

A list of the Achaemenid Royal Inscriptions by language

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1 Introduction: the Achaemenid Royal Inscriptions

The term “Achaemenid Royal Inscriptions” refers to a corpus of 179 texts commissioned by various Achaemenid kings: Darius I (521-486 B.C.), Xerxes (485-465 B.C.), Artaxerxes I (423-424 B.C.), Darius II (423-405 B.C.), Artaxerxes II (404-359 B.C.) and Artaxerxes III (358-338 B.C.).

As is generally known, the so-called Bīstūn inscription, carved on a rock not far from Kermanshah in western Iran, is the oldest and the longest in the list of Achaemenid royal inscriptions. It was Darius I who ordered the inscription to be drafted and engraved on the rock. The text tells the story of Darius’ accession to the throne and the first years of his reign. In the last quarter of the 5th century BCE, an Aramaic version was recorded on papyrus. The rock inscription itself contains no less than 414 lines of Old Persian, 112 lines of Babylonian and 260 lines of Elamite (in an older and a younger version).

This does not mean that there are no inscriptions from the Achaemenid kings before Darius, more precisely Cyrus II (559-530 BCE) and Cambyses II (529-522 BCE). It is true that Cambyses II did not leave us any inscription, but we do have some inscriptions from Cyrus II. The most famous one is the so-called Cyrus Cylinder, a monolingual Babylonian text recording Cyrus’ capture of Babylon. Next to this text, there are some short Babylonian brick inscriptions from Cyrus II, found in Ur and Uruk. Nonetheless, these inscriptions are not included in this study.

2 The languages of the Achaemenid Royal Inscriptions

The Achaemenid Royal Inscriptions are drafted in various languages. Most used are Babylonian, the then language of southern Mesopotamia, Elamite, spoken in the southwest of Iran, and Old Persian, the native language of the royal Achaemenid family and of the Achaemenid empire’s elite. Less frequently, Achaemenid scribes made use of Egyptian and Aramaic.

The following tables show, per king, which Achaemenid Royal Inscriptions were quadrilingual, trilingual, bilingual or monolingual. The distinction between larger inscriptions and smaller inscriptions lies in the text format. Shorter inscriptions only have the royal name, a genealogy and/or the royal title. They do not contain the introductory formula *θātiy RN xšāyaθiya* “Says

RN the king” (RN = royal name). The use of this criterion also implies that fragmentary inscriptions with this formula are being catalogued under the longer inscriptions.

2.1 Darius I (91 inscriptions)

	Total	Longer inscriptions (38)	Shorter inscriptions (53)
Quadrilingual (OP, Bab., El., Eg.)	1	--	1: VDc
Quadrilingual (OP, Bab., El., Aram.)	1	1: DB	
Trilingual (OP, Bab., El.)	61	19: DEa, DHa, DMa, DMb, DNa, DNb, DPa, DPh, DSd, DSe, DSf, DSg, DSi, DSj, DSn, DSo, DSab, DZc, DZf	42: CMa, CMb, CMc, DBb, DBc, DBd, DBe, DBf, DBg, DBh, DBi, DBj, DNe, DNf, DPb, DPc, DPi, DPj, DSc, DSy, DSac, DZb, DZe, SDa, SDb, SDc, SDd, SDe, SDe, SDf, SDg, SDh, VDa, VDb, WDa, WDb, WDe, WDd, WDg, WDh, WDi
Bilingual (OP, El.)	4	1: DSz	3: DBa, DBk, Wdk
Monolingual (OP)	17	11: DFa, DGa, DPd, DPe, DSe, DSk, DSl, DSp, DSt, DSad	6: DKa, DSb, DZa, DZd, WDe, Wdf
Monolingual (Bab.)	4	4: DPg, Dsv, DSw, DSaa	--
Monolingual (El.)	3	2: DPf, DSu	1: WDj

2.2 Xerxes I (52 inscriptions)

	Total	Longer inscriptions (17)	Shorter inscriptions (35)
Quadrilingual (OP, Bab., El., Eg.)	15	--	15: Vxa, Vxb, Vxc, Vxd, Vxe, Vxf, Vxi, Vxk, Vxl, Vxm, Vxn, Vxo, Vxp, Vxr, Vxs
Trilingual (OP, Bab., El.)	24	13: XEa, XPa, XPb, XPc, XPd, XPe, XPf, XPg, XPh, XPj, Xpm, Xsa, Xsd, XVa	11: XPe, XPi, XPk, XPn, Xpp, XPq, XPr, XPs, Vxh, SXd, SXg
Bilingual (OP, Bab.)	1	--	1: VXj
Monolingual (OP)	10	3: XPl, XPo, XSc	7: XFa, VXg, SXa, SXb, SXc, SXe, SXf,
Monolingual (Bab.)	2	1: XSe	1: XSb

2.3 Artaxerxes I (10 inscriptions)

	Total	Longer inscriptions (2)	Shorter inscriptions (8)
Quadrilingual (OP, Bab., El., Eg.)	5	--	5: VA ¹ a, VA ¹ b, VA ¹ c, VA ¹ d, VA ¹ g
Trilingual (OP, Bab., El.)	1	1: A ¹ Pa	--
Bilingual (OP, Bab.)	1	--	1: VA ¹ f
Monolingual (OP)	2	--	2: SA ¹ a, VA ¹ e
Monolingual (Bab.)	1	1: A ¹ Pb	--

2.4 Darius II (5 inscriptions)

	Total	Longer inscriptions (4)	Shorter inscriptions (1)
Trilingual (OP, Bab., El.)	1	1: D ² Sb	--
Monolingual (OP)	4	3: D ² Ha, D ² Sa, D ² Sc	1: SD ² a

2.5 Artaxerxes II (14 inscriptions)

	Total	Longer inscriptions (13)	Shorter inscriptions (1)
Trilingual (OP, Bab., El.)	4	3: A ² Ha, A ² Sa, A ² Sd	1: A ² Sb
Monolingual (OP)	6	6: A ² B ² d, A ² B ² e, A ² Hb, A ² Hc, A ² Hd, A ² Sc	--
Monolingual (El.)	4	4: A ² B ² a, A ² B ² b, A ² B ² c, A ² Se	--

2.6 Artaxerxes III (5 inscriptions)

	Total	Longer inscriptions (2)	Shorter inscriptions (3)
Trilingual (OP, Bab., El.)	1	--	1: A ³ Pb
Monolingual (OP)	3	1: A ³ Pa	2: SA ³ a, SA ³ b
Monolingual (Bab.)	1	1: A ³ Sa	--

2.7 General table

King	Total	Darius I	Xerxes I	Artaxerxes I	Darius II	Artaxerxes II	Artaxerxes III
Total		91	52	10	5	14	5
Quadrilingual (OP, Bab., El., Aram.)	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
Quadrilingual (OP, Bab., El., Eg.)	21	1	15	5	0	0	0
Trilingual (OP, Bab., El.)	92	61	24	1	1	4	1
Bilingual (OP, El.)	4	4	0	0	0	0	0
Bilingual (OP, Bab.)	2	0	1	1	0	0	0
Monolingual (OP)	43	17	10	2	4	6	3
Monolingual (Bab.)	8	4	2	1	0	0	1
Monolingual (El.)	7	3	0	0	0	4	0

2.8 Conclusion

The material above may lead to some conclusions. In general, all quadrilingual inscriptions include an Egyptian version and they are all shorter inscriptions (applied to vases and bowls). As to the inscriptions of Darius I, the large majority of trilingual inscriptions is remarkable : no less than 66,67% of his inscriptions is trilingual. Honesty obliges, however, to reveal that 67,74% of these trilingual texts belongs to the shorter inscriptions (many seal and weight inscriptions). On the other hand, the category of the longer inscriptions has a percentage of 51,28% of trilingual inscriptions. The number of trilingual texts within the category of shorter inscriptions is overwhelming, with 77,78%.

The second most frequent category of Darius' inscriptions is the monolingual Old Persian inscriptions: 19,35%. The other categories (quadrilingual, bilingual, monolingual Babylonian, monolingual Elamite and monolingual Aramaic) are very limited in number.

Xerxes' inscriptions too show us a majority of trilingual texts (46,15%), of which slightly more than half are larger inscriptions. Remarkably, the second largest category is the quadrilingual inscriptions (28,85%), all applied to vases. The third largest category is the monolingual Old Persian inscriptions, being 19,23% of the all Xerxes' inscriptions. The other categories (bilingual and monolingual Babylonian) are negligible.

The number of inscriptions of Artaxerxes I, successor of Xerxes, is significantly lower. This marks the beginning of a period of considerably lower production of royal inscriptions by the Achaemenid kings. Artaxerxes I only commanded 10 inscriptions, 8 of which are attested on vases (7) or seals (1). Of the 7 vase inscriptions, 5 are quadrilingual. Nonetheless, it is more interesting to see that one of the larger inscriptions is a monolingual Babylonian text.

From the reign of Darius II onwards the importance of the Babylonian and Elamite languages gradually decreases, while the importance and use of Old Persian gradually increases. Darius II had only five inscriptions, but four of them are monolingual Old Persian (among which one seal inscription). The other one is trilingual. Another tendency is the disappearance of the quadrilingual inscriptions from the corpus of Achaemenid Royal inscriptions. A consequence of this is that also Egyptian is no longer used as “royal” language.

These tendencies continue during the reign of Artaxerxes II, even if this king had more inscriptions produced, namely 14, only one of which being a shorter trilingual inscription. Six of his inscriptions are monolingual Old Persian, four (three from Babylon and one from Susa) are monolingual Elamite and four others are trilingual.

The last Achaemenid king having commanded royal inscriptions is Artaxerxes III. Of his inscriptions, totalling five, three are monolingual Old Persian (one longer and two shorter inscriptions). The two others are trilingual and monolingual Babylonian. This makes clear that Old Persian had become the dominant language for spreading royal ideology, even if Darius I and Xerxes also frequently made use of their mother tongue. It is even probable that the trilingual inscription, a series of epigraphs accompanying and identifying the throne bearers on the tomb of Artaxerxes III at Persepolis, is trilingual because it is strongly inspired by the epigraphs accompanying and identifying the throne bearers on the tomb of Darius I at Naqsh-e Rostam.

In conclusion, some developments become visible when studying the inscriptions and their languages. Old Persian was always the *lingua prima* of the Achaemenid kings, but its dominance becomes very clear from the reign of Darius II onwards. At the same time, Elamite and Babylonian become less used. Egyptian even disappears as “royal” language. Another development is that the number of inscriptions drastically decreases from the reign of Artaxerxes I onwards.