MULTILINGUALISM IN ANCIENT CONTEXTS

Perspectives from
Ancient Near Eastern
and Early Christian
Contexts

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IMPERIALISM AND LINGUALISM IN ACHAEMENID PERSIA

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10.1 INTRODUCTION

Monolingualism, and the enforcement of a *lingua franca*,¹ is often associated with asymmetrical power relations in imperial regimes, while multilingualism is generally associated with more liberal and inclusive expressions of political power. The ancient examples of the Hellenistic and Roman empires with Greek and Latin as the respective imperial languages, as well as modern examples of imperial powers enforcing one language onto their colonies (such as the case of English, French, and German on the African continent, Spanish in Latin America, and Russian in Eastern Europe) seem to confirm this assumption.

However, many examples from ancient Near Eastern empires (as discussed in other contributions in this volume) show that this assumption simply does not hold true for these contexts. It seems that the ancient (Greek and Roman) and modern examples (colonies and annexed areas in Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe) referred to above mislead scholars to project such a view onto other ancient Empires (such as Neo-Assyria, Neo-Babylonia, and Achaemenid Persia) as well. The role that Aramaic played in these ancient imperial contexts is often misunderstood as if its function as *lingua franca* formed it into a vehicle for imperialism. This misunderstanding applies particularly to Achaemenid Persia (539–332 BCE). Although Aramaic was a standardised *lingua franca* and a widespread administrative language in the vast expanses of this empire, imperial ideology was never expressed in Aramaic – and thus monolingually – but rather in trilingual inscriptions (in Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian). This means that multilingualism – and not monolingualism – functioned as the vehicle for imperial ideology.

- 1 A *lingua franca* is defined as follows: “It is on the basis of function alone that a language is considered to be a *lingua franca*, by which term is designated any lingual medium of communication between people of different mother tongues, for whom it is a second language. Applicable to all situations where linguistic communication is difficult or impossible, it applies as well to areas characterized by extreme dialect differences as to those with different languages in the normal sense. Any form of language can be used with this purpose. Natural languages spoken beyond their native boundaries are the best-known examples, but dialects have spread in the same manner.” The spheres of use of a *lingua franca* can be described as follows: “Languages and dialects have their spheres of use extended as a consequence of a variety of social phenomena. Some of these are conquest, colonization, migration, trade, commerce, and religion ... Neither number of speakers, manner and mode of use, nor quality of comprehension are defining characteristics of a *lingua franca*; but all these factors determine the social and linguistic consequences of its use. Similarly, a language or dialect acquired as a second language by other speakers does not thereby become automatically a *lingua franca*, but only when the latter linguistically diversified populations use this second language amongst themselves ...” (William J. Samarin, “*Lingua Franca*”, in *Sociolinguistics: An International Handbook of the Science of Language and Society*, eds. Ulrich Ammon, Norbert Dittmar & Klaus J. Mattheier [Berlin: De Gruyter, 1987], 371.).

This (from a modern perspective) unusual relationship between imperial ideology and multilingualism will be the focus of our investigation in this contribution. Since Aramaic forms a “golden thread” throughout the history and geography of the Ancient Near East, and since Aramaic is often wrongly attributed with the imperial aspirations of different ancient regimes, the next section (section 10.2) will first focus on the historical position of this language from the time of its emergence in the 9th century BCE till the end of the Achaemenid period in the 4th century BCE. Thereafter (section 10.3), I will narrow the focus to the Achaemenid empire (539–332 BCE). I will present brief overviews of the Achaemenid royal inscriptions (section 10.3.1) and Achaemenid royal ideology (section 10.3.2), before discussing the relationship between language and imperial ideology in Achaemenid Persia (section 10.3.3). Then (section 10.4) I will turn to a brief theoretical reflection on the relationship between lingualism and imperialism. Within that context, I will particularly consider how lingualism functions in so-called “weak imperialism”. Lastly (section 10.5), I will spell out some implications of the Achaemenid case study and bring my argument to a short synthesis.

10.2 A SHORT OVERVIEW OF THE HISTORICAL POSITION OF ARAMAIC

The scope of this chapter does not allow a fully-blown description of the history of Aramaic; other excellent studies can be consulted for that purpose.² The aim is more

- 2 For an excellent, and the most comprehensive, description of the history of Aramaic, see: Holger Gzella, *A Cultural History of Aramaic from the Beginnings to the Advent of Islam*, Handbook of Oriental Studies 111 (Leiden: Brill, 2015). For shorter and more popular descriptions by the same author, see Holger Gzella, “Die Wiege der ersten Weltsprache: Die Alt Aramäische Sprache Syriens in 9. bis 8. Jh. v. Chr”, *Antike Welt*, 2 (2016): 6-7; Holger Gzella, “New Light on Linguistic Diversity in Pre-Achaemenid Aramaic: Wandering Arameans or Language Spread?” in *Wandering Aramaeans – Aramaeans Outside Syria: Textual and Archaeological Perspectives*, eds. Angelika Berlejung, Aren M. Maeir, & Andreas Schüle (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2017), 19-38. See also the following studies focusing on the history of the language, or of parts of that history (listed in order of publication year): Franz Rosenthal, “Aramaic Studies during the Past Thirty Years”, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 37/2 (1978): 81-91; Joseph Naveh & Jonas C. Greenfield, “Hebrew and Aramaic in the Persian Period”, in *The Cambridge History of Judaism Vol. 1*, eds. William D. Davies & Louis H. Finkelstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 115-29; Klaus Beyer, *The Aramaic Language: Its Distribution and Subdivisions* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986); Franz Rosenthal, “Aramaic, I. General”, *Encyclopaedia Iranica* II (1987): 250-6; Jan Tavernier, “An Achaemenid Royal Inscription: The Text of Paragraph 13 of the Aramaic Version of the Bisitun Inscription”, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 60/3 (2001): 161-76; Dirk Schwiderski, *Die alt- und reichsaramäischen Inschriften = The old and imperial Aramaic inscriptions*, Fontes et Subsidia ad Bibliam pertinentes 2 & 4 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2004); Paul-Alain Beaulieu, “Official and Vernacular Languages: The Shifting Sands of Imperial and Cultural Identities in First Millennium B.C. Mesopotamia”, in *Margins of Writing, Origins of Cultures*, ed. Seth L. Sanders, University of Chicago Oriental Institute Seminars 2 (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2006), 187-209; William M. Schniedewind, “Aramaic, the Death of Written Hebrew, and Language Shift in the Persian Period”, in *Margins of Writing, Origins of Cultures*, ed. Seth L. Sanders, University of

modest, namely to highlight what the function and position of Aramaic was since the time of its emergence.

The first written documents in Aramaic started emerging at the beginning of the 9th century BCE. At the beginning of this phase of the language – that is commonly called Early Old Aramaic, lasting until about the beginning of the 7th century BCE – we see a diversity of Aramean tribes without a common material culture settling down throughout the Syrian region in the Levant. These tribes established a variety of city-states in the area and started developing their respective vernaculars into written languages (such as that used in Tell Fekheriye and in Sam'al – see other contributions in this volume for discussions of these), particularly by adopting and changing the Phoenician alphabetic script for this purpose. Gzella remarks that these early texts create the impression that they served more formal purposes and were rather expressions of the growing cultural and political self-awareness of the time. There are still no signs of any reflection on economic conditions and private life in texts from this era.³

However, from the middle of the 9th century BCE, the Kingdom of Damascus started becoming a more prominent cultural and political centre, and through the influence of this kingdom, Aramaic started spreading outside the Syrian region, southwards to the Galilee and the Transjordan, and by the end of the 8th century BCE, even to western Iran. Increasing cultural and economic contact paved the way for the Damascus version of the language, together with some vernaculars, to find entry into the linguistic landscape of the Near East. Due to the movement of peoples through the fertile crescent, Aramaic started emerging from its local contexts to develop into an international language, or even a *lingua franca*.⁴ When the Neo-Assyrian Empire started its expansion westwards, it ironically opened up the cultural and economic avenues through which Aramaic could also spread its influence into their imperial realm. In

Chicago Oriental Institute Seminars 2 (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2006), 141-52; Devorah Dimant, "The Qumran Aramaic Texts and the Qumran Community", in Flores Florentino, *Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Early Jewish Studies in Honour of Florentino García Martínez*, Journal for the Study of Judaism Supplement Series 122 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 197-205; Margaretha Folmer, "Alt- und Reichsaramäisch", in *Languages from the World of the Bible*, ed. Holger Gzella (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2011), 104-31; David S. Vanderhooft, "'el-Medīnā Ūmedīnā Kiktābāh: Scribes and Scripts in Yehud and in Achaemenid Transeuphratene", in *Judah and the Judeans in the Achaemenid Period: Negotiating Identity in an International Context*, eds. Oded Lipschits, Gary N. Knoppers & Manfred Oeming (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 529-44; Jan Dušek, "Aramaic in the Persian Period", *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 2/2 (2013): 243-64; Herbert Niehr, "The Power of Language. Language Situation and Language Policy in Sam'al", in *In Search for Aram and Israel*, eds. Omer Sergi, Manfred Oeming & Izaak de Hulster, *Orientalische Religionen in der Antike* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 305-32.

3 Gzella, *A Cultural History of Aramaic*, 102.

4 See again the definition and spheres of use of a *lingua franca* discussed in fn. 1 above.

the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian Empires, Aramaic was still characterised by a considerable amount of internal heterogeneity, and this heterogeneity fed into the existing linguistic diversity of the period.⁵ However, Aramaic also started growing in prominence in the imperial bureaucracy and in economic life. Akkadian maintained its position in the royal court as administrative language and language of education and culture, but it was not enforced in the provinces.

There were apparently no attempts to consistently standardise the Aramaic language under Assyrian and Babylonian rule. In the provinces, various forms of Aramaic co-existed with various local idioms, which led to the development of bilingualism amongst scribes and tradesmen. Gzella is of the opinion that by the time of the transition from Babylonian imperial rule to the Achaemenid Empire (that is, by 539 BCE), Aramaic might have become a *lingua franca* already in Babylonia and might even have replaced Akkadian as spoken language by the 5th or 4th century BCE.⁶ Interestingly enough though, it seems that the use of Aramaic – despite its rapid and wide spread during these centuries – did not show any imperial aspirations.⁷

With the emergence of the Achaemenid empire – and particularly as part of the bureaucratic reforms during the reigns of Darius I and Xerxes I in the second half of the 6th century BCE – a deliberate standardisation of Aramaic started taking place. Due to the influence of Babylonian scribes, one particular Aramaic dialect from Babylonia was selected from the huge available variety and was codified into clear orthographic and grammatical rules. It was used in a broad spectrum of societal contexts. This true *lingua franca* was not only widely employed in central imperial administration, but also in local provincial governments – a development which also impacted heavily on the situation in the Palestinian region.⁸ The standardised form of Aramaic spanned several centuries and was not strictly bound to the existence of the Achaemenid Empire.

5 The Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian deportations, which also included groups from the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah in the Levant, contributed to the language diffusion in this time period.

6 Gzella, *A Cultural History of Aramaic*, 154.

7 Gzella points out that the term “*Reichsaramäisch*” is often used wrongly to refer to the Aramaic variants during Assyrian and Babylonian rule. This term has its origin in the description that was given in scholarship to the Egyptian variant of Aramaic, a variant which actually developed only during Achaemenid rule. It is thus anachronistic to employ the term already for the Aramaic of Assyrian and Babylonian times. Knowing however that the term is often used wrongly, Gzella therefore opts to rather speak of Achaemenid Official Aramaic when referring to the standardised version of the language that developed during the time of Darius I and Xerxes I (Gzella, *A Cultural History of Aramaic*, Chapter 4.)

8 See, e.g., the description in Bernard Spolsky, *The Languages of the Jews: A Sociolinguistic History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). Some scholars think that Hebrew, which used the same script as Aramaic since the 6th century BCE, was totally replaced as a spoken language by Aramaic in the Persian period, only to resurface (in another variant, namely Mishnaic Hebrew) in the late Hellenistic period (Naveh and Greenfield, “Hebrew and

What were the reasons that Aramaic gained so much influence over many centuries? Gzella mentions particularly three reasons. Firstly, he indicates that “a light and versatile grammatical system” would lend itself well to facilitate communication between speakers of different languages, particularly mobile work forces; secondly, its “slender morphology” probably contributed to its spread without any empire enforcing it; and thirdly, “limited literacy” was needed to master Aramaic which made use of an alphabetic script in contrast to the complicated Mesopotamian cuneiform, and one could therefore assume that people without formal scribal training, such as craftsmen and traders, could master it. Gzella summarises these points as follows: “Aramaic was thus attractive because of its prestige, its efficiency, and its accessibility.”⁹

Colburn links the success of Aramaic with the increasingly globalised world that started developing during the Achaemenid era when he says:

In order to control its vast geographical extent, the Achaemenid Empire employed several strategies for linking together distant places. These included the establishment of a network of roads and storehouses, a mounted relay postal system, *the use of Aramaic as an administrative language*, and the standardization of the calendar. These measures created the potential for long-distance connectivity by reducing the uncertainties of travel within the empire, and also facilitated interactions between people in different parts of the empire by creating some basic common ground. ... The Achaemenid Empire, then, is a case in which the long-distance complex connectivity necessary for globalization was present, but did not lead to widespread cultural change. ... It suggests that the long-distance connectivity in the empire, though certainly regular (if not frequent) and meaningful, was not necessarily strong. This does not mean that the empire was weak or

Aramaic”; Schniedewind, “Death of Written Hebrew”.) Some others do not see the situation to be so radical, although the fact that Aramaic gained much more status and was widely used in Palestine, is not disputed (Vanderhooft, “‘el-Medîna Ūmedîna Kiktābāh”). It seems that Aramaic started replacing Hebrew as spoken vernacular, but Hebrew remained important at least for the reading and interpretation of religious documents, which continued to be written in Hebrew.

- 9 Gzella, *A Cultural History of Aramaic*, 108. Compare these developments with the definition and spheres of use of a *lingua franca* discussed in fn. 1 above. Although the definition is modern, the phenomenon of a language developing into a *lingua franca* is already observable in the ancient world. The development of Aramaic from a local dialect into an international language through the deportations of the Neo-Assyrian empire, fit the definition of a *lingua franca* well, and one could therefore argue that Aramaic became a *lingua franca* from the period of the Neo-Assyrian empire, but particularly in the Achaemenid period. As Gzella and Colburn (see the quote provided here) indicate, Aramaic fulfilled an important role in creating long-distance connectivity in the subsequent imperial contexts. The evidence thus shows that the language has become a true *lingua franca* according to the definition used in this contribution. Also see Josef Wiesehöfer, “The Role of Lingua Francas and Communication Networks in the Process of Empire-Building: The Persian Empire”, in *State Formation and State Decline in the Near and Middle East*, eds. Rainer Kessler, Walter Sommerfeld & Leslie Tramontini (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2016), 121-34.

disconnected. ... *Arguably, the emphasis on diversity in Achaemenid ideology indicates that these ties were left deliberately weak...*¹⁰ (emphasis mine)

I will return to the aforementioned statement in section 10.4. We now move to focus on lingualism in Achaemenid Persia. This historical case study is particularly meaningful because we have seen that Aramaic has developed into a fully standardised language in this era. Does this mean that it became a vehicle for Achaemenid imperial ideology?

10.3 LANGUAGE AND IMPERIAL IDEOLOGY IN ACHAEMENID PERSIA

10.3.1 A Brief Overview of Achaemenid Inscriptions

Amélie Kuhrt states the following with reference to studying the history of Achaemenid Persia:

The material for studying the Achaemenid empire presents particular difficulties, not so much because it is sparse but because it is very disparate. The many different peoples embraced by the empire had their own, often very long-established, distinctive traditions for commemorating the past and of writing, artistic forms, religion, social and political institutions, eating habits and, of course, languages. These were modified in different ways and over time as they interacted with the Persian régime. But the many local traditions and forms did not die out, and this helps to explain some of the great diversity in the evidence available to the historian. A further problem with the material we have is its very uneven temporal and spatial distribution: the bulk of the documentation clusters around the late sixth and early fifth centuries and is throughout, almost exclusively, concentrated on the western, above all the north-western, section of the empire.¹¹

More specifically, with reference to Persian literature per se (in contrast to classical writers and Old Testament witnesses), the sources are mainly of two types: first, royal inscriptions, and second, administrative documents. In the last-mentioned (mainly concentrated in the so-called Treasury Texts and Fortification Texts found at Persepolis), Aramaic was very prominently used for notations, but also other languages such as Elamite, Babylonian, and Demotic. These administrative texts illuminate interesting socio-economic aspects of the empire. What is striking, however, is that the royal inscriptions never use Aramaic. Virtually all these monumental inscriptions

10 Henry P. Colburn, "Globalization and the Study of the Achaemenid Persian Empire", in *The Routledge Handbook of Archaeology and Globalization*, ed. Tamar Hodos (London: Routledge, 2017), 874, 882.

11 Amélie Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period* (London: Routledge, 2013), 6.

are trilingual, mostly in Old Persian, Babylonian Akkadian, and Elamite, with the occasional appearance of Egyptian hieroglyphics¹² and an Aramaic translation.¹³

Rüdiger Schmitt provides an excellent catalogue of the Old Persian inscriptions of the Achaemenids,¹⁴ and reference can be made to this publication for transliterations and German translations. The most prominent and impressive inscription is the one that Darius I commissioned, and which was chiselled into the rockface of a mountain at Bisitun, alongside the main road from the Mesopotamian plain to Ecbatana (DB – see Figure 10.1). This inscription in three languages is also accompanied by an extensive relief panel which illustrates the submission of some rebels by the king, as described in the inscription.¹⁵

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- 12 On a statue of Darius which was found at Susa, there are some cuneiform texts (DSab), but also some hieroglyphics (DSeg). However, it is now generally accepted that this statue rather originated in Egypt and was later relocated to Susa. See the discussion of Melanie Wasmuth, *Ägypto-Persische Herrscher- und Herrschaftspresentation in der Achämenidenzeit*, *Oriens et Occidens* 27 (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2017). Furthermore, the Darius inscriptions found at Suez also include a hieroglyphic section. One of the lower inscriptions of the Šalūf stela (DZc) contains the text in the traditional three languages of royal inscriptions (Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian – with the Old Persian version best preserved), but a hieroglyphic version of the text also occurs on the back of the stela. See Rüdiger Schmitt, *Die altpersischen Inschriften der Achämeniden: Editio Minor mit deutscher Übersetzung* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2009), 18.
- 13 An Aramaic translation of the Bisitun inscription (DB Aram – see further discussion), dating from the 2nd half of the 5th century BCE, was found on the reverse side of a papyrus from Elephantine in Egypt. This artefact is significant for our discussion of Aramaic in the Persian empire. However, the discussion will be postponed to a later section in this contribution. On DB Aram, see, e.g., Jonas C. Greenfield & Bezalel Porten, *The Bisitun Inscription of Darius the Great: Aramaic Version* (London: Humphries, 1982); Tavernier, “An Achaemenid Royal Inscription”; Gard Granerød, “By the Favour of Ahuramazda I Am King: On the Promulgation of a Persian Propaganda Text among Babylonians and Judaeans”, *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period*, 44.4-5 (2013): 455-80.
- 14 Schmitt, *Die altpersischen Inschriften*.
- 15 Granerød, “By the Favour of Ahuramazda I Am King”; Louis C. Jonker, “Is the Book of Chronicles Yehud’s Equivalent of Bisitun? Interaction between Biblical Writings and Royal Persian Inscriptions from the Late Achaemenid Period”, in *Forschungen zum Alten Testament II*, eds. Catherine Smith & Jill Middlemas, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, forthcoming).

FIGURE 10.1 Bisitun (Behistun) Inscription illustration

A further prominent site where inscriptions abound, is the burial place of many of the Achaemenid kings at Naqš-i Rūštām (see Figure 10.2).

FIGURE 10.2 Achaemenid Tombs at Naqš-i Rūštām

Particularly, the inscription on the tombface of Darius I at Naqš-i Rūštām is significant in terms of the royal ideology (DNa and DNb – see Figure 10.3).¹⁶ This inscription, that is often referred to as the Testament of Darius, actually consists of two separate inscriptions, numbered as DNa and DNb. The first occurs in trilingual form – in Elamite, Old Persian, and Babylonian cuneiform – to the left of the relief at the top of the tomb face. The Old Persian version stands directly to the left of the relief, with the Elamite version in a separate column to the left of that, and with the Babylonian text on the left side of the façade wall. DNb also occurs in the three mentioned languages, with the Old Persian version to the left of the tomb entrance.

FIGURE 10.3 Inscriptions and Iconography on Darius I's Tombface – illustration

Furthermore, there are also numerous inscriptions in the ruins of the royal centres Pasargadae, Persepolis, Susa, and Ecbatana – the majority commissioned by Darius I and Xerxes I. For example, the first trilingual inscription that welcomes the visitor to Persepolis, hails the fame of King Xerxes I who commissioned the building of the impressive entry gate to the city, the so-called Gate of All Nations (XPa) (see Figure 10.4).

16 See Louis C. Jonker, "Achaemenid understanding of law and justice in Darius I's tomb inscriptions: Any connections with Hebrew Bible Pentateuchal conceptions?" *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament*, 33/1 (2019): 23-40.

FIGURE 10.4 Trilingual inscription of Xerxes I on the Gate of All Nations, Persepolis

All these, together with some of the minor inscriptions found at other locations, contribute to our understanding of Achaemenid royal ideology, which will be the focus of the next subsection.

10.3.2 Achaemenid Imperial Ideology

Although the above-mentioned inscriptions play an important role in formulating the Achaemenid royal ideology, architectural features, and iconography also stood in service of this ideology. Other features will therefore also have to be discussed here.

The royal ideology of the Achaemenids is often called *Pax Achaemenidica*.¹⁷ It was nothing new to associate the imperial ideology with “peace” – we have seen that already in the earlier Neo-Assyria, and also observe that in the later Roman Empire. It is often said that this royal ideology found its best expression in the architectural and artistic features of the royal cities, particularly in Persepolis.¹⁸ This city, which was founded by Darius I in 515 BCE and built by him and his successors in the following years, not only contains many reliefs in which the close relationship between the king

17 Josef Wiesehöfer, “From Achaemenid Imperial Order to Sasanian Diplomacy: War, Peace, and Reconciliation in Pre-Islamic Iran”, in *War and Peace in the Ancient World*, ed. Kurt A. Raaflaub (London: Blackwell, 2007), 124–27; Josef Wiesehöfer, “Law and Religion in Achaemenid Iran”, in *Law and Religion in the Eastern Mediterranean: From Antiquity to Early Islam*, eds. Anselm C. Hagedorn & Reinhard G. Kratz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 41–57; Louis C. Jonker, *Defining All-Israel in Chronicles: Multi-Levelled Identity Negotiation in Late Persian Period Yehud*, *Forschungen zum Alten Testament* 106 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 78–83.

18 See the discussion in Matt Waters, *Ancient Persia: A Concise History of the Achaemenid Empire, 550–330 B.C.E.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), Chapter 8.

and the deity is given expression, but the Apadana staircase reliefs also give strong expression to this ideology. The relief scenes depicting numerous nations bringing all kinds of gifts to the royal city are well known. However, lesser known is the fact that on the inside of these staircases are clear depictions of armoured Persian soldiers (see figures 10.5-6).

FIGURE 10.5 Reliefs facing the outside on the Apadana, Persepolis

FIGURE 10.6 Reliefs facing the inside on the Apadana, Persepolis

Battle scenes and scenes of subjugation are also shown on some inner walls of palaces.¹⁹ Those having an audience with the Persian kings would have been reminded of the fact that order, peace and the benevolence of all subjugated peoples can also be enforced with Persian military power, if necessary.

Wiesehöfer relates this ideology of peace with what he calls a “Persian national identity”.²⁰ It was not only expected of Persians to comply with this ideology, but it was also imposed on subjugated peoples. He furthermore indicates that a Persian national identity can be observed in the inscriptions which are associated with the imperial rule. These inscriptions give an impression of how the elites of the provinces were integrated into an empire-wide ruling class culture, and how subjugated peoples were integrated into a sort of imperial symbolic universe. Inhabitants of the empire were not forced to deny their local identities, but rejection of the Persian national identity was regarded as rebellion.

One of the clearest summaries of this ideology is found in some lines of the so-called Darius Testament, an inscription from the tombface of Darius I at Naqš-i-Ruštām (discussed above). It reads as follows (DNb 5–21):

ḡāti Dārayava.uš xšāyaθiya: vašnā A.uramazdāhā avākaram ami, taya rāstam daušta ami, miθa nai dauštā ami; naimā kāma, taya skauθiš tunuvantahyā rādī miθa kariyaiš, naimā ava kāma, taya tunuvā skauθaiš rādī miθa kariyaiš.

taya rāstam, ava mām kāma; martiyam draujanam nai dauštā ami; nai mana.uviš ami; yacimai prtanayā bavati, dršam dārayāmi manahā; uvaipašiyahyā dršam xšayamna ami.

*Martiya, haya hantaxšatai, – anudim hankrtahyā avaθā paribarāmi; haya vināḡayati, – anudim vinastahyā avaθā prsāmi; naimā kāma, taya martiya vināḡayaiš; naipatimā ava kāma: yadi vināḡayaiš, nai fraḡiyaiš.*²¹

Proclaims Darius, the king: By the favour of Auramazdā I am of such a kind that I am friendly to right, (but) I am not friendly to wrong. (It is) not my desire that the weak one might be treated wrongly for the strong one's sake, (and) that (is) not my desire that the strong one might be treated wrongly for the weak one's sake.

19 See also the discussion of Wiesehöfer, “From Achaemenid Imperial Order to Sasanian Diplomacy”, 126.

20 Josef Wiesehöfer, “The Achaemenid Empire”, in *The Dynamics of Ancient Empires: State Power from Assyria to Byzantium*, eds. Ian Morris & Walter Scheidel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 89–90.

21 Transliteration from Schmitt, *Die altpersischen Inschriften*, 106–7.

What (is) right, that (is) my desire. To the man following Falsehood I am not friendly. I am not hot-tempered. Whatever occurs to me in a quarrel, I firmly hold back in my thinking; I am firmly in control of myself.

The man who co-operates, for him, according to the co-operation, thus I care for him; who does harm, according to the harm done, thus I punish him. (It is) not my desire that a man should do harm; moreover that (is) not my desire: If he should do harm, he should not be punished.²²

What is “right” and “falsehood” are contrasted with one another, and the king’s rewards and punishments are directly related to these values.

It is now necessary to focus on the languages used in the monumental inscriptions of the Achaemenid kings, in order to establish what relationship these inscriptions had to imperialism.

10.3.3 Trilingualism and Imperial Ideology

In an earlier section we have seen how the Aramaic language rose to prominence through the ages from the 9th century BCE until the 4th when Hellenism started exerting its influence. We have also seen how Aramaic became a standardised “Achaemenid Official language” during the reigns of Darius I and Xerxes I. Does this development mean that Aramaic became the accompaniment and expression of royal imperial ideology in Ancient Persia? It is often assumed in modern-day reflections on *lingua francas* that imperialist ideologies mostly, if not always, stand behind the development and enforcement of monolingual societies. We have referred to some ancient and modern examples in the introduction above where this assumption is indeed confirmed.

It seems, however, that things were different under Persian imperial rule. Apart from the fact that Achaemenid Official Aramaic developed and was standardised to become the main administrative language, we are also aware of the fact that the royal inscriptions discussed above – that form the bulk of the literary legacy of this imperial regime – were all multilingual. We have seen that the Bisitun inscription proclaims the imperial ideology under Darius I in three languages, namely in Babylonian, Elamite, and Old Persian. This pattern is repeated in many other royal inscriptions particularly from the time of Darius I (522–486 BCE); from the monumental Darius tomb inscriptions at Naqš-e Rostam, to the shorter inscription on the Gate of All Nations in Persepolis,

22 Translation from Rüdiger Schmitt, *The Old Persian Inscriptions of Naqsh-e Rostam and Persepolis*, *Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum* 2 (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 2000), 40.

and the one-liner inscriptions at Pasargadae (which is generally accepted to have been inscribed in Cyrus's city only during the time of Darius I).

In the royal Achaemenid inscriptions Old Persian normally takes the most prominent position.²³ Old Persian was a non-Semitic, Indo-Iranian language that was created under the commission of Darius I, from several Iranian dialects. Matthew Stolper describes the language as follows:

The Old Persian language and script were used only for the king's inscriptions, or else to identify objects or people connected with the king. The written language of the empire's rulers that we call Old Persian was not what the kings and the satraps spoke, or indeed what anyone spoke. It was an artificial idiom, drawing forms from several Iranian dialects, both contemporary and old, and using a grammar that was already archaic when the inscriptions were made. It was written with a script invented for these inscriptions and used for no other purpose. Old Persian writing and language together were not so much vehicles for communication among Persians as instruments for the great king's display of his presence and power. The Persian texts present Darius and Xerxes at the centre of a larger Iranian world, and at the zenith of a long Iranian history...²⁴

Jennifer Finn also reiterates: "[T]he use of Old Persian is in harmony with the general program of the Achaemenids: a cooperative, collaborative, and all-encompassing melting-pot."²⁵

The second language to be used in the trilingual Achaemenid inscriptions was Elamite. This language had its connection to western Iran and was closely associated with the Kingdom of Anshan and with Cyrus the Great. It was unrelated to Old Persian and Babylonian and was not limited to royal inscriptions. Stolper indicates that "Elamite was and remained the language of practical literacy in Iran".²⁶ The majority of the Persepolis Fortification and Treasury texts (discussed above) are therefore in Elamite.

23 It is clear that the Old Persian version in Bisitun was the first inscription to be made. Thereafter, the Elamite and Babylonian versions were added. See Rüdiger Schmitt, *The Bisitun Inscriptions of Darius the Great: Old Persian Text*, Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum 1 (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1991); Granerød, "By the Favour of Ahuramazda".

24 Matthew W. Stolper, "Achaemenid Languages and Inscriptions", in *Forgotten Empire: The World of Ancient Persia*, eds. John E. Curtis & Nigel Tallis (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 19-20. As Stolper and Tavernier have indicated after publication of the essay referred to here, there is now evidence that Old Persian was also occasionally used in administrative texts. See Matthew W. Stolper & Jan Tavernier, "From the Persepolis Fortification Archive Project, 1: An Old Persian Administrative Tablet from the Persepolis Fortification", *Achaemenid Research on Texts and Archaeology*, 1 (2007).

25 Jennifer Finn, "Gods, Kings, Men: Trilingual Inscriptions and Symbolic Visualizations in the Achaemenid Empire", *Ars Orientalis*, 41 (2011): 235.

26 Stolper, "Achaemenid Languages and Inscriptions", 20.

The third language in the inscriptions, Babylonian, as one of the influential Akkadian dialects, was during the Achaemenid period largely confined to Mesopotamia. Stolper explains that

[l]ike the use of Latin in medieval Europe, the use of Akkadian in the Achaemenid inscriptions conveyed prestige in at least two senses. As the language of learning that was ancient, manifold and still productive, Akkadian connoted high civilization. As the language of the Assyrian and Babylonian kings who had conquered western Asia, and whose lands were now subject in turn to the Achaemenids, it connoted domination over the world beyond Iran.²⁷

It is thus clear that trilingualism was the foremost expression of Achaemenid royal ideology. However, the role of these trilingual inscriptions was not necessarily to be read and interpreted. The Bisitun inscription, as well as the Darius tomb inscriptions, are good examples of this point. The first was inscribed high up against a mountain rock cliff, while the Darius tomb inscriptions can also not be read from ground level. It was not necessarily the contents that conveyed the royal ideology – although the contents surely expressed this ideology well – but the fact that it was put in monumental writing. Various scholars have pointed out that writing itself had a strong imperial symbolism in the Ancient Middle East where literacy levels were low.²⁸ Writing was in itself an expression of royal power and even of the numinous.²⁹ As seen above, Darius even had a special language being invented exclusively for this purpose.

While acknowledging the fact that trilingualism, through Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian was the most prominent conveyor of imperial ideology in Achaemenid Persia, and that the widespread, standardised Achaemenid Official Aramaic mainly functioned as administrative language, one also has to take notice of the interesting case study that the Bisitun inscription and a small part of the Darius tomb inscription had been translated into Aramaic in Egypt, about 100 years after the creation of the

27 Ibid., 21.

28 David M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Donald C. Polaski, “What Means These Stones? Inscriptions, Textuality and Power in Persia and Yehud”, in *Approaching Yehud. New Approaches to the Study of the Persian Period*, ed. Jon L. Berquist (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 37-48; Katherine Stott, *Why Did They Write This Way? Reflections on References to Written Documents in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Literature*, LHBOTS 492 (New York: T&T Clark, 2008); Cameron B.R. Howard, “Writing Yehud: Textuality and Power under Persian Rule”, (PhD dissertation, Emory University, 2010); Finn, “Gods, Kings, Men”.

29 Cf. Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander. A History of the Persian Empire. (Translated into English by P.T. Daniels)* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 127; Finn, “Gods, Kings, Men”, 221-8; Mark Leuchter, “The Aramaic Transition and the Redaction of the Pentateuch”, *Vetus Testamentum*, 136/2 (2017): 249-68. Finn emphasises that the trilingual inscriptions should be interpreted together with the iconographical representation that accompanies the inscriptions.

original text at Bisitun.³⁰ Apart from some fragments of a Babylonian version of Bisitun that was found in Babylon, an Aramaic papyrus text was found at Elephantine in Egypt containing the Bisitun inscription, with a small part of the Darius tomb inscription inserted into the text (also in Aramaic).³¹ It is generally accepted that this translation (of the Old Persian version of Bisitun)³² was made during the time of Darius II when this later king wanted to consolidate his power in Egypt.³³ This Aramaic version therefore also conveyed imperial ideology, but in another context.

Does this case study of the Aramaic version of Bisitun invalidate our earlier assumption that trilingualism was the main conveyor of imperial ideology, while Aramaic was only a functional, administrative vehicle? I do not think so. In my opinion, this exception, which occurred in a totally different context – in Egypt – confirms the rule. In the contexts where Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian would be known (as symbolic languages), trilingualism would be the strongest vehicle for the expression of royal ideology. However, where those languages did not have any symbolic value, such as in Egypt, there would have been no sense in using trilingualism, and would a language which would convey the contents of the inscription well, in this case Achaemenid Official Aramaic, serve the task best.³⁴

This discussion of the different contexts within which trilingual and Aramaic inscriptions or texts were developed in Achaemenid Persia brings us back to the question on the relationship between language and empire.

10.4 “WEAK” IMPERIALISM?

Above we have already considered Colburn’s view when he says:

The Achaemenid Empire, then, is a case in which the long-distance complex connectivity necessary for globalization was present, but did not lead to widespread cultural change. ... It suggests that the long-distance connectivity in the empire, though certainly regular (if not frequent) and meaningful,

30 Schmitt, *The Bisitun Inscriptions*; Rüdiger Schmitt, “Comparative Studies of King Darius’s Bisitun Inscription” (PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 2001); James E. Bowick, “Characters in Stone: Royal Ideology and Yehudite Identity in the Behistun Inscription and the Book of Haggai”, in *Community Identity in Judean Historiography: Biblical and Comparative Perspectives*, eds. Gary N. Knoppers & Kenneth A. Ristau (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 87-117; Granerød, “By the Favour of Ahuramazda”.

31 See again Tavernier, “An Achaemenid Royal Inscription”.

32 The Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian versions of Bisitun do not contain the same exact contents. The Aramaic version from Elephantine, as well as the Babylonian version from Babylon, seem to reflect the content of the Old Persian version closest.

33 Greenfield & Porten, *The Bisitun Inscription*.

34 Wiesehöfer, “The Role of Lingua Francas”.

was not necessarily strong. This does not mean that the empire was weak or disconnected. ... *Arguably, the emphasis on diversity in Achaemenid ideology indicates that these ties were left deliberately weak ...*³⁵
(emphasis mine)

At this point, one should consider some distinctions developed in the study of empires in the past years. Burbank and Cooper, in their description of the history of imperialism, indicates the following:

Emperors stood atop of pyramids of authority, sometimes trying to build upon rather than crush their subordinates' claims to a territory or a group of people. Within a single empire, some parts might be ruled directly from the center, while in others local elites retained partial sovereignty. Emperors and other imperial governors and their subordinates could try to adjust these arrangements. The fact that empires could redefine their allocations of power and privilege made them ambiguous kinds of states, capable of adapting to new circumstances. Political flexibility could give empires long lives. ... Empires' durability depended to a large extent on their ability to combine and shift strategies, from consolidating territory to planting enclaves, from loose supervision of intermediaries to tight, top-down control, from frank assertion of imperial authority to denial of acting like an empire.³⁶

Furthermore, two distinctions made by Mangan in the book *Making Imperial Mentalities*, should also be considered. Although writing about the British Empire, these distinctions also hold value for the understanding of ancient empires' power dynamics. Mangan first makes a general distinction between two ways in which political socialisation is understood:

Political socialisation may be both narrowly and broadly conceived. Narrowly conceived, it may be considered as the deliberate inculcation of political knowledge, values and practices by agents and agencies formally charged with this responsibility. Broadly conceived it may be considered to encompass not only political but also apparently non-political learning, formal and informal, calculated and uncalculated, which effects the learning of politically relevant attitudes and the development of politically relevant individual and group behaviour.³⁷

35 Colburn, "Globalization", 874, 882.

36 Jane Burbank & Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 16.

37 James A. Mangan, "Introduction: Making Imperial Mentalities", in *Making Imperial Mentalities: Socialisation and British Imperialism*, ed. James A. Mangan (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 1-2.

With more specific reference to imperial regimes, Mangan distinguishes two core elements:

Imperial socialisation incorporates at least two major elements: enculturation, the process of aggressive induction into the dominant culture, and acculturation, the process of acquiring more passively, through contact, elements of this culture.³⁸

These distinctions help us to a more nuanced description of the relationship between imperial power and language use in Achaemenid Persia. We have seen above that a *lingua franca* co-existed with multilingualism. Standardised Aramaic, which was not an indigenous language of the Achaemenid Empire, was not enforced in service of imperialism, but was used for practical, long distance connectivity reasons, and not to the detriment of local vernaculars. Multilingualism, on the other hand, was the primary vehicle for the expression of the imperial ideology of the *pax Achaemenidica*.

This brings us then to hypothesise the following:

- A strong, centralised imperial power and ideology will lead to a *lingua franca* and the enforcement of a monocultural environment (described as “enculturation” by Mangan).
- An imperial power allowing for and driven by the ideology of diversity will lead to the development of a *lingua franca* for practical reasons, but with *multilingualism* simultaneously giving expression to the said ideology in a multicultural environment (described as “acculturation” by Mangan).

10.5 IMPLICATIONS AND SYNTHESIS

It cannot be denied that there is a close relationship between language use and imperial power. One tongue-in-the-cheek definition of what a language is – given by a sociolinguist Max Weinreich – puts it nicely: “A language is a dialect with an army and a navy!” However, we have seen above that the power dynamics between language and empire during the Achaemenid imperial regime warn us against unnuanced descriptions. A statement which is often quoted, is the one by Antonio de Nebrija, a Spanish linguist who lived in the 15th and early 16th century CE, that goes like this: “Your majesty, language has always been the perfect instrument of empire.” This response was given by Nebrija, who also happened to be Bishop of Avila, after being asked by Queen Isabella of Spain what possible use she might have for his painstakingly crafted grammar of Castilian Spanish. In a context of strong imperial aspirations, Nebrija emphasised the usefulness of language to promote imperialism.

38 Mangan, “Introduction”, 3.

This statement is undoubtedly true, as long as it does not mislead us to read a singular in the sentence. It is not “language” that has always been the perfect instrument of empire, but rather “languages”. Both monolingualism and multilingualism can stand in service of imperialism. There is no clear-cut relationship between monolingualism and imperialism, as well as between multilingualism and democratic societies – at least, from the historical perspective of the Achaemenid Empire!

References for Figures

Figure 10.1 Drawing by Jill Curry Robbins, after L.W. King and R.C. Thompson, *The Sculptures and Inscription of Darius the Great on the Rock of Behistun in Persia* (London, 1907); and A. Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period*, vol. 1 (London/ New York, 2007) – <https://bit.ly/3pqislN> (Accessed 29 September 2020).

Figures 10.2, 10.4-6 Own photos © Louis C. Jonker

Figure 10.3 Illustration of Margaret Miller after A. Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period*, vol. 1 (London/ New York, 2007), Figure 11.14.