this case, early modern Western European ones) to the definition of others in which those criteria were never employed. A comprehensive and useful volume, *The Literature of Pre-Islamic Iran*, surveys the literature extant in ancient Iranic languages and includes all sorts of writing, even inscriptions, records of transactions, ritual recitations, and other texts not normally considered literary in other fields,[32] although among the contributors to this volume are some of the very scholars who stated that the "ancient Iranians" had an "oral society" and did not write their literature.

To transcend this dilemma, I adopt a provisional model for talking about ancient literary works—without providing a universal definition of literature—from C. W. Hedrick. To go beyond the simple distinction between "literature" and "documents" in Roman studies, he proposes a quadripartite taxonomy of ancient written texts:

1. *monumental* texts such as royal inscriptions on stone,
2. *instrumental* texts such as records of sale inscribed on ostraca,
3. *communicative* texts such as legends on coins,

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29. There is a substantial modern scholarly literature on the concept of literature and on the study of genre and its fashioning. The two disciplines—scholarship of literary texts and scholarship of ancient Iranian texts—rarely meet, however.

30. E.g., Boyce 1957: 35; Boyce 1968a: 31; Huyse 2006: 410. "Practical" is sometimes elaborated as "economic and administrative purposes," e.g., de Jong 2009: 31; Shenkar 2023: viii. Macuch (2009: 117) acknowledges that "there are enough Arabic and Syriac translations, Persian recensions and adaptations as well as allusions to lost works of this genre [*scil*. secular imaginative literature] to convey the impression of a rich pre-Islamic literary heritage," but goes on to say that "the bulk" of it was minstrel poetry and oral in nature. Durkin-Meisterernst (2008: 203) stands out by recognizing that there must have been scientific handbooks and religious literature in Middle Persian, in addition to "practical" texts of the type directly attested.

31. See, e.g., Schmitt 2016.

32. Emmerick and Macuch 2009; these texts were included, however, "even if they have hardly any literary value in the strict sense of the word" (p. xxvi, with value left undefined); cf. *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature* (Beeston, Johnstone, Serjeant, and Smith 1983: xi): "The editors feel no apology is required for adopting a broad definition of 'literature' to comprehend virtually everything that has been recorded in writing, apart from inscriptions and purely archival material."

4. and *literary* texts meant for copying and reproduction, such as poems written in books.[33]

These types of text are not mutually exclusive and the types are not airtight. For example, epistles, conceived as communicative texts, can be collected subsequently and preserved as literary works. Nevertheless, using this model I will give many reasons to believe that Middle Persian literacy and literary works in the Sasanian kingdom were not limited to monumental texts and memoranda, official correspondence, contracts, deeds, labels, and other instrumental texts of a "nonliterary" character. Already in Sasanian times, not only royal, funerary, and dedicatory inscriptions, epistles, and "practical" documents, but also literary works in the sense just given—texts meant to be reproduced by copying and intended to hold enduring interest, be it for entertainment or for scholarly or ideological purposes—existed in writing. Adopting such a simple and straightforward definition of the literary obviates the need for making aesthetic judgments, focusing on the use and preservation of texts instead. As I will show, the preservation of texts is the key issue left neglected in the discussions of "ancient Iranian" orality.

33. Hedrick 2017: esp. 6–8 (online pagination).

2
Why Doubt the Existence of Ancient Iranian (or Iranic) Written Literature?

Why should we doubt the existence of written literature, or literary works, in a society in which many literate individuals lived? Let us take the case of the kingdom of the Persian Sasanids (r. 224–651). The idea that ancient Iranic literature was "primarily" or "essentially oral"—and that what was written was merely "practical"—will come as a surprise to anybody who studies the well-known, continuously existing extant manuscript traditions that originated under their rule. Their domain included the countries today called Iraq and Iran throughout their reign. There are five continuous extant manuscript traditions surviving from the Sasanian kingdom, each with its own evolving, nonstate institutions to curate it: three of them are preserved in closely related literary dialects of Aramaic:[34] that of the Babylonian rabbis, that of the Church of the East, and that of the Mandaean priests; a fourth is that of the Armenian church, in Armenian; and a fifth is the continuous Sasanian manuscript tradition of the Zoroastrians in Middle Persian, an Iranic language. The first four are indisputably literary traditions continuing or emerging under Sasanian sovereignty, in "ancient Iran," while with regard to the works of the last-mentioned category, because they were mostly compiled, if not composed, in the ninth and tenth centuries and still later, it is seldom clear which parts of them were actually salvaged older texts and really represent Sasanian literature in their extant form, a problem increasingly recognized in recent scholarship.[35] Some scholars have treated Zoroastrian Middle Persian texts as pure Sasanian material merely rearranged, allowing it to stand for an uninterrupted, unredacted, internally consistent, and relatively unchanging pre-Islamic culture; others regard it as the product of

34. The late third-century inscriptions of the priest Kirder include predominantly Aramaic-speaking provinces—Asuristan, Meshan, and Nodširagan, all encompassed by today's Iraq—as a part of "the land of the Aryas," Ērānšahr, right along with Persia, Parthia, and the rest (MacKenzie 1989: 35, 55, 58 [§14]). Still in the eighth century the Persian Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ listed Aramaic (*suryāniyya*) as one of the "linguistic varieties of Persian," *lughāt al-fārsiyya*, along with Persian and Parthian (Ibn al-Nadīm 2009, 1.1: 31.15–32.1). Their concept of what "Arya" and Persian were differed from that of the founders of modern historical linguistics.

35. I leave out the Manichaean manuscript tradition in Middle Persian and Parthian, as it became defunct, although the manuscript pages recovered at Turfan prove that it once existed. It may be argued that Old Georgian constitutes another continuous but originally Sasanian literary tradition, but the number of extant Georgian texts that may have originated during the Sasanian period is tiny (Rapp 2018: 88–90), and the extent to which one should consider K'art'li (Georgia) to have been integrated into the Sasanian kingdom, rather than being merely a normally reliable client country, is debatable.

its own later context, remaining uncertain about the extent to which it collects, redacts, or preserves older, otherwise lost material of the Sasanian period. The determination of the age of textual material preserved in Zoroastrian Middle Persian manuscripts is a matter of investigation text by text, a project not yet carried out systematically.[36] In any case, each of these five manuscript traditions includes literature by any definition.

Given the several different book traditions of Sasanian origin, one may wonder about the claim that this "Iranian" kingdom's culture eschewed written literature. But dialects of Aramaic and Armenian are not Iranic languages. These literatures were "in Iran" but not "Iranian." Thus, as a concept, "ancient Iranian" is ambiguous: when linguistic affiliation is required, Iranian is a linguistic term, but when territory is required, Iranian is a geographic term. At the very least, the implicit notion that "Iranian culture" was separate from other cultures in the same country requires substantiation; the term "Iranian" is not suitable enough for the argument, as I have emphasized above.

It is also not tenable that the Persians who ruled the Sasanian kingdom ruled people with written literature and lived beside them, and their neighbors to the east and west, Indians and Chinese and Romans, also had written literature, but they themselves, and other speakers of Iranic languages in their midst, checked the impulse to employ writing for the composition of literature in a way that accords with the modern genealogical classification of their languages. The explanation for this alleged cultural anomaly lies apparently in the character of "ancient Iranians" and their culture or it is a historical accident.[37]

Copious evidence, to be reviewed presently, refutes this. The idea that ancient Iranians (however defined) did not write down literary works seems to be supported only by a few comments in written sources, none of which is from Sasanian times, but rather from the ninth and tenth centuries, and by the dearth of surviving written material. This ought to arouse suspicion. One scholarly accommodation to this has been to suggest that written literature "developed late" for "ancient Iranians," but that pervasive attitudes favoring oral literature persisted and continued to be expressed when they finally did write.[38] The hypothesis of tardy literacy, itself unexplained, is a practical expedient to explain the existence of Zoroastrian Middle Persian books, compiled and written by post-Sasanian priests trans-

36. See, e.g., Mokhtarian 2015: 33–38 and de Jong 2016: 227–28, which discuss the problem of dating Zoroastrian Middle Persian texts. For Boyce (1968a: 32), it was the qualities of "oral literature" that she alleged characterized all Zoroastrian Middle Persian texts that "make[s] it impossible to trace individual contributions or phases of growth" within the texts.

37. For example, Wiesehöfer 1996: 157; Huyse 2008: 142; de Jong 2009: 32. Some suppose that it is a matter of Iranian psychology, the "impact of epic upon minds" hindering the emergence of a distinction between rational "logos" and "mythoepic discourse" (Shayegan 2012: 159) or it is a preference for "colorful story" over "facts" (Shenkar 2023: viii). For Boyce (1968a: 32), it seems to have had to do with political history.

38. Boyce 1968a: 31–32; Huyse 2008; Macuch 2009: 119. De Jong (2009: 32) holds that the Middle Persian religious and literary texts began to be written only in the sixth century. Boyce (1957: 36; 1968a: 32) held that the sixth century witnessed a "considerable widening of the application of [Persian] writing," but she did not deny the existence of older written literature.

mitting allegedly early Sasanian material.[39] With the nonsurvival of older literary books,[40] the only way to explain the early contents in the late Zoroastrian books is to suppose that it was all oral literature before that—that is, the oldest extant Middle Persian literary texts in the Zoroastrian books are some of the earliest ever written down. Traces of historical knowledge in Middle Persian books must then reflect "oral tradition," which position then prompts subsequent studies on the "oral features" of the texts extant in writing rather than their literary or aural features.[41] Now even the books and inscriptions themselves become a symptom not of literacy but of orality.

Orality and literacy, however, are not two distinct evolutionary states of a society that cannot coexist fully.[42] They never comprise a shared fixed quantity, so that if literacy expands, orality contracts, or if some kind of oral literature is popularly cultivated, then disregard for literacy prevails. Rather than regarding the surviving Zoroastrian Middle Persian texts as the child of a late-coming Iranian literacy and a shift away from a unique Iranian persistence of oral transmission of literature, written texts in ancient Iranic languages should be regarded as traces of a long-lived literacy, as well as of literary texts or literature, most of which, written on perishable materials, have been obliterated by time and, more importantly, the failure of any institution to preserve literary texts—to which I shall return below.

A main positive testimony used to support the idea of an overwhelming "ancient Iranian" preference for oral literature is taken from a passage of the fifth book of the Zoroastrian Middle Persian compendium called the *Dēnkard*,[43] dated to the early ninth century CE, two hundred years after the end of the Sasanian kingdom. It has been misconstrued, however. The chapter consists in part of a list of challenging questions posed by a Christian named Buxtmāri and the answers offered by the Zoroastrian priest Ādurfarrbay, the compiler of the *Dēnkard*, who flourished in the reign of the Abbasid caliph al-Maʾmūn (813–833). The Christian asks why Zoroastrian priests memorize their scripture and preserve it orally rather than in books. A part of the answer, which Ādurfarrbay communicated to the Christian not orally but in writing, is often cited: "'The law spoken by voice'[44] is superior to that of

39. Boyce 1968: 31–32; Kłagisz 2014.

40. E.g., Huyse 2006: 411: "Mainly due to the oral character of Parthian literature, both religious and secular, no work of literary value survives from the Arsacid period [. . .]."

41. Benkato (2017) investigates signs of oral delivery in Middle Iranian written texts (their aurality) without relying on a notion of a dichotomy between the two modes as evolutionary stages. Certainly, there are written texts that give indications that they were intended to be read aloud for a listening audience or that they are records or idealized versions of spoken texts. It is not surprising to find signs of orality in such texts.

42. Coleman 1996, 1997.

43. Cited by Skjærvø 2009: 269; Huyse 2008: 143. Harold Bailey (1943: 162–63) cites it too, but not as evidence of a general oral culture.

44. This expression represents Middle Persian *dādistān ī wāz gowišnīg*, which is itself a conjectural emendation following none of the three extant manuscripts exactly (Amouzgar and Tafazzoli 2000: 84). For the present discussion, I have followed Skjærvø's translation (2011: 251) of his emendation. The translation of Amouzgar and Tafazzoli (2000: 85), "La légitimité de la tradition orale,"

writing in many ways, and for many other reasons too, it is reasonable to consider living spoken words to be more basic than that which is in writing."[45] This statement may seem to suggest a general preference for orally preserved texts over written ones; in context, however, Ādurfarrbay is not addressing literature in general or literacy as a phenomenon but specifically the matter of the Zoroastrian scripture, the Avestan liturgy preserved by daily oral recitation by the priests. He was such a priest himself. Oral recitation of this extensive liturgy was a requirement of his profession. Moreover, his remark is prefaced by a few statements acknowledging the use of writing for the preservation of that scripture. He says that Ohrmazd, his god, had commanded that the scripture be *written* in a fundamental written text (*bunīg nibištag*), and he contradicts the misconception of his Christian querent, who seemed to believe that the Zoroastrian priests had no written scripture at all. He says that they do indeed have written copies of most of the Avesta, "as is known among the informed" (*čiyōn andar āgāhān paydāg*). He adds that the benefit of memorization is that one may inform laypeople about the correct recitation of religious texts. This refers, again, to his priestly profession. By his direct testimony, then, writing was important, even though writing was not the primary instrument for the oral liturgy of the priests.

Methods special to the study of oral literature are required in investigating the composition of the Avesta and its survival as a recitation composed orally in the distant past.[46] It is a mistake, however, to extrapolate from the peculiar case of the Avesta in the ninth century to all ancient Iranic-language literature, or worse still to "the Iranians." Priests responsible for ritual recitations, which are realized specifically in the oral performance that is at the center of their professional responsibilities and the foundation of their priestly authority, would naturally find oral tradition superior specifically with respect to those recitations, while other passages from the post-Sasanian Zoroastrian Middle Persian texts praise individuals who have memorized parts of the Avesta.[47] In short, the statement discussed above should not be used to support the notion that, hundreds of years before the statement was written, orally recited texts were preferred to written ones.

It is more illuminating to regard Ādurfarrbay in the historical context of his ninth-century society. When he delivered these remarks in written Middle Persian, Muslim scholars,

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which Huyse (2008: 143) follows, depends on their further emendation of *dādestān* to *dādestānīgīh*, made to address the concept of an oral tradition. Xavier Tremblay (2012: 110) renders it "la légitimité de la transmission orale." The variety of emendations and translations that have been offered demonstrates that the expression is not well understood and obscures the fact that the passage is textually problematic in all three manuscripts.

45. *Dēnkard* 5, §24.13 (Amouzgar and Tafazzoli 2000: 84): *dādestān<īgīh> ī wāz gōwišnīh frāy az ān ī nibēsišnīg wasīhā ud pad-iz abārīg was čim zīndag gōwišnīg saxwan az ān ī pad nibišt mādagwar-tar hangārdan čimīg*.

46. See, for example, the various approaches and methods pertaining to oral transmission of the Avesta brought by Kreyenbroek 1996, Cantera 2012, and Skjærvø 2005–6 and 2012, with references to his earlier contributions on the topic.

47. Bailey (1943: 158–66) cites many passages concerning memorization of scripture, but he understands that these references refer specifically to the religious texts. Samra Azarnouche (2013) has analyzed the Zoroastrian Middle Persian terminology for memorization of religious texts.

including converts from other religions, were engaging in similar debates about the relative merits of oral preservation and written composition, specifically with respect to the incipient genre of hadith, which was to become an adjunct to Islamic scripture. Jewish scholars were engaged in debates about oral law and written scripture too. Michael Cook has shown that the Jewish and Islamic cases were products of the same historical context.[48] Both Muslims and Jews left record of this debate, furthermore, in written texts. We know that Ādurfarrbay lived in contact with the same society from a brief text describing his debate with a Zoroastrian apostate to Islam in the presence of the caliph al-Maʾmūn.[49] This suggests that this ninth-century figure was responding to such discussions in his ninth-century context, as the passage occurs in a work of interreligious disputation with a Christian.[50] There is no sign that his view about the superiority of scripture in its oral form represents a debate of the earlier Sasanian period, although that is not ruled out either.

Besides reference to priestly liturgy and hymns in Avestan, which were transmitted orally and, since about the fifth century CE, in writing as well,[51] the other main line of argument in support of orality draws from a landmark study of Mary Boyce of 1957, which discussed the Parthian *gōsān* 'minstrel' (a word attested rarely) and minstrels of ancient Iran in general. Those who assert that ancient Iranians lacked interest in written literature regularly refer to this study. Here Boyce elucidated the figure of the ancient Iranian singer or reciter of epic tales about ancient heroes and kings, battles, and romance. The contents of these tales are rightly assumed to have been like those of the romance of Ardašīr I known from the Middle Persian prose tale entitled *Kārnāmag ī Ardaxšīr ī Pābagān* or the poetic *Ayādgār ī Zarērān*,[52] or of the kind we find eventually set down on paper in works like the *Shāhnāmah*, Firdawsī's verse epic book of kings finished about the year 1010 from a stock of partly lost ancient material, much of it mediated by Arabic written materials.[53] Boyce's body of evidence for the minstrel is, appropriately, a series of testimonia that she assembled about minstrels called *gōsān* and other names, mentioned in texts connected with the Sasanian kingdom and with geographically adjacent sites and chronologically subsequent

48. Cook 1997.

49. Barthélemy 1887; Chacha 1936.

50. Sahner 2019. Götz König (2018) sheds some light on the contemporary intellectual context of Ādurfarrbay and other learned Zoroastrians of his time, but the most relevant context to his discussion of Zoroastrian thought in ninth-century intellectual life is not *falsafa* (philosophy in forms received in Arabic translations from Greek), as he supposes, but rather *kalām*, disputational theology. De Jong (2016) issues a small corrective to Zoroastrian studies by drawing attention to the presence of Zoroastrian scholars in Iraq (specifically Baghdad), a region often not considered "Iranian," and their participation in the Iraqi society at large while producing distinctive new literary works in Middle Persian.

51. Scholars disagree about the date of the invention of the Avestan script, which was designed specifically to represent the Avesta as pronounced orally. See Bailey 1943: 191–93; Kellens 2000: 1; Cantera 2004: 163; Weber 2010: 256. See Panaino 2012: 79–84 for the view I favor—that the Avestan script was created under Sasanid rule—along with further references.

52. Cereti 2001: 192–202.

53. De Blois 2004: 54–55.

sources. She cautiously surmised that minstrels in ancient Iran composed songs extemporaneously, and she referred to it as oral literature. Boyce's article on the minstrel, however, does not posit an "oral society," nor does it suggest that ancient Iranian literature was predominantly oral. She merely supposed that Sasanian *poetry* was entirely oral, perhaps because it was normally accompanied by music, and that Sasanian literacy was "slow to extend its range" (presumably as compared with literacy elsewhere).[54] This contrasts with the recent, starker surmises about ancient Iranian oral literature. For example, Skjærvø combines Boyce's evidence for the *gōsān* with the passage from the *Dēnkard* just mentioned to make the case that "The Iranians, in fact, considered oral traditions superior to written ones as expressed by the author of the *Dēnkard* still in the ninth century."[55] Contrary to this view, which developed after her, Boyce went out of her way in the same article on ancient minstrels to emphasize that "The use of writing, continuous evidently from Achaemenian days, is of course abundantly attested for the Sasanian period."[56] She drew many examples to illustrate this, providing a short catalogue of testimonia of scribal practice like the one she drew for the recitations of the *gōsān*. She also referred to the numerous Middle Persian works surviving in Arabic translation, granting that there was such written literature. This part of her article is overlooked by the theorists of pervasive ancient Iranian orality.

To summarize the foregoing, if we look specifically and only at the oral Zoroastrian liturgy and references to minstrels' poems and songs performed live for audiences, and we make the unwarranted assumption that these two genres comprised the bulk of ancient literature in Iranic languages—ignoring the many subjects of Persian kings who certainly maintained literature of many kinds—then we may allow ourselves to be convinced that "ancient Iran" was an "oral society." We should not, however, be so enchanted by this romantic notion of illiteracy or "oral cultures" that we overlook the evidence for written texts of a literary character in the Sasanian kingdom, even if it is not nearly so much as we would like to have been preserved or composed according to genres matching modern European ones. While Boyce was surely right when she wrote that there "had been evidently a rich and abundant oral literature of entertainment," of which only a small number of pieces remain written in Zoroastrian Middle Persian manuscript tradition, it has been an unwarranted inference that this was the extent of it in the main and that the Persians of Sasanian times were not really interested in special learning recorded in writing meant to be copied, that they liked primarily love songs and heroic tales and pious mythology recited live, and mostly wrote down only their theology, and that only in a last-ditch effort to save it.

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54. Boyce 1957: 35.

55. Skjærvø 2009: 269. Note the assumption that the *Dēnkard*'s contents reflect close continuity with Sasanian Persian thought, even when that component of the *Dēnkard* is explicitly responding to a ninth-century debate and is obviously not a Sasanian text.

56. Boyce 1957: 32–38. Her conception of a "twofold literary culture," part oral and part written, must be correct, and indeed is correct for any society in which the writing of texts occurs. Her idea that pre-Islamic Iranians wrote only prose and recited poetry is implausible.

3
Forms of Middle Persian Writing

The many names for different kinds of writing in Sasanian Middle Persian, which have not aroused much discussion about the forms of written texts generally, demonstrate some of the various purposes of Middle Persian writing in the Sasanian kingdom.

āwišt[57] 'sealed, rolled document'

daftar 'register, account book',[58] perhaps 'quire, notebook'. Cf. Greek διφθέρα 'skin, hide, parchment', Aramaic *dptr'*

dib[59] 'letter, epistle', from Old Persian *dipi* 'cuneiform text', from Elamite *tippi*, 'cuneiform clay tablet' (from Akkadian *ṭuppu*, from Sumerian DUB). Cf. Parthian *dib*, Bactrian λιβο 'document'

frawardag[60] 'official document (of title), epistle'. Cf. Parthian *prwrtk*, Sogdian *prw'rt* 'epistle', Armenian *hrowartak* 'official letter', Aramaic *prwrtq'* 'edict'

gitt(*ag*)[61] 'contract, document'. Borrowed from Aramaic *giṭṭā* 'document', from Akkadian *giṭṭu* 'parchment document', from Sumerian KUŠ.GÍD.DA 'ox-skin'.[62] Cf. Armenian *ktak*

mādayān[63] 'book (codex?)'. Cf. Armenian *matean*, Georgian *matiane*

mādagwar[64] 'original copy'

nāmag[65] 'inscription, text, book, letter, monograph'. Cf. Armenian *namak*, Sogdian *-n'mk*

57. MacKenzie 1971: 14; Perikhanian 1997: 342; Durkin-Meisterernst 2004: 76.

58. MacKenzie 1971: 23; Rajabzadeh 1993. As indicated by François Déroche (2006: 30), more research is required on the history of the *daftar* in the Umayyad period; this may shed light on the pre-Islamic *daftar*.

59. Perikhanian 1997: 353; Durkin-Meisterernst 2004: 148. W. B. Henning (in Welles, Fink, and Gilliam 1959: 416) translated *dib-ēw* in *dpy-1* as "a rescript, an epistle" in his reading of a third-century Middle Persian parchment scrap D.Pg. 37 from Dura, where the word clearly occurs. He used the term "rescript" because he deemed it to refer in this instance to a written message from the king Shapur I.

60. MacKenzie 1971: 33; Gignoux 1972: 32 and 61; Nyberg 1974: 77; Perikhanian 1997: 359; Durkin-Meisterernst 2004: 157; Ciancaglini 2008: 238.

61. Gignoux 1972: 22; Back 1978: 215; Perikhanian 1997: 362.

62. Kaufman 1974: 52–53; Black, George, and Postgate 2000: 95.

63. MacKenzie 1971: 53; Nyberg 1974: 128–29; Perikhanian 1997: 372.

64. Perikhanian 1997: 372.

65. Gignoux 1972: 30; Back 1978: 235; Perikhanian 1997: 374; Durkin-Meisterernst 2004: 238.

nibēg[66] 'book', Parthian *nbyg*, Bactrian ναβηγο, Sogdian *np'yk*; also *dast-nibēg* hand-copy, manuscript, personal account'

nibišt(*ag*)[67] 'writ'. Cf. Parthian *npwšt*, Aramaic *nbštg* 'writing, sentence, deposition'

(*ham*)*pačč*ē*n*[68] 'copy of original text, response'. Cf. Armenian *pačēn*/*pačean*, Aramaic *pršgn'* 'copy'

pādixšīr 'written agreement'[69]

Though the equivalent term is not extant in Middle Persian, there is also Parthian *pōstag*,[70] Sogdian *pwstk*,[71] Bactrian πωσταγο[72] 'parchment or leather document or book'; cf. MP and NP *pōst* 'skin, leather' and the borrowing in Sanskrit, *pustaka*, and in other Indic languages (*potthaka*, etc.).[73] The Parthian poem transmitted in the Zoroastrian Middle Persian manuscript tradition, *Draxt ī Asurīg* (The tree of Asuristān), characterizes a goat as boasting, among his merits, about the usefulness of his own leather, that "they make writings from me, the bureau of correspondence; they write registers and agreements upon me" (*nāmag az man karēnd, frawardag dīwān* / *daftar ud pādixšīr abar man nibēsēnd*).[74]

A. Attestations of Middle Persian Writing, Instrumental and Literary

There are very many positive attestations for written Sasanian Middle Persian (to say nothing of other Middle Iranic languages before the advent of Islam). They include actual examples of Middle Persian writing in texts preserved by copying, later translations of Middle Persian literary works otherwise lost, and witnesses to Persian literature from the Sasanian period. It is not the intention here to catalogue all the attestations. To do that, one would have to survey all the extant inscriptions, graffiti, and other texts, and then, especially, to sift through the Zoroastrian and Manichaean Middle Persian texts that survive to find criteria for assigning them to a Sasanian or to a post-Sasanian date. Instead, I offer a sample, which should suffice to resolve the doubt that writings of various kinds, including literature in an appropriately broad sense, as already discussed, were current throughout the Sasanian period.[75] Because the Sasanian dynasty's period was generally one of increas-

66. Gignoux 1972: 30; Nyberg 1974: 141; Perikhanian 1997: 375; Durkin-Meisterernst 2004: 239; Sims-Williams and Durkin-Meisterernst 2012: 126.

67. Gignoux 1972: 30, 59; Back 1978: 236–37; Nyberg 1974: 141; Perikhanian 1997: 375; Ciancaglini 2008: 211–12.

68. MacKenzie 1971: 62; Nyberg 1974: 147; Perikhanian 1997: 365; Ciancaglini 2008: 241; Buyaner 2016: 88–97.

69. MacKenzie 1971: 63; Gignoux 1972: 31; Back 1978: 241. I do not endorse the etymology of Buyaner 2016: 97–100.

70. Durkin-Meisterernst 2004: 287. From **pawasta-ka-* 'leathern (writing)'.

71. Sims-Williams and Durkin-Meisterernst 2012: 162; Christian Sogdian *pwsty* (Sims-Williams 2016: 159).

72. Sims-Williams 2007: 258–59.

73. Mayrhofer 1992–2001, 3: 331–32.

74. Henning 1950: 644.

75. This includes "imaginative" works, which description seems partly to characterize the "lit-

ing prosperity, despite some severe intermittent troubles, it is likely that literacy became increasingly pervasive during those four centuries, just as it is likely that the population grew greatly during the same period. This was not, however, the transformation of an "oral society" into a "written society."[76] As I will show, ancient written Middle Persian literature of some kind must also have existed.

B. Middle Persian Orthography as a Witness

The ancient continuity of the orthography used to write Middle Persian by itself strongly reinforces this hypothesis. The conservative character of Middle Persian spelling is well known to all who study it. More than a century ago the discovery at Turfan of the Manichaean Middle Persian texts written without conservative orthography, composed as early as the third century, revealed that the pronunciation of spoken Middle Persian had developed considerably from an earlier time in which the traditional orthography was devised (most notably with extensive postvocalic consonant lenition, but in other ways too).[77] For example, the Old Persian word *patikara-* 'image' is still written in Middle Persian as [ptkr] but its pronunciation is revealed by the Manichaean texts to have been *pahikar* (whence, eventually, New Persian *paykar*). Armenian *patker* 'image, form'[78] and Aramaic *ptakrā* (*pθaxrā*) idol'[79] represent borrowings from the older stage of Persian reflected in the Middle Persian orthography. Similarly, Old Persian *baga-* 'god' is written in Middle Persian as [bgy], but the Manichaean texts show that the pronunciation, at least in that dialect, had become *bay*.[80] Furthermore, the aramaeograms used in writing Middle Persian and other Middle Iranic languages—the convention of writing fixed Aramaic words for their Iranic-language equivalents—often reflect words and spellings no longer normal in Aramaic speech by the time of the Sasanids.[81] An example is the aramaeogram [ḥnḥtwn], Aramaic *hanḥəṯun* 'put down', to represent Middle Persian *nihādan* 'to put down'. The first letter of the aramaeogram represents an archaic feature of the causative stem not used in the time of its attestation in Middle Persian writing; *ha-* had become *ʾa-*, but the regular aramaeogram shows the much older form.[82] Such historical spellings found both for words written

erary" (as opposed to the "religious") for Boyce (1957: 35 and 1968a: 31) and Macuch (2009: 117). They imply that religious works are to be distinguished categorically from fiction.

76. Huyse (2008: 140); Macuch (2009: 119), "the process of transition from an oral culture to a written one." A few Iranic-language specialists (e.g., Huyse 2008: 152 n. 56, 155; Kłagisz 2014) have invoked the theories of Walter Ong, which pose a dichotomy of oral and literate societies, in which a society's state of "orality" evolves into one of "literacy," but they overlook long-standing corrections to Ong's hypotheses (see especially Coleman 1996 and 1997, both with further bibliography).

77. Henning 1958: 72–75; Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities 2007; Sundermann 2009.

78. Olsen 1999: 902.

79. Ciancaglini 2008: 243.

80. The Middle Persian word was often written with the aramaeogram [ʿrḥyʾ].

81. Shaked 1993: 75. On the system of writing generally, see Skjærvø 1996: 516–27.

82. On the archaic character of spelling with the causative in *ha-*, see Coxon 1978: esp. 417.

phonographically and for those written with aramaeograms attest to an unbroken tradition of writing originating in the centuries BCE.

Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, a Persian secretary for officials in the caliphal state, who translated literary works from Middle Persian into Arabic in the mid-eighth century, reports the existence of "about a thousand" aramaeograms.[83] From the maintenance of conservative orthography and arcane writing conventions over many centuries during which no written works survive, we conclude that scribal traditions and training in literacy in a large vocabulary did exist continuously. These scribes were not learning to spell words merely for their own sake, while reciting literature orally. They learned to spell words in order to write them. Even though the products of the early Middle Persian scribal tradition are lost today, the writing system itself leaves no doubt that it not only existed uninterruptedly but that it developed. If we imagine that the scribes never composed anything other than instrumental texts and coin legends, never copied texts beyond official documents, and satisfied their human creativity with a few inscriptions dictated to them in the mold of oral traditions, we would be hard pressed to explain the entirety of Middle Persian orthography, the capaciousness of its vocabulary, and the insistence on the tradition of aramaeograms. We should therefore assume that various works of ancient Persian written literature did exist, and that scribes, and perhaps others, wrote, read, and copied them and appreciated them, but that they left little trace, for reasons to be discussed below.[84]

Even if we abandon this inference, the traces of Middle Persian literacy that do survive from the Sasanian period remain indicative.

C. The Manichaean and Christian Middle Persian Textual Traditions

It is well known that Manichaeans wrote original literature in Middle Persian and translated Aramaic (Syriac) literature into Middle Persian (and other Iranic languages). Manichaean Middle Persian texts date from the time of Mani, the religion's founder, in the third century.[85] Nevertheless, the exception of Manichaean Middle Persian literary texts, as well as those in Parthian and Sogdian, to the idea that "ancient Iranian" literature was oral is largely left unexplained.

Twelve leaves of a copy of a Middle Persian version of the Psalms, the translation of which scholars assign variously to the fourth, fifth, or sixth century, were found at Bulayïq in Inner Asia, written and copied in a script that is archaic by comparison with that of the later Zoroastrian manuscripts. A Middle Persian translation of the entire Christian Bible is thought to have existed; Bible translations were one of the notable efforts of Christian mis-

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83. Ibn al-Nadīm 2009, 1.1: 34.4: *wa-huwa naḥwa alfi kalima*. The extant so-called *Frahang ī Pahlawīg* elucidates more than five hundred aramaeograms and some historical spellings (MacKenzie 2000).

84. Macuch (2009: 118–19) and Durkin-Meisterernst (2008) regard the script primarily as a hindrance to literacy, but the maintenance of a script requiring extensive training should be regarded as evidence of literacy and of its crucial importance to the society in which it was used.

85. Sundermann 2009 surveys this literature. The oldest such text is apparently Mani's *Šāhbuhragān* (ibid.: 219–21).

sionaries even in antiquity. On the basis of the old letter-types used for the Middle Persian psalms pages, Walter Henning assumed that Middle Persian Bible translations existed by circa 500 CE.[86] There are further references to Christian Middle Persian literature dating to the fifth century at the latest.[87] One passage in the tenth-century East Syrian *Chronicle of Seert*, based on much earlier material,[88] mentions a summary of Christian doctrine in thirty-eight chapters presented to the Persian king Kawād (r. 488–496, 498–531), which had been translated into Persian for the occasion. The king is supposed to have favored this work over "the rest of the treatises (*maqālāt*) that he had received," presumably other doctrinal summaries.[89] In the early seventh century Giwargis, a Christian convert from Zoroastrianism, formerly known as Mihrmāhgušnasp (d. 615), translated a written summary of the East Syrian Christian doctrine into Persian from Syriac for reading by Xusrō II (r. 590–628).[90] Before this same Mihrmāhgušnasp converted from Zoroastrianism to Christianity, his first questions about Christianity were answered in conversation by one of his estate managers in Iraq, a Christian, but soon he requested to hear Christian instruction read to him specifically from their written books—for the purpose of verification.[91] (On the Middle Persian literacy of Mihrmāhgušnasp, see further below.) These details are related by a close personal acquaintance, his biographer, who had been his supervisor in the monastery of Mount Izla and thus someone in a good position to know such anecdotal information. Unless a text must be written by a Zoroastrian to qualify as "Iranian," which would require an argument in its favor, it is hard to maintain a position of ancient Iranian literary orality vis-à-vis these well-known attestations just mentioned; Christian and Manichaean Middle Persian written literature is, however, inexplicably absent from such discussions—unless such writings are mined for residue of older, oral "Iranian" literature.[92]

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86. Henning 1958: 47.

87. Gignoux 2002. For a summary of testimonies to Middle Persian Christian literature, see Sims-Williams 2009: 267–70.

88. Wood 2013: 93–119.

89. Scher 1911: 126. Reports like this support Durkin-Meisterernst's remark (2008: 202–3) that the Sasanid kings likely "had some training in writing during [their] education."

90. Bedjan 1895: 516. The text is credited to Ḥnānišoʿ and Giwargis, but the translation was made "by the diligence of Mār Giwargis" (*ba-ḥpiṭuteh dileh d-Mār Giwargis*). The king himself is thought to have read it: *men bātar qrāh malkā [. . .]*. For more, see Reinink 1999: 179–82.

91. Bedjan 1895: 439: *hayden emar leh d-nete ḥad men hālen d-yādʿin l-meqrā ba-ktābe w-neqre qdāmay [. . .] w-yāʾeb-nā d-ešmaʿ-ennen āp men ktābā*, "Then [Mihrmāhgušnasp] said to him, 'Let one of those who knows how to read in books come to read before me [. . .] I am eager to hear it also from a book [or, the Book]'." (The book specified as having been read to him in the narration was the story of St. George.) Cf. the German translation of more than one hundred years ago (Braun 1915: 225). The text does not specify in which language his Christian books were read to him; they were written presumably either in Syrian Aramaic or in Middle Persian.

92. Christian and Manichaean Middle Iranian texts are included in Emmerick and Macuch 2009, which surveys pre-Islamic Iranian literature. Although de Jong (2009: 31) grants that "Manichaean scribes" existed, they "represent a whole different world" from other Middle Persian scribes of literary works, whose existence he denies. De Jong's concern here is evidently strictly with Zoroastrian

D. Scribes and Officials

The profession of the Sasanian scribe, *dibīr*, was, of course, defined by literacy.[93] Some of the third-century royal inscriptions were signed by scribes who added their names. These scribes worked as secretaries who managed records and correspondence. Archives and collections of letters were called *dīwān*.[94] Scribes were fluent enough in writing in the third century that they were able to jot off casual graffiti at Dura-Europos to commemorate their visits.[95] Small scraps of third-century Middle Persian and Parthian writing on parchment from the same site, precious pieces of letters, were found, now preserved in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University.[96] Panaino demonstrates that the Sasanian Persian transaction of relations with foreign powers required scribes and ambassadors possessing careful and precise literacy in at least two languages.[97] The priest Kirdēr's inscriptions from the late third century refer to titles, testaments, records, and writings (*pādixšīr*, *gitt*[*ag*], *mādayān*, *nāmag*), on which his personal seal might be found together with the titles he bore in different stages in his career. Clay bullae that were attached to documents to receive the seal impressions of those who authorized them survive from the Sasanian period in the thousands;[98] each was attached to a written document that disintegrated long ago, leaving only the stamped lump of clay to indicate its former existence. Although these kinds of writing were mostly instrumental rather than literary (that is, written as testimony of an occasion and not for recopying and subsequent appreciation), they demonstrate the continuous existence of writing and a class of nonpriestly people whose livelihood was based on writing, among whom literature would likely have had an audience.

We can add to these testimonia the pieces of papyri, parchment, and linen extant from the ten-year Persian occupation of Egypt (619–29 CE). Nearly a thousand scraps of Middle Persian writing survive from the military government there.[99] Among them are writing exercises, some of which show that scribes practiced by writing the same line over and over;[100] the fragment of an itinerary of locations on the way up the Nile;[101] and a tiny parchment fragment from an account of Alexander of Macedon, perhaps a Middle Persian translation of the Greek *Alexander Romance*, certainly a literary text.[102]

texts, but this undermines generalizations about limited literacy. Skjærvø devotes an article (2009) to discovering the residue of ancient Iranian oral literature in written Manichaean texts.

93. Tafazzoli 2000: 18–37. Classical Armenian uses the loan-word *dpir*.

94. Henning (1950: 644 n. 7) provides the most convincing etymology, from **dipi-pāna* 'tablet-protector'. See also Khurshudian 1998: 165–66.

95. Geiger 1956; Daryaee 2010.

96. Ed. Henning *apud* Welles, Fink, and Gilliam 1959: 414–17.

97. Panaino 2017.

98. Gyselen (2007: 1–8) and Dang (2022: 18–53) provide sound introductions to these materials.

99. Fournet 2009: 419–21.

100. Weber 2010.

101. Weber 2003: 34–36.

102. Weber 2009.

E. Persians Writing in Arabic about Pre-Islamic Persian Books

Two Arabic accounts by Persians who converted to Islam describe a variety of old Middle Persian book hands and script types, most of which are no longer attested in texts extant today. One of these accounts is attributed to Rōzbih son of Dādōya, better known as Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ (d. ca. 757), a government secretary, already mentioned, who translated Middle Persian works into Arabic.[103] The other is attributed to the mobed Zardušt son of Ādurxwarra, better known after his conversion to Islam as Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad, "the mobed of al-Mutawakkil" (Abbasid caliph, r. 847–861), whose companion he was.[104] Their accounts, which are probably related, in that Abū Jaʿfar apparently drew on Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ as well as other sources of information, name and describe not only varieties or styles of Persian script but also specify their uses. For example, one variety, consisting of eighteen letters, is said to have been used for seal inscriptions and coin legends. This must be similar to the variety of Persian script of nineteen letters used in early Sasanian Middle Persian inscriptions and coin legends. Another of these scripts seems to be the one well known from Zoroastrian book tradition, which Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ calls the "epistolary script" (*kitābat al-rasāʾil*, or *nāma-dibīrīh*), which, he says, was used by all classes of the Sasanian kingdom apart from the kings alone.[105] They furthermore mention not only the well-known Avestan script, *dēn-dibīrīh*, but also, for example, an otherwise unattested script used by the kings in correspondence with foreign powers, in which every consonant and vowel received an individual letter of its own; like the Avestan script, that kingly script was a system that eschewed aramaeograms. Among the other Persian script-forms said to have existed but not attested today was one that had twenty-eight letters, with some letters differentiated by diacritical points (*wa-fīhā naqṭ*), used for writing logic and philosophy. Among his translations, Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ is credited with turning at least one Middle Persian work of Aristotelian logic into Arabic, which is extant and published today, suggesting that he knew what he was talking about when he mentioned a script-form used for writing philosophy in Middle Persian, even if not a single example of this sort of script survives today.[106] When so much of the detailed information provided by Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ about Persian writing has long been recognized as remarkably correct, it would be inconsistent to assume that only the parts that cannot be verified are false.

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103. Ibn al-Nadīm 2009, 1.1: 32.9–34.9; known as early as Spiegel 1858: 34–36; Spiegel 1871–78, 3: 768–71.

104. Ḥamza 1968: 21–24. On this apostate Zoroastrian priest, and the hypothesis that he was the author of a small portion of *Dēnkard* III, see de Blois 1996: 45–46.

105. *Wa-hiya li-sāʾir aṣnāf al-mamlaka khalā al-mulūk faqaṭ*. The manuscripts preserve a sample of this script, which, although distorted so that it does not represent any specific words, is clearly the same as the book hand familiar from the Zoroastrian manuscript tradition. This script is said to have aramaeograms but also "thirty-three letters." Unless ligatures were counted as individual letters, it is hard to see how the total of thirty-three letters was arrived at. The figure may be a mistake.

106. Hermans 2018.

This abundance of terms for various species of pre-Islamic Persian writing and texts should not be assumed to emanate from a society with scarcely any written literary texts.[107] Three different terms for "books," *mādayān*, *nāmag*, and *nibēg*, do leave us wondering about distinctions between them with respect to their physical form and their typical contents—one topic here among many for further research—but the use of these terms in post-Sasanian Middle Persian demonstrates that "book," in a broad sense, is an adequate, if somewhat unspecific, translation of all three words. The existence of "books" demonstrates the existence of literary works that are not strictly instrumental. Here again I am employing the useful taxonomy of Hedrick, for whom "The hallmark of the literary text is its circulation in reproduction."[108]

As mentioned, a few of the proponents of the primarily oral nature of ancient Iranian literature explicitly acknowledge the existence and widespread use of the technology of writing for languages like Middle Persian, but they claim its use was restricted to "non-literary" purposes, however ill-defined.[109] De Jong, who says, quite rightly and against the grain of current scholarship, that "this should not lead to the impression that the Sasanian empire was in any way an 'oral civilization'," adds that it is a "well-known fact" that "there were two prominent areas of Sasanian culture for which the use of writing was either consciously rejected or, perhaps, never proposed"[110]—religious texts and literary texts.[111] By religious texts, he seems to mean strictly Zoroastrian ones; and with "there is no evidence" for scribes who "engaged in writing down and copying secular and religious books in the Sasanian period," he evidently means *in Middle Persian.*[112] Various sources, however, pose serious hurdles for the notion that written Iranic-language texts of a religious and literary—that is, fictional, imaginative—character scarcely existed. I will review some of these sources here, but they should suffice to reveal the exaggeration in the current idea of ancient Iranian orality.

F. Translations from Middle Persian

The idea that literary texts in the form of books were not written in pre-Islamic Middle Persian is especially contradicted by the existence of many translations of Middle Persian

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107. Huyse (2008: 142–43), who holds that this was an "oral society" "on its way to a higher level of literacy," lists several ancient Iranian words pertaining to remembering and recitation. It is not under dispute here that speakers of ancient Iranian languages remembered or recited literature. Huyse also cites various words for writing and documents in the same essay.

108. Hedrick 2017: 6 (online pagination).

109. Macuch 2009: 119–20; de Jong 2009: 30.

110. De Jong 2009: 32. Here it is likely that "Sasanian culture" is intended to exclude the inhabitants of the Sasanian kingdom who wrote in non-Iranic languages.

111. Boyce (1968a: 31) supposed that the use of writing for Middle Persian "was evidently not extended to religious or imaginative works until *the early centuries of the Christian era*" (emphasis added), thus envisioning some written works of those kinds in the Sasanian kingdom.

112. De Jong 2009: 31, responding to Tafazzoli 2000: 34–35.

literary works, especially into Arabic from the eighth century onward,[113] e.g., on astrology and astronomy,[114] wisdom literature,[115] edifying fiction,[116] Sasanian histories of the Sasanids and of preceding dynasties,[117] logic,[118] agriculture,[119] lapidary science,[120] and other sorts of special learning in various forms and recensions. At least one extant Syriac work of Aristotelian logic is a translation from mid-sixth-century Middle Persian.[121] I cannot imagine a persuasive argument that all this material was orally performed literature only written down in Arabic upon its immediate translation.[122] Yet, if not simply omitted, reference to these originally Middle Persian works is often diminished in importance. (Later New Persian translations of Arabic versions of Middle Persian works, such as the *Letter of Tansar*, seem to be regarded as more relevant than the prior Arabic ones.) They may be ignored, it would seem, because the Arabic translations are attested as post-Sasanian, and so may represent the alleged shift from a state of orality to one of literacy. Some of the very scholars who treat Zoroastrian Middle Persian books from the ninth and tenth centuries,

113. These are sometimes acknowledged briefly, e.g., Macuch 2009: 117.

114. Nallino 1922; Ullmann 1972: 278–82, 290, 296–98, 306; van Bladel 2009: 27–30.

115. Henning 1956; Shaked 1985; Zakeri 1994; Zakeri 2007, with bibliography; van Bladel 2004.

116. De Blois 1990; de Blois 2008: 1197–98; Boyce 1968b; Guillaume 1997. The *Fihrist* of Ibn al-Nadīm (2009, 2.1: 325.1–11) mentions several more translated into Arabic from Middle Persian.

117. Hämeen-Anttila 2018: 30–51; Hoyland 2018; Hämeen-Anttila 2021.

118. Dānišpāžūh 1978: 1–93; Hermans 2018.

119. Ullmann 1972: 434–36. Wāʾil ʿUbayd's edition (1999) of the Arabic translation of the Middle Persian translation of Cassianus Bassus Scholasticus's *Geoponika* is fundamentally problematic: it apparently blends two different Arabic versions, one from the Middle Persian intermediary and the other from the Greek original, into one text, while falsely ascribing the text to Qusṭā ibn Lūqā (d. 912) through a misunderstanding of the corruption in the name Cassianus. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that a Middle Persian version existed, as evidenced by the name *Warznāmah* and Middle Persian words retained in the Arabic translation. A New Persian translation of the Arabic version of the *Warznāmah* has also been published (ʿĀṭifī 2009).

120. Ullmann 1972: 102–4.

121. Vosté 1928: 23; Hugonnard-Roche 2004: 234. This unedited text, number 171 in the catalogue of the Chaldaean monastery of Baghdad (Hugonnard-Roche 2004: 234 n. 4), explicitly states that it is a Syriac translation by Severus Sebuxt (d. 666 or 667) from a Persian version by Paul the Persian (sixth century CE). A second possible example of a Syriac translation from Middle Persian is the introduction to logic by the same Paul the Persian, dedicated, in language redolent of Persianisms, to "the glorious king of kings Xusrō [I], best of men" (*gaddānā mlek-malkē Kusro ṭābā d-gabre*). Here *gaddānā* = *xwarrahōmand* or *farrox*. This text illustrates the logical concept of a multivocal thing by the example of the sun, which is expressed by Middle Persian words rendered in Syriac letters as *ʾbṭʾbn kwrkšyd mhyr*, that is, *āβtāb*(*ān*), *xwarxšēd*, and *mihr* (Land 1875: 9.2). On this text and its origins, see Bruns 2009: 34–38.

122. Durkin-Meisterernst (2008: 205) is right that "The indirect evidence [for literary production in Middle Persian] cannot be ignored," but he has only the example of *Kalīla wa-Dimna*. He is also right to assume, generally, that much written material has been lost. Nevertheless, his remark (p. 206) that, besides the *Xwadāy-nāmag*, "no other Sasanian historiography is known," is contradicted by many other well-known examples (Hämeen-Anttila 2021).

and later, as reflecting a Sasanian worldview, and who lament the loss of Middle Persian (oral) literature, ignore eighth- and ninth-century Arabic versions of older Middle Persian books otherwise lost.

The neglect of Arabic sources seems to be related to arguments of Philippe Gignoux, who created an influential threefold taxonomy of sources for the Sasanian kingdom to prioritize objects and texts from the kingdom itself over "foreign" and post-Sasanian sources.[123] Sometimes this has been applied effectively. For example, Rika Gyselen is right when she insists that Sasanian seals bearing the names of officials should have priority as sources (being, in Gignoux's taxonomy, "primary" sources) over readings of the names of officials as recorded in the history of al-Ṭabarī (for Gignoux a "tertiary" source, along with all "historiographie arabo-persane").[124] Although correct in principle, Gignoux's taxonomy blurs important differences between sources within the three alleged categories of priority and ignores the ways that different sources are relevant to different historical problems, while in actual effect, it appears to have been used by some to relegate all Arabic sources on Sasanian history and culture to a "tertiary" category of minimal relevance. Rather, Arabic sources on the Sasanian kingdom belong to quite different kinds of sources that must be distinguished. There is a great difference between, for example, a tenth-century synthesis of lost Sasanian histories blended with folklore about pre-Islamic Arabian tribes and a faithful Arabic translation directly from a sixth-century Middle Persian composition.

G. Written Middle Persian Poetry and Historiography

One of the very few works of poetry to be transmitted in Middle Persian manuscripts is *Draxt ī asurīg*, a tenson or dispute poem of more than one hundred couplets, mentioned above for its reference to writing on leather. The poem, which is Parthian adapted to Middle Persian writing, concludes with verses blessing whomever sings the poem *or copies it in writing*. I have slightly modified Christopher Brunner's translation:

118 (Whoever) has sung my song, / whoever has written (*nibišt*) his own [copy],[125]
119 may he live long with every singing; / may he view the head of his dead foe.
120 May he who composed (*nihād*) and he who wrote (*nibišt*) / be, both in the same manner,
121 renowned of person in the material world, / and saved of soul in the immaterial.[126]

123. Gignoux 1978; Gignoux 1984. He borrowed (1978: 140) this tripartite organization of sources from Assyriologist J. A. Brinkman, who used it to organize the study of Babylonian history from the twelfth to the eighth century BCE (Brinkman 1968).

124. Gyselen 2009; Gignoux 1984: 260.

125. Does <npšh> here represent Middle Persian *xwēš* or Parthian *wxēbēh*?

126. Brunner 1980: 294–95.

But where is the epic literature so dear to the oralist? There is at least one solid indication that even epic poetry was once plentiful in Middle Persian writing. The testimony comes from Ḥamza of Iṣfahān, a learned and prolific scholar who flourished in the second half of the tenth century CE. He wrote in Arabic but evidently spoke a Western Iranic language at home.[127] He gives us glimpses of an abundant fictional written literature, including poetry, in Middle Persian. In compiling an extensive collection of proverbs occurring in Arabic poetry, he emphasized how pervasive and numerous proverbs are in Arabic literature, but he did not miss the opportunity to declare that the Sasanian Persians had something similar, though much less extensive.

> As for the Persians, the prose texts of their histories, their wars, and the famous accounts of their romantic lovers used to be converted for their kings into verses of poetry registered within books and preserved in the libraries that were the Houses of Wisdom.[128] An unaccountably plentiful sum of this was assembled, but then most of it was lost along with the loss of their kingdom. Remnants of it still remain exceeding ten thousand leaves, written in their Persian script.
>
> It is poetry all of which adheres to a single meter similar to that of [the Arabic meter] *rajaz*.[129] It resembles Arabic poetry in the regularity of its measures but differs from it in the absence of end-rhymes. Sayings from their verses of poetry used to circulate orally as proverbs among the people of their time, and a bit of it remains on the tongues of people [today].
>
> The proverbs of the Persians, though they wrote them down, and though they accumulated through ancient times, do not add up to a tenth of the proverbs of the Arabs.[130]

What is more noteworthy than the reference to the oral circulation of poetry—it is not at issue that people recited poetry aloud and remembered verses of song that they had heard—is that Ḥamza knew of more than "ten thousand leaves," i.e., pages of codices, of literature concerning specifically the "stories of love and adventure or heroic tales" that were assumed not written,[131] which survived in books into the tenth century CE. This material was, according to Ḥamza's estimate, only a portion of what once existed, and it is entirely lost today. Even if Ḥamza's figure is a round one and exaggerated, he knew of such

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127. In one of his works Ḥamza provides notes about the phonology of Western Iranian, making it clear that he was conversant in it (Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī 1968: 34–35). He also transmits, without changes, Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ's statement that the language of Iṣfahān, his home city, was Parthian (*al-fahlawiyya*) (ibid.: 23).

128. On the Sasanian background of the Arabic term *bayt al-ḥikma*, "House of Wisdom," referring to a library, see Gutas and van Bladel 2009.

129. Shaked (1970: 405) rightly remarks that *rajaz*, as the least regulated of the canonical Arabic meters, probably stood as the nearest example to Middle Persian verse forms, which operated by principles other than syllable quantity.

130. Ḥamza 2009: 64.13–65.5. An English translation of the passage was published by Shaul Shaked (1970: 405), who received the text from M. J. Kister, but the above translation is my own.

131. Macuch 2009: 119–20.

books, and we can believe his general point: epic poetry and romance in verse were written down, in Persian, in substantial quantities under the reign of the Sasanids. It is noteworthy that Ḥamza furthermore implicitly regarded written literature as the basis for the composition of oral poetry, not the reverse. Ḥamza, still today one of the major sources for Sasanian history, is a strong authority who cannot be disregarded. For his work to collate charts of Sasanian reign-lengths and create a concise royal chronicle of the Sasanids from eight different versions of Middle Persian sources, he consulted other scholars and researchers in the process, reading at least one work on ancient history by a mobed of Fārs, Bahrām son of Mardānšāh.[132] Ḥamza is also an early source for the existence of a Western Middle Iranic written version of the epic romance of Vis and Rāmin.[133] Ḥamza's report about Persian poetry, cited above, survives because he included it in a large volume on wise sayings in Arabic poetry, one of his many areas of expertise. Unlike books on Arabic literature, the Middle Iranic books he knew about had no copyists to preserve them. The Iranic-language literary works were lost, while early Arabic literary works were partly preserved.

H. The Post-Sasanian Continuation of Middle Persian Literary Culture

The ninth-century Arabic essayist al-Jāḥiẓ of Basra likewise refers to a large Middle Persian work of literary erudition called *Kitāb Kārwand*. On the topic of Persian literature, he says, imitating the words of a proponent of non-Arab culture:

> Whoever wants to advance in the art of eloquence, to understand rare vocabulary, and to delve deeply into the lexicon should read the Book of Kārwand. Whoever needs intelligence and education (*adab*), and to know ranks, admonitions, and punishments, beneficent statements, and noble ideas should investigate *Siyar al-mulūk* (Tales of the kings). These are the Persians, their treatises, speeches, words, and ideas.[134]

He goes on to characterize other nations as having their own books and materials for developing eloquence, naming the ancient Greeks (*al-yūnān*) and the Indians (*al-hind*) as comparable to the Persians. One might doubt the information about *Kārwand* had al-Jāḥiẓ not also mentioned it in a different treatise, where he says that a certain Muslim theological disputant (*baʿḍ al-mutakallimīn*) told him that he had seen a Zoroastrian at Sīrāf, a rich port city of Fārs about 650 km from Basra, who was memorizing the *Kārwand*, which was recorded in a thousand densely written parchment leaves.[135] The figure of a thousand is likely

132. Hoyland 2018: 26–44; Hämeen-Anttilla 2021: 46.

133. Minorsky 1962: 276–77. The story of Vis and Rāmin is mentioned in the Arabic poetry of the half-Persian poet Abū Nuwās (d. 814). The verse makes it clear that the story of Vis and Rāmin was read aloud from a book divided into sections (MP sg. *fragard*).

134. Al-Jāḥiẓ 1968, 3: 13.1–4.

135. Al-Jāḥiẓ 1955: 84 §155: *kayfa ḥifẓuka li-l-kitābi Kārwand wa-qad ḫabbaranī baʿḍu al-mutakallimīna annahū raʾā bi-Sīrāf majūsiyyan yaḥfaẓuhū wa-huwa fī alfi jildin bi-ḫaṭṭin muqāribin*. Charles Pellat, the editor, incorrectly emends the name to *Kārnāmak*, thinking that it is the Middle Persian work *Kārnāmag ī Ardaxšīr* (p. 189 n.), but that work would not fill hundreds of pages. Pellat

again to be a round number but the book was clearly supposed to be large. The word *kār-wand* 'useful' (or 'practical') is not attested in Middle Persian or Parthian, but it would be the equivalent in those languages for New Persian *kārband* 'useful, attentive to work'.[136] Unfortunately, we know no more about this book. Part of it was probably a *frahang*, a vocabulary of Middle Persian words and aramaeograms, and part an *ēwēn–nāmag*, or book of protocols and customary manners.[137] Such a collection was mentioned also by al-Masʿūdī (d. 956f.) as "huge, consisting of thousands of pages" (*ʿaẓīm fī al-ulūf min al-awrāq*), "scarcely found complete except in the hands of mobeds and other village leaders."[138]

These post-Sasanian testimonies may not reassure the proponents of pervasive ancient orality who allege that literary literacy developed "late," as discussed. But could *all* this literature have been written at the very end of the Sasanian kingdom or afterward? Could all the scripts mentioned by Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ around 750 CE be new inventions in the last century of the Sasanid dynasty? An affirmative answer to these questions is implausible. Nevertheless, their post-Sasanian attestation should not be a reason for them to be ignored in accounts of Middle Persian literature and culture, and they do directly refute the concept of "ancient Iranians" who were skeptical of written literature.

I. Fictional and Nonfictional References to Middle Persian Literacy

Testimonies from Sasanian times, too, indicate the role of Middle Persian writing. Some of these are from accounts that are fictional, but that expect an audience to regard writing as a normal activity. The *Kārnāmag ī Ardašīr*, extant in Middle Persian, portrays third-century characters as engaging in lively written correspondence and holds the young Ardašīr in esteem for his education in literacy (*dibīrīh*) as well as horsemanship.[139] In Syriac Christian martyr legends, writing by Persians is portrayed as an ordinary matter. And in the story of Sindbād the sage, translated into Arabic from Middle Persian, the sage delivers an intensive education to the son of a king, locked in a house for six months while writing on walls specially whitewashed for the purpose.[140] Even if these accounts are fictional, they aim at verisimilitude in their narration of conceivable events and things, such as the employment of writing for various purposes.

Some biographical accounts directly credit Zoroastrian priests with literacy. One written in Syriac by Bābay, the abbot of Mount Izla (d. 628), a leading figure in the Church of the East in his day, about the Persian martyr Giwargis (George, d. 615), whom he knew personally, serves as an example:

notes that his manuscript sources gave *kʾwryd*, a form easily miscopied and mispointed from the correct *kʾrwnd*.

136. For the suffix *-wand* in Western Middle Iranic, see Durkin-Meisterernst 2014: 180.
137. Tafazzoli 1984; Cereti 2001: 58.
138. Al-Masʿūdī 1894: 104.9–11.
139. Anklesaria 1935: 8.
140. Nöldeke 1879: 521; Baethgen 1879: 11.

> Mihrmāhgušnasp, who is now the martyr Giwargis, was honed with Persian writing from his youth. He was educated in Magianism so that, while not yet seven years old, he could "do hymms" (*yašt*) and hold the ritual rods (*barsom*) according to the error of Magianism.[141]

Here the priestly education of a Persian Zoroastrian boy included both Persian writing and oral recitation of Avestan liturgy. In Syriac, "Persian writing," *seprā Pārsāyā*, refers to the "Pahlavi" script with its ambiguities and aramaeograms.[142] This literate Zoroastrian priest-in-training's conversion to Christianity was a special victory from the author's point of view.[143]

As mentioned above, Mihrmāhgušnasp was responsible for the Persian translation of a written text summarizing his faith for the Persian king. Nevertheless, the chronology of Mihrmāhgušnasp, from the late reign of Xusrō II (r. 590–628) near the end of the Persian kingdom, may be used to insist on the putative gradual transition of Persian-speakers from an "oral society" to a literate one. Moreover, the extent of his literacy may be doubted by one who assumes that Persians had only instrumental uses for writing, records, and legal notes. Even earlier references, as in the next two sections, are helpful to dispel this misconception.

J. The Writing Down of the Zoroastrian Religion for the Armenians

One of the most spectacular episodes in the known history of the Persian kingdom was the failed attempt by Yazdgird II (r. 438 to 457) and his closest allies to convert his Armenian, Albanian, and Georgian subjects to Zoroastrianism and the rebellion that ensued. To my knowledge, the role of writing in this event has not been discussed in the context of Middle Persian literary works. According to Łazar P'arpec'i (fl. late fifth century), who composed his history about it in Armenian within living memory of the event, Yazdgird is alleged to have sent the Zoroastrian religion in written form, along with priests, to instruct the Armenian aristocracy in the Good Religion. The arrival of the instruction in written form alongside the oral informants is emphasized repeatedly in his history. "So [Yazdgird] immediately summoned the magi, and, setting down the tenets of magism [in writing: *greal*], he had them brought to Armenia."[144] The king declared in written messages [epistles:

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141. Bedjan 1895: 436.6–11: *hu den Mihrmāhgušnasp d-hāšā Giwargis sāhdā etlṭeš b-seprā Pārsāyā men ṭalyuteh w-etdarraš ba-mgušutā aykannā d-āp-lā ʿadkel bar-šbaʿ šnin itaw^{hy}-hwā yašt neʿbed w-bursmā nelbok a^{y}k ṭaʿyutā dilāh da-mgušutā*. The text does not quite say that he "récitait du magisme," as Tremblay rendered it (2012: 115). The Syriac *yašt neʿbed*, translated literally here as "do hymns," is clearly a calque from Middle Persian *yašt kunēd*, as *bursmā nelbok* is from Middle Persian *barsom dārēd*.

142. See the description of the *seprā Pārsāyā* by Ishoʿdād of Marw in the mid-ninth century (translation with brief commentary by van Bladel 2017a: 203).

143. On the role of Zoroastrian priests as officials in Sasanian society, see now Dang 2022: 18–136.

144. Tr. Thomson 1991: 80; Łazar 1891: 135: *ew greal zawrēns mogout'eann tayr berel i Hays*.

hrovartak], "Therefore, we have written down our infallible and just religion and had it brought to you."[145] The Armenians "realized that he was sending them in writing their impious religion."[146] The Armenian aristocracy is characterized as mocking the reading that is read to them. They declared (with references to reading and writing emphasized here by italics),

> For the religion which we know to be false and the babbling of witless men, which we have often heard from your false so-called teachers, and of which we are as knowledgeable as you, should be neither *read* nor heard. For *at its reading* we are forced to laugh, so that the religion, its teachers, and those who worship such chicanery are together insulted. Therefore, we did not consider it appropriate or convenient to set our religion *in writing* and have it brought to you according to your order. For if we did not think your false and ridiculous religion worthy *of being read* and introduced among us lest we insult you by mocking your religion—which in your great wisdom you should have considered when *writing it down* and having it brought to us—how could we send *in writing* such a divine and true religion to your ignorant majesty to be mocked and insulted?[147]

The six verbal references to reading and writing in this passage characterize the situation in 450 CE. They are only several of many such references in the Armenian text.[148] It should not, therefore, be said that leading Persians objected to the writing of the principles and tenets of their religion. Perhaps one may respond that a summary of Zoroastrianism may have been written by the magian priests in Armenian rather than in Persian. But there is no hint here that this was composed in Armenian, no remark by the Armenian author that the king communicated in "our own language" or words to that effect, no excerpts from

145. Tr. Thomson 1991: 81; Łazar 1891: 136: *vasn oroy ew zawrēns mer zstoyg ew zardar grec'ak' ew towak' berel aṙ jez*.

146. Tr. Thomson 1991: 81; Łazar 1891: 137: *grov* ("by means of writing").

147. Tr. Thomson 1991: 83; Łazar 1891: 142–44.

148. It is likely that inducing adult Armenians to participate in Zoroastrianism would mean their learning at least some Avestan prayers. It is worth considering, then, at least as an unprovable hypothesis, that this may have been the occasion for the invention of the Avestan script, which was fully alphabetic like the recently invented Armenian script. (Antonio Panaino [2012: 80] notes even the similarity of some letter shapes between Armenian, Greek, and Avestan letters.) That is, it is possible that written Avestan recitations were part of the written version of the Persian religion sent to the Armenians. In that case the Avestan script would have been created, in the first instance, not as an aid to memory for those already fluent in its recitation, as is sometimes supposed, but as a means of propagating Zoroastrianism among others through instruction in Avestan prayer and liturgy. The learners, in such a case, would be adults who were not raised with training in the oral recitation rather than Zoroastrian boys who learned to recite the Avestan text—in all probability orally, following the live example and instruction of adults. Łazar's Armenian characterization of the king's religion as "babbling" coheres with the typical polemic of non-Zoroastrians specifically against the recitation of the Avesta, likened by Christians (and others) to murmuring and gibberish (Greenfield 1974; van Bladel 2017a).

such writings in the Armenian text for the purposes of refuting them. When the king ordered that the tenets of magianism be written, the natural assumption is that it was written in the privileged language of the royal sender rather than in the Armenian language and script, which was, as far as we know, written only by Armenian churchmen at this time. By contrast, the Armenian aristocrats who were the targets of the conversion effort are characterized in this historian's account as understanding speech in the Persian court when they attended it.

K. Fourth-Century References to Persian Literacy

An even earlier attestation of Persian literacy comes from the heresiographer Epiphanius (d. 403), the bishop of Salamis, writing in the 370s. Epiphanius makes a parenthetical remark to explain to his Roman readers Mani's choice to divide his book *The Mysteries* into twenty-two chapters, each corresponding to one of the twenty-two Aramaic letters.

> For most of the Persians use the Aramaic characters too besides Persian letters,[149] just as, by us, many nations use Greek characters, even when nearly each nation has its own characters. But other [Persians] solemnly use the profoundest dialect of the Aramaeans and the dialect of Palmyra, both it and their letters. These are twenty-two, wherefore this book [Mani's *Mysteries*] is divided into twenty-two sections.[150]

Epiphanius is saying that literate Persians were generally familiar with the Aramaic alphabet in addition to their own and that some even wrote in Aramaic; this is to make sense of Mani's choice of twenty-two divisions in a book with a "Persian" audience. Besides the implication of his words most relevant here—that Persians were, to him, a literate people, a nation with its own variety of writing—he believes that Persian writers generally could use the Aramaic script too, in a secondary way. This appears to refer to the use of Aramaic letters for entire Persian texts, in the manner of the well-known Manichaean Middle Persian texts composed in a variety of Aramaic script resembling the Palmyrene, known today as the "Manichaean script."[151] Epiphanius thus attests to fourth-century Persian literacy,

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149. The definite article was added by the editor Holl: <τὰ> Περσικὰ στοιχεῖα. This textual addition seems unnecessary and may even slightly obscure the meaning.

150. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 13.4–5: χρῶνται γὰρ οἱ πλεῖστοι τῶν Περσῶν μετὰ Περσικὰ στοιχεῖα καὶ τοῖς Σύρων γράμμασι, ὥσπερ παρ' ἡμῖν πολλὰ ἔθνη τοῖς Ἑλληνικοῖς κέχρηνται, καίτοι γε ὄντων σχεδὸν κατὰ ἔθνος ἰδίων γραμμάτων. ἄλλοι δὲ δῆθεν τὴν βαθυτάτην τῶν Σύρων διάλεκτον σεμνύνονται τήν τε κατὰ τὴν Πάλμυραν διάλεκτον, αὐτήν τε καὶ τὰ αὐτῶν στοιχεῖα. εἴκοσι δύο δὲ ταῦτα ὑπάρχει· διόπερ καὶ ἡ αὐτὴ βίβλος εἰς εἴκοσι δύο τμήματα λόγων τέτμηται. Cf. Spiegel 1858: 34.

151. It is remotely possible that this refers, somewhat obscurely, to the aramaeograms, with the following sense: although some Persians write in literary or contemporary Aramaic, most Persians who write do so in Persian, but even the latter, when writing Persian, use Aramaic characters *with* Persian letters. The interpretation hinges on the use of the Greek preposition μετά. The probable interpretation is that the word indicates sequence ("after"), so that the Persians sometimes use Aramaic letters as an *alternative* to the Persian script. If, however, it indicated concomitance, then the Persians

evidently not on a tiny scale. Of course, the Persian letters too were originally a variety of the Aramaic script, but, as seen already on the earliest Sasanian coins and inscriptions, they had become distinct in their shape from those used by Aramaeans of Syria and Iraq in the fourth century. This passage recognizes a distinction between two forms of writing among the Persians of that time. Epiphanius does not qualify his statement to indicate that Persian writing was used only for practical purposes. The context of his discussion is, rather, written religious texts. One surprise is the remark that some Persians prefer to write purely in erudite Aramaic, which could signify either the frequent Roman use of the name "Persian" to mean, generally, any inhabitant of the Persian kingdom, meaning therefore that some *subjects* of the Persians write in Aramaic—but this would scarcely require comment and is unlikely to be the right interpretation. It may rather refer to persons like Aphrahaṭ (Western Middle Iranic *Frahāt*, Greek Φραάτης), known in Aramaic as "the Persian scholar" (*ḥakkimā Pārsāyā*), whose eloquent Syrian Aramaic *Demonstrations* survive—twenty-two in number according to the letters of the Aramaic alphabet. He composed them in the 330s and 340s in the kingdom of the Sasanids; they are preserved in several extremely old manuscripts, three dating to the fifth and sixth centuries, and they were translated into Armenian in the fifth century as well.[152] Unless Aphrahaṭ was a fourth-century miracle, there would have been other Persians, Christian and non-Christian alike, who wrote religious and other literary texts in Aramaic but whose works were not preserved, as well as Persians who wrote literary works in Middle Persian. Epiphanius's parenthetical remark, particularly in its context, would be seemingly irrelevant if Middle Persian was written only for ephemeral texts such as receipts and the like.

Still earlier references to writing by Zoroastrian priests come from Manichaean texts in Coptic translation. The Manichaean *Psalm of the Bema* CCXLI relates, rhetorically addressing the deceased Mani, that the Magians (ⲙⲁⲅⲟⲩⲥⲁⲓⲟⲥ) "wrote their lying screeds; they gave them out concerning thee" (ⲁⲩⲥϩⲉⲓ ⲛⲉⲩⲃⲓⲃⲗⲓⲇⲓⲟⲛ ⲛϭⲁⲗ ⲁⲩⲧⲉⲉⲩ ⲉⲧⲃⲏⲕ).[153] The Coptic word translated here as "screeds" is a word borrowed from Greek, βιβλίδιον, the most basic meaning of which is a little book or *libellus*, a term that may refer either to little codices or to single sheets containing notices. Here Zoroastrian priests are characterized as writing communicatively and polemically about religion for a special occasion in the third century CE, and their writing was meant to be reproduced. The Coptic text is dated to the late fourth century, in all likelihood based on an earlier account. Whether or not such a specific piece of polemical writing existed, the author of this translated hymn deemed the idea of Zoroastrian priestly writing to have verisimilitude. Likewise, a passage in the Manichaean *Kephalaia*, in a surviving Coptic translation, refers to the writing and reading

would be said to use Aramaic letters "amid" Persian letters, and that would mean the aramaeograms. His allusion to the use of the Greek script by other nations strongly suggests that he means the former, for he says that the Greek script can be used, however defectively, to represent other languages. If this was a reference to aramaeograms, it would be the earliest known reference of that kind, which makes the remote possibility worth mentioning.

152. Brock 2011.

153. Allberry 1938: 43.16–21.

of religious texts by followers of Zarathushtra (Zaradēs).[154] We do not know anything more about these written texts, but we need not discount their existence for this reason alone. A possible counter-suggestion that the Manichaean source attributes religious writing to Zoroastrian priests only to further a larger argument (here, about the corruption of scripture among adherents of other religions) would require us to accept what is now a lot of testimonies and attestations of Persian writing as mere exceptions—Arabic, Syriac, Armenian, Greek, and Coptic sources note that Sasanian Persian writing was normal and that books were written and copied in Middle Persian.

These testimonies to the use of writing for literary and other kinds of written works before the late Sasanian period, to which more could be added, should not surprise us. Neither should it surprise us that many Middle Persian literary works survive in translation in Arabic and in other languages. There is actually no reason to suppose that literate Persians were not interested in written literary texts, texts that should be copied and appreciated, whether for entertainment or religion or scholarship. If Middle Persian literary writing did not exist under the Sasanids, the testimonies related here, and other such testimonies, need to be explained. A theory of pervasive "ancient Iranian" orality should address as many of them as possible. Although plenty of sources indicate that Zoroastrian priests learned their liturgical recitations orally, no source states that the Persians were peculiar in not keeping literary books or that they refused to write anything other than "practical" notes. The absence of any remark stating that Persians generally did *not* write books, either from outsiders or by "Iranians," is at least as important as the nonsurvival of Sasanian Middle Persian literary books.

154. Polotsky and Böhlig 1940: 7.31–33. See further Dilley 2015 for discussion of early Manichaean references to written Zoroastrian texts. Tremblay (2012: 113) held that this passage indicated the existence of written commentaries on the Avesta. It could refer to various kinds of texts, including texts of which we have no knowledge, but clearly Zoroastrians are noted as having had some kind of written religious texts.

4
Middle Persian Literacy in Sasanian Society

So how much Middle Persian written literature was there? We cannot know the answer to that, except to say confidently that it must have been much more than current estimates, which hold that there was virtually none. Another avenue to approach the problem is to contemplate the extent of literacy. This is, unfortunately, also not a question that can be answered definitively, even in the light of the numerous illustrations of Persian literacy just adduced.

As explained, those who have emphasized the exclusivity of orality for ancient Iranian literature have assumed that Middle Persian literacy was the limited domain of a very small number of professionals in the Sasanian kingdom, who, moreover, wrote only for practical functions and never books of scientific erudition or entertainment. Many of the testimonies presented above have demonstrated this to be false, however.

Strictly speaking, the issue of the "primarily oral" character of Middle Persian literary works is distinct from the question of the extent of Middle Persian literacy. It is therefore possible to ignore the hypothesis of pervasive literary orality while still holding that only a small number of scribes ever wrote Sasanian Middle Persian. Desmond Durkin-Meisterernst (2008) provides an example of this position in a thoughtful essay addressing the question of the extent of literacy in the Sasanian kingdom. While accepting the existence of Middle Persian books, he posits that Middle Persian book composition was not used for private purposes, but only by scribes who wrote in their professional function. Middle Persian scribes formed a "guild" of literate experts that "wanted to keep this system [of writing] for itself to secure the future of professional scribes." The difficult features of the Middle Persian script, he suggests, were "a barrier that the uninitiated simply could not cope with," so that the script itself was, in effect, a "cryptographer's masterpiece" that kept nonscribes in a state of illiteracy. In this way "the Sasanian state" was "perhaps even deliberately reactionary," as compared with neighboring societies, with respect to the technology of writing. In other words, the Sasanian state is suspected of having purposefully fostered illiteracy in the language of its own kings.[155]

Durkin-Meisterernst identifies four features of the traditional Middle Persian script that allegedly contributed to the general condition of Persian illiteracy outside of the guild of specialist scribes: (1) defective writing of vowels; (2) multivalence of some letters; (3) historical spellings; (4) heterography (aramaeograms). There is no doubt that these features pose challenges for learners of the script. In the ninth century Ishoʿdād of Marw called this form of Persian writing "the most difficult of scripts," specifically because of the aramae-

155. Durkin-Meisterernst 2008: 195–97.

ograms.[156] Yet all these features occur variously in the writing systems of other languages, where they have never entirely prevented nonprofessionals from being literate. Defective writing of vowels is a feature of Hebrew, Arabic, Neo-Persian, or Urdu, for example; multivalence of some letters and historical spellings are commonplace in English or French. Heterography is certainly a challenge, but is it more of a challenge than learning kanji for the many literate Japanese?[157] Many who were not professional scribes and secretaries became literate in these other languages even before the modern age of state-sponsored mass education of children. Learning the irregularities of the traditional Middle Persian script is no less difficult than acquiring literacy in Chinese, yet many other than professional scribes became literate in Chinese. Durkin-Meisterernst is right that training in Middle Persian literacy must have started in childhood and required years of practice, but that is the same for many forms of literacy, even today. The traditional Middle Persian writing system poses acute problems in our day because the few who study it are not native speakers, cannot consult native speakers of the language, and must learn it as adults from a relatively small and poorly edited corpus of texts that are usually either fragmentary or corrupt. In my view, it is this state of things, more than the difficulties inherent in the writing system (which I do not deny), that make reading Middle Persian, in its traditional script, a "cryptographic" experience. This would not have been the state of things for Sasanian Persian boys who were native speakers of the language and tutored by competent teachers.

I believe it is inherently unlikely that the Sasanian rulers or bureaucrats created and enforced a policy, enduring for four centuries, to restrict Middle Persian literacy to a special guild while allowing all sorts of unregulated literacy to subject peoples in languages besides Persian, and that such a putative restriction was unattested by any observer—one would expect this curious custom to have been noticed and remarked upon. Nor does any source hint that Persian scribes wrote in a cryptic mode specifically to exclude outsiders. As mentioned, Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ tells us that there was a secret script used by the Sasanian kings for sensitive matters of foreign correspondence, with forty distinct letters and no aramaeograms, but all classes of nonroyal Persian people in the Sasanian kingdom used a common form of Persian writing called *nāma-dibīrīh*. This is a direct testimony from a translator of Sasanian Middle Persian works to the general accessibility of literacy.

When Durkin-Meisterernst concludes that "it is impossible to know the extent of literacy in the Sasanian empire,"[158] we can only agree with him. We cannot quantify it. The extent of literacy, its distribution among men and women and between social classes, and different levels of proficiency are all debated even in areas of ancient history that are much better documented. When I argue that Middle Persian literacy was more pervasive than the current estimate, I mean that literacy among Sasanian Persians was probably something like that of neighboring peoples in antiquity: only a small percentage of people ever acquired literacy or ever needed to do so, beyond the most basic capacity. Given the illus-

156. Van Bladel 2017a: 203.
157. Durkin-Meisterernst (2008: 199–200) draws this comparison himself.
158. Durkin-Meisterernst 2008: 208.

trations of Persian literacy that have been drawn in the preceding discussion, I go further in assuming that there were educated, literate Persians who were not professional scribes. The testimonies indicate that there were books of Middle Persian literature; necessarily, it was literate people who enjoyed and copied such books. But, as exemplified by the aforementioned Mihrmāhgušnasp (575–615), who was characterized by his biographer Babay the Elder (551–628), both of whom lived in the Persian kingdom of the Sasanians, as commanding when visiting one of his country estates, "Let one of those who knows how to read in books come and read before me,"[159] literacy was apparently not widespread, but it was not rare. In short, Middle Persian literacy was probably typical of literacy in ancient societies generally, and the activity of writing was not restricted to just the kinds of texts that happen to survive directly in Middle Persian.

159. Bedjan 1895: 439: *nete ḥad men hālen d-yādʿin l-meqrā ba-ktābe w-neqre qdāmay*.

5
The Conditions of Survival

If written, and not just oral, Middle Persian literature existed during the reign of the Sasanids, some good explanations exist for why only a very small bit of it survives. The critical point is that survival is not the default state of any text. It is the exception, and it is always for reasons.[160] For example, unless a text is written on highly durable materials, such as hard stone or clay, or happens to have been left in an extremely arid or otherwise favorable climate, it is destined to disappear through the decay of its medium.[161] Many Middle Persian inscriptions and dipinti were probably written on substances less durable than stone, like mud brick or plaster, making inscriptions in that language seem much more rare than they once were.[162] And without special material factors, every single ancient text that survives to this day does so because of the intervention of humans who worked to preserve that text, usually by making copies. People preserve older texts only when there is a present demand, so that, with the changing needs of passing generations, texts preserved for a long duration may still disappear suddenly when nobody preserves new copies of them; the result then is that we may have no inkling of their former existence, even in the case of texts enjoyed for centuries. Finally, texts may also be superseded by later versions deemed improvements, so that early versions are lost. The tendency of later texts to survive then creates an illusion of late-developing literacy.

A relatively small number of ancient texts has been preserved over centuries for reasons that vary from generation to generation. In the case of the Sasanian kingdom, it is the endurance of the nonstate institutions of religious groups alone that preserved the bulk of the presently surviving Sasanian texts. What distinguishes the literacy of the Persians of the Sasanian kingdom from their neighbors in the Roman or Chinese empires, for example, is not a lingering state of pervasive orality, but the nonpreservation of more Middle Persian texts through a subsequent continuous classical or classicizing Middle Persian tradition common to a group of educated persons who required Middle Persian literacy for their profession. The advent of the first Islamic state in the seventh century induced in the lands hitherto ruled by the Sasanids an increasing rupture in the continuity of Middle Persian literary tradition. Members of the literate scholarly and secretarial classes shifted to the use

160. Roger Bagnall (2011: 140) writes: "Survival is the exception rather than the rule, and careful investigation can usually, where the evidence has not been destroyed, discover the reasons for such survival." He also rightly insists that "arguments from silence, those based on the absence of some body of documentation that would have been created by such everyday writing, deserve the very most rigorous scrutiny before being given any credence."

161. Durkin-Meisterernst (2008: 207) also emphasizes this factor in conditioning the survival and nonsurvival of Sasanian texts.

162. Kennedy 2006: 7–8; Engeskaug 2020: 174.

of Arabic, beginning in the eighth century. By then, Arabic far outweighed Middle Persian in prestige among the real holders of power in society, whom the bureaucrat and secretary, the *dibīr* now called *kātib* (Ar. 'scribe, secretary'), served.

This had two major consequences for Persian literacy. First, Middle Persian literacy eventually ceased to be cultivated for public and general functions, in different regions at different times, and the absence of trained copyists meant the gradual physical deterioration and loss of copies of the ancient and medieval Middle Persian texts that we expect to have been written and read until those times. This was apparently especially disastrous for the highly specialized scripts, mentioned by Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, used for genres of texts that do not survive at all (though the Middle Persian Psalm fragments and the written Avesta prove that other varieties of Persian script did exist). Second, those who were literate in Middle Persian but worked for the interests of government—now the Islamic state ruled by the Arabic-speaking offspring of Arabian colonists—and participated in the shift to Arabic use, did preserve many Middle Persian texts relevant to their interests, but only in Arabic translation, as their changing audience required. Literary Arabic has never ceased to be cultivated since that time, and the preservation of these texts was therefore better secured for a much larger and, as it happened, longer-lasting audience. As discussed, a large batch of early Arabic texts are translations of Sasanian and immediately post-Sasanian Middle Persian works. Their contents prove the existence of Middle Persian literary works in the genres of special interest to the professionals who maintained them, but we would be mostly ignorant about them had they not been translated. Some of the Arabic translations from Middle Persian are recorded as having existed but are themselves lost or preserved only in fragmentary excerpts by other authors. They disappeared for the same reasons outlined above, especially when they were superseded by other works and anthologies in Arabic, or more polished Arabic expositions of the same material. In this way, early Arabic texts offer us the best available view of Sasanian Middle Persian literature—better than the Zoroastrian Middle Persian texts themselves do—for all topics beyond specifically Zoroastrian priestly interests. Their nonsurvival in Middle Persian has contributed to the illusion of ancient Iranian orality among the Persians, but we should look instead at the circumstances of survival to understand the pattern of genres that they represent.

What does survive directly in Sasanian Middle Persian reflects exactly the pattern outlined by the foregoing argument based on material factors. Texts on durable materials are more likely to survive. Hence inscriptions on stone and metal objects and legends on coins make up a significant part of the extant Sasanian Middle Persian corpus. As mentioned, Egypt's dry climate preserved about 950 fragmentary Middle Persian texts on papyrus and other fabrics, mostly pertaining to the military government during Sasanian Persian occupation (619–629 CE). If these have been unearthed from a ten-year period of military occupation, it should boggle the mind to contemplate how many perishable documents the management of Sasanian society produced in four centuries over vast territories. The extremely dry environment of far-eastern Turfan and its region, today in China, likewise preserved thousands of fragmentary Middle Persian, Parthian, and other ancient Iranic-language texts used by Manichaeans and Christians, among many texts in other languages.

Apart from the preserving effects of durable material substrate and especially dry climate, chance is another factor for the survival of a small number of other texts, e.g., documents poorly provenanced but likely rediscovered in an arid Iranian locale, such as the mostly unedited and uncatalogued "Pahlavi archive" or the so-called Tabarestan archive. The rest were maintained by copyists who retained only what suited their own specific needs. Even the society of the Zoroastrian priests, in different locales, shifted to the use of Arabic and to New Persian as media for nonreligious learning, and had no more need of Middle Persian for nonreligious texts. They used the same nonreligious texts as everybody else, so that the domain of functions for which they used Middle Persian contracted. Yet if it were not for these families, we would have no written Avestan texts and no Zoroastrian Middle Persian books, the latter of which E. W. West estimated in 1888 to be only about as extensive, collectively, as the Hebrew Bible, in its extant totality.[163]

From this perspective we should assume that there were once large numbers of Sasanian Middle Persian texts that are now lost: it is extremely unlikely that the only texts ever written in that language were just those that fit the conditions for survival. Were it not for the existence of manuscript MK,[164] which preserves the bulk of the extant Zoroastrian Middle Persian texts of a nonreligious variety, it would be possible to expound a theory that the writing of Middle Persian was a special, sacred activity reserved only for religious texts. We know this was not the case and we must use reasonable inferences to surmise what once must have existed.

These processes did not condition just literature in Middle Persian. They also apply to literary texts in other ancient languages. Ancient Greek texts survive mostly only in medieval manuscripts younger than the original compositions by centuries (far more abundantly than those for Middle Persian) and as inscriptions on durable materials, or they have been preserved by the dry climate of Egypt—where troves of discarded papyri, when discovered and read and digested, transformed the study of ancient Greek literature and society. The historical conditions affecting the Greek manuscript tradition were entirely more favorable, however, as the eastern Roman state and society, with copyists interested in ancient Greek literary learning, survived until the fifteenth century. But an analogous example is the manuscript tradition of ancient Greek philosophy: what was not current in the philosophical schools of late ancient Alexandria and Athens, and in libraries in Byzantium when new readers demanded old texts, is now lost, so that there are preserved the names of many ancient Greek philosophers whose books do not survive. Diogenes Laertius's *The Lives and Views of the Estimable Philosophers* (third century CE) alone gives us a glimpse of the extent of the loss, amounting to hundreds of works by many different authors. A single copying center in ninth-century Constantinople seems to have preserved a great proportion

163. West 1888: 402.

164. MK was formerly known as manuscript J. For its contents, see Cereti 2001: 172–74; West 1896–1904: 111–14, 117–20.

of the extant ancient Greek philosophical texts for later generations in just a small number of manuscripts.[165]

Another illuminating comparison is with the Syriac manuscript tradition. It is well known that an unusually large number of ancient Syriac codices are extant today. Several of these are of extraordinary age, dated even to the fifth century. Sebastian Brock has shown that most of the 136 Syriac manuscripts dated to the period before 1000 CE were preserved probably through the actions of one man, Mushe of Nisibis, who, in the tenth century, collected old Syriac manuscripts during a stay in Baghdad and brought them to an Egyptian monastery. A single act, in effect, relocated Syrian and Iraqi manuscripts to a secluded place in the very dry climate of Egypt. Without this act, we would probably have lost much of what is preserved today of the earliest Syriac literature.[166] Mushe of Nisibis was Syrian Orthodox; by contrast, early works of the Church of the East, a different institution, are largely lost. We can see the extent of the discrepancy of the loss from ʿAbdishoʿ bar Brikā's (d. 1318) list of East Syrian authors and the titles of their books, most of which are now no longer extant.[167]

Books are seldom preserved when preservation carries unwanted costs, and they become useless when nobody who can read them survives. Thereafter only a lucky condition can keep them intact. The Syriac tradition is like the Middle Persian in another important respect: its accidental religious character. Syriac books on topics not pertinent to Christianity survive in very small numbers. That is because churchmen who used Syriac for the purposes of their religion eventually came to use Arabic, predominantly, for all other literary and scientific purposes. The restriction of the domain for the use of literary Syriac gives Syriac the character of a strictly Christian and especially religious tradition, but that is only an accident of the selection process, conditioned by church institutions and the distribution of domains of language use in society. Ancient secular Syriac literature and the Syriac literature of non-Christian groups like pagans and Manichaeans are mostly lost.

We should not, therefore, interpret the nonsurvival of Sasanian Middle Persian books as a sign that Persians recited most of their literature out loud for audiences from memory, without writing much at all. We should assume, rather, that no such lucky accidents occurred to preserve more Sasanian Middle Persian manuscripts, including literary texts, directly or in direct transmission. Critically, no continuously existing institutions, besides the Zoroastrian priesthood, managed to preserve any secular Middle Persian works in their original form. There was no pressing need for these texts when other languages—Arabic and New Persian—became more useful, interregional and intercommunal vehicles for literate people.

In a sense, even the Zoroastrian Middle Persian texts that do survive are still due to lucky accidents. As Götz König has shown, were it not for one family of Zoroastrian priests who brought Middle Persian texts with them from Khorasan to Kirman in the sixteenth

165. Goulet 2007: 54–57; Pontani 2015: 340–41.
166. Brock 2004; Brock 2012.
167. ʿAbd Yishūʿ al-Ṣawbāwī 1986.

century, a very large portion of the extant Zoroastrian Middle Persian material may not have been preserved at all.[168] Another lucky accident was the Uighur patronage of Manichaean teachers who treasured books composed in Middle Persian and Parthian, leading to the import of many precious Manichaean texts to a desert region in which the climate preserved them. And while the conquest of the Sasanian kingdom by the first Islamic state is blamed for the demise of Middle Persian literature, oral or written, it is also one of the outcomes of that conquest that much Sasanian and post-Sasanian Middle Persian literature was preserved, albeit in Arabic translation. For the classes of people who probably most used and enjoyed Middle Persian secular literary writing did not disappear with the Islamic conquests. These were not just the secretaries and scribes already discussed. Persian astrologers and physicians, much smaller but nevertheless influential groups of professional scholars, found new patrons among the Abbasids too. As these groups shifted from the use of Iranic languages like Middle Persian and Parthian to Arabic, for the purposes of their profession and, eventually, for everyday use, some of them translated Middle Persian books into Arabic for themselves as well as their patrons. Outside of the specific domain of Zoroastrianism, it is in Arabic that more Middle Persian literature survives than in any other medium. These works are very seldom treated in scholarly surveys of Middle Persian literature, furthering the sense of dearth that supports the view that literary works were almost all orally composed and transmitted.[169]

The special role of religious institutions in preserving originally Sasanian texts created a serious problem for the modern historiography of the Persian kingdom of the Sasanids. In the case of five distinct Sasanian manuscript traditions—the East Syrian Christian, the Babylonian Jewish, the Mesenian Mandaean, the Armenian Christian, and the Middle Persian Zoroastrian—the selection of texts for survival, reproduction, and commentary remained basically in the hands of religious personnel.[170] The consequent disappearance of texts not concerned with religion acts as a powerful filter for us on our sources, contributing to a vision of a Sasanian society in which, in the appearance of hindsight, people were overwhelmingly concerned with religious identity and explained the world's events in starkly theological terms. An emphasis on the "political theology" and even "political cosmology" of the Sasanian monarchs has emerged in recent scholarship reflecting this accidental pattern of selection of religious sources for survival, making it seem that Persian generals, secretaries, and managers relied on the Avesta and its exegesis for their strategy, policy,

168. König 2014.

169. This fact runs against a current view that the shift to Arabic, both the language and, in the case of New Persian, the Arabic script, is the cause of the demise of ancient Iranian literature. Macuch (2009: 117–18) ties the demise of oral Sasanian Middle Persian literature to the "religious fanaticism," "narrow-mindedness," and "vandalism and destruction" of Muslims, descriptions that do not take into account the history of Arabic scholarship or the enormous salvage effort by scholars and scribes whose medium became Arabic.

170. Other religions of the Sasanian kingdom disappeared and their manuscripts are gone; van Bladel 2017b: 98–117. The obvious exception is the sensational discovery of Manichaean manuscripts at Turfan and a few other sites.

and motivation rather than for useful and perhaps even sometimes sincere rhetoric.[171] The predominant survival of literary sources with specifically religious concerns has contributed to such a caricature of late ancient Persians and their subjects, misguiding scholars today into the belief in a world ruled by extreme religiosity. The Arabic translations of lost Middle Persian texts therefore constitute in effect a vitally important sixth Sasanian manuscript tradition.[172] By contrast, the nonreligious varieties of pre-Islamic Persian texts preserved in Arabic translation reveal how blinding the religious concerns of the other five continuous Sasanian traditions really are. Sasanian Middle Persian science, philosophy, and history all existed in some form of writing. Much research will be required to elucidate the character of this sixth Sasanian literary tradition and its relevance to the history of the Sasanian culture, proceeding from the assumption that there were Sasanian traditions of Persian books to be copied.

171. E.g., Payne 2013; Canepa 2018: 9–11. Touraj Daryaee (2013: 22) argues that an inherited Zoroastrian religious ideology was the motive for creating the Sasanian kingdom (rather than a Persian lord's usurpation of Arsacid power) and suggests that the "Umayyads and the Abbasids were only the realization of a Sasanian imperial dream which was in the making for four centuries."

172. Cf. Durkin-Meisterernst 2008: 203, where it is argued that "the disproportional amount of preserved religious texts [in Middle Persian] is not accidental but rather a result of particular characteristics of the religious community; except perhaps for parts of the ideology of the state the secular activities did not have such a community that was able to ensure the preservation of its written texts after the collapse of the state." I posit that in fact there was such a community after many Sasanian bureaucrats adapted to their new circumstances, and that the shift of this community to the use of Arabic after a few generations is the key to the discovery of its surviving texts.

6
Conclusion

Although there was oral literature among speakers of ancient Iranic languages, I have argued that there is no valid reason to assume that Middle Persian speakers, alone among sedentary peoples of their time, never or seldom wrote literary works in their language. Not only are there many Middle Persian literary works surviving in translation, and sufficient testimonies to the existence of Middle Persian literary works now lost and to Sasanian Middle Persian literacy, there are also strong explanations for their general nonsurvival that eliminate the assumption of a theory of predominant literary orality and disinclination to write literature, an *argumentum ex silentio*. We may reasonably assume that it is wrong to propose that what happens to survive in the original language on stone and metal surfaces and in desert environments represents the true range of Sasanian Middle Persian—the odds are far against it. Especially when propped up by a concept of "ancient Iranians" and without any definition of literature or the literary, it has no sound basis and is contradicted by a variety of extant sources. The arguments presented here can, in most cases, be extended to assume the existence of more written literature in other Middle Iranic languages that, unfortunately, does not survive today.

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