

Zoroastrianism and Late Antiquity through Pahlavi / Middle Persian Language

Course Overview

Description

Pahlavi (aka Middle Persian) is a little-studied Iranian language associated with the Sasanian Dynasty of Iran. At the risk of oversimplification, Pahlavi is “New Persian” (itself not all that new, a term referring to the variety of Persian that began being written in Arabic script in the 10th century) as it existed without Arabic or Islamic influence.

At the risk of understatement, Pahlavi is a Zoroastrian language. The surviving Pahlavi texts — a corpus numbering in the thousands of pages (large compared to what survives in other archaic languages, but small compared to what you are probably used to) — were preserved for posterity by refugee Zoroastrian priests, which means they are disproportionately religious in character. The same way it would be difficult to study classical Arabic with no knowledge of Islam, it is difficult to study Pahlavi as a language without also trying to understand the world of Zoroastrianism on its own terms.

So we are going to try to learn about a language and culture very far removed from our own. If you are still interested, it is because you like doing things *because* they are hard, not despite the fact. Pahlavi as a language will have more features that seem punishingly difficult to master. Zoroastrianism as a tradition will have fewer common touchstones with anything you are familiar with. That is what makes this fun... right?

Texts

For the Pahlavi language, we will make it as far as we can through Oktor Skjærvø’s *Pahlavi Primer*. This was written by the greatest master of everything Pahlavi of the 20th-21st century: it is comprehensive and challenging.

Our other textbook is also by Dr. Skjærvø: *An Introduction to Zoroastrianism*. This text is similarly comprehensive and dense, so we will supplement it with other readings.

You can find digital versions of the texts in the course shared folder.

Assignments and other requirements

- Maintain your own, customized Anki flashcard deck (free download: <https://apps.ankiweb.net/>)
- Complete assignments in the *Primer* (some of which can be typed, some of which need to be written by hand)
- Mini in-class presentations about selected themes in the English-language readings

Schedule

*Assignments and readings are all due **before** the class date.*

August 26, 2025

- Primer:
 - Read all of Chapter 1
 - Complete exercises 1.1 (practice writing Pahlavi on lined paper) and 1.2 (matching words)
- Readings:
 - Jenny Rose, *Zoroastrianism: An Introduction* (I.B.Tauris, 2011): pp. xvii—29 (preface and first chapter)
- Other:
 - Download Anki and watch tutorial (make sure to sync across desktop & smartphone)

September 2, 2025

- Primer:
 - Complete any Lesson 1 exercises not finished in class.
 - Read Lesson 2.
 - Complete exercises 2.1-2.3.
- Readings:
 - Skjærvø, *Introduction to Zoroastrianism**, pp. 1-7.
- Presentation:
 - Aramaic versus Persian in pre-Islamic Iran (Kimiya)
 - * see Prods O. Skjærvø, “Aramaic in Iran,” *ARAM*, no. 7 (1995): 283–318.

September 9, 2025

- Primer:
 - Read Lesson 3
 - Complete exercises 3.2 & 3.3 (3.1 optional)
- Readings:
 - Skjærvø, *Introduction to Zoroastrianism**, pp. 7-15
- Anki: experiment with custom flashcard templates available from this link
- Presentation:
 - The “Majhul Vowels”: Pahlavi, classical Persian, and modern Urdu (Zaina)
 - What is the “Dēn”? (Laith)
 - * see Rushain Abbasi, “Islam and the Invention of Religion: A Study of Medieval Muslim Discourses on Dīn,” *Studia Islamica*, no. 116 (2021): 1–106.

September 16, 2025

- Primer:
 - Read Lesson 4
 - Complete exercise 3.4
- Mini-essay: Write a one-page reflection that draws connections between your secondary readings so far and the Pahlavi exercises. For instance: what is a Zoroastrian concept in an example sentence or exercise in the Primer that the readings on the history of Zoroastrianism helped you understand better?

September 23, 2025

- Class: Using the MacKenzie dictionary
- Primer:
 - Review Lesson 4
 - Complete exercise 4.1
 - Glance at 4.2: how many words can you recognize?

September 30, 2025

- Class: Looking up etymology
- Primer:
 - Read Lesson 5
 - Complete exercise 5.1
 - Underline words you recognize in 5.2
- Readings:
 - Skjærvø, *Introduction to Zoroastrianism**, pp. 16-25

October 7, 2025

- Class: does not meet
- Primer:
 - Review Lesson 5
 - Complete exercise 5.2 & 5.3
- Readings:
 - Maria Macuch, “Pahlavi Literature,” in *The Literature of Pre-Islamic Iran*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater, XVII, A History of Persian Literature (I.B. Tauris & Co., 2008). *Read first half.*

October 14, 2025

- Readings:
 - Maria Macuch, “Pahlavi Literature,” in *The Literature of Pre-Islamic Iran*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater, XVII, A History of Persian Literature (I.B. Tauris & Co., 2008). *Read second half.*

October 21, 2025

- Primer:
 - Read Lesson 5 additional readings
 - Read Lesson 6
 - Complete exercise 6.1
- Pahlavi texts:
 - Read line no. 2 of *Wizārišn ī Čatrang*
- Readings:
 - Pick a ‘character’ (god, hero, villain) and write a short (1-2 paragraph) description of the figure’s role in Zoroastrianism and how the story or meaning changed in the Islamic period. Pick a figure from the “names” part of the vocab list (i.e., one that has appeared in example sentences so far); and probably Encyclopedia Iranica will be the best way to research the figure.

October 28, 2025

November 4, 2025

November 11, 2025

November 18, 2025

November 25, 2025

December 2, 2025

December 9, 2025