

WRITING IN ANOTHER TONGUE: Alloglottography and scribal antiquarianism in the Ancient Near East

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The term alloglottography was coined by Ilya Gershevitch in his study of how the inscription of Darius at Bīsitūn was written. The Elamite version was most likely the first to be engraved, then the Babylonian one, and finally the Old Persian. If the Persian king used Old Persian as his language, one may wonder why Elamite figures so prominently on the rock. According to Gershevitch, the Elamite version is the true original and represents the actual words of Darius, whereas the Old Persian on the inscription is a retranslation or back-translation. This means that the Great king uttered the words in Old Persian, but the scribes wrote them down in Elamite and read them back to him (as the inscription says) in Old Persian.

Alloglottography —i.e., writing a text in a language different from the language in which it is intended to be read— was not unusual in the Ancient Near East. Cross-culturally alloglottography is not such a rare phenomenon (e.g., the *Kojiki* and the *Man'yōshū* in early Japan). Likewise, Sumerian texts from Ebla (Tell Mardīḥ, in Syria, mid 3rd millennium) were actually read in Semitic. Moreover, the sometimes difficult linguistic attribution of some Early Dynastic texts (especially the so-called “ancient *kudurrus*”) to Akkadian or Sumerian may point to a similar situation.

In fact, partial alloglottography was inherent to cuneiform writing: Akkadian texts are full of Sumerograms, and Hittite texts abound in both Sumerograms and Akkadograms. The writing of Middle Iranian languages involved the use of Arameograms. The use of a written language different from the language of utterance seems the epitome of textual antiquarianism. There is a particular breed of scribal traditionalism in this antiquarian devotion to a script and a language, regardless of the practical act of reading. Alloglottography and scribal antiquarianism enhance the highly artificial nature of all cuneiform traditions.

BASIC REFERENCES

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