

# Persepolis

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I visited Persepolis today. Persepolis proved to be a great way to end the year and to reflect on the passage of time. More unexpectedly, Persepolis also proved to be an occasion to reflect on linguistic diversity and languages in contact. To begin with, one of the central sites of Persepolis, the Hall of Nations, is explicitly devoted to diversity with its sculptures of 23 national delegations paying tribute to the Persian king. One of the guide books says “Unlike Assyrian, Egyptian, and Babylonian analogies, these delegations seem calm and happy,

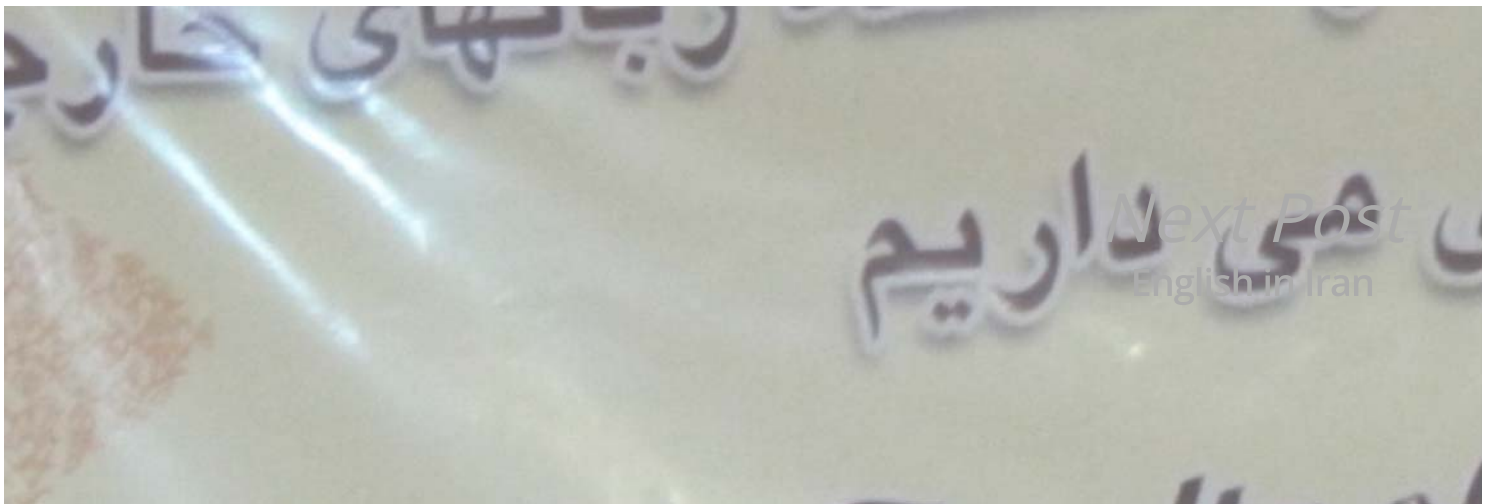
coming as free and invited guests rather than brought as slaves and forced into prostration before the royal throne.”

Additionally, a multiplicity of languages is inscribed in the stones of Persepolis. The Tachara, another central monument is described as a “museum of the history of calligraphy” in the guide books. There are the cuneiform texts of Old Persian, the Pahlavi texts of Middle Persian, and from the Buyids to the Qajars, a number of dynasties have immortalized themselves in the Arabic script of Modern Persian. European visitors of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century also had their names chiseled into the ancient stone, in what could probably be described as aristocratic graffiti. I’ve taken pictures of the names of British, French, German and US visitors who chiseled stuff like “F.W. Graf Schulenburg 1926.19 – Gesandter – 30.1931.” I suppose it means that Graf Schulenburg was the German ambassador to Iran between 1926 and 1931. Furthermore, modern additions to the ancient structures include large glass plates in front of the monuments which add captions in Persian and English.

While many languages have been added to the monuments of Persepolis over its 3,000 years of existence, even more have been taken away. The first destroyer was Alexander, who is known in the West as “the Great” and in the East simply as “the Macedonian.” Alexander’s troops burnt Persepolis to the ground and made it part of the Greek empire. One of the many things that were lost in the fire was the original name of Persepolis, which today is known internationally by its Greek name. Many centuries later, when the Sasanid Persian empire fell to the advancing Arabs, the semiotics of Persepolis changed yet again with the Arabs destroying the faces of the people in the sculptures and the faces of many animals, too. The next despoilers were the British, who removed many of the monuments in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Today, the British Museum holds a much larger collection of the Persepolis monuments than Persepolis and the National Museum in Tehran combined. As I listened to the tour guides today

and the comments of the visitors, it became obvious that the memory of all three violations are still kept alive and that neither the Greeks, the Arabs nor the British have been forgiven.

I've come away from Persepolis with the sense that as sociolinguists we should be paying more attention to history and that the stones can teach us a lot about linguistic diversity and how it can be a force both for harmony and advancement as well as conflict and destruction.



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