

# The Indo-Iranian oral tradition & the emergence of writing

## An explorative discourse

### Pronunciation symbols:

**a** as in fun; **ā** as in far; **ā̃** (nasal sound **ā̃n**) as in ‘āvā̃n’; **ə** as in fed, **ē** as in fade; **i** as in fill; **ī** as in feel; **o** as in for; **ō** as in fore; **u** as in full; **ū** as in food. The nasal sounds are **ā̃n** as in āvā̃n; **ə̃n** as in the French ‘trés bièn’, **ī̃n** as in Ahī̃nsā (also pronounced Ahī̃msā) and **ū̃n** as in Humayū̃n. The pronunciation of some consonants are ‘**ś**’ for ‘sh’, ‘**ṣ**’ for ‘ss’, ‘**ṛ**’ for ‘ri’, **ṅ** for ‘ni’, ‘**ḷ**’ for ‘zh’.

### Abbreviations:

**Ṛg V:** Ṛg Vēda; **AV:** Athārvā Vēda; **YV:** Yajur Vēda; **SV:** Sāma Vēda

**Aves:** Avesta/Avestan; **Gath:** Gāthā/Gāthic;

Ved: Vēda/Vēdic; **Skt:** Sanskrit; **Prak:** Prakrit

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## The written word

The Proto-Indo-Iranians are commonly identified with the descendants of the Proto-Indo-Europeans known as the Andronova culture and their Primeval Homeland in the Eurasian Steppes of Central Asia. It has been estimated that the Indo-Iranian languages probably began to diverge by 2000 BC. The earliest recorded forms of these languages, (Indic) Vedic Sanskrit and (Iranian) Gathic/Avestan are remarkably similar, descended from the common Proto-Indo-Iranians language.

The **Indo-European Sumerians ca. 4000 BCE** it seems arrived in Mesopotamia to establish the land of Sumer. Later, came the **Indo-Aryan Mitanni and Kassite peoples ca. 1500-1300 BCE** in Syria and South-west Anatolia. The **Sumerian** language script is thus ‘presumed’ to be the oldest form of writing in existence, and dates from at least 3400 BCE. **Wide variations in the exact dates have been recorded.** The earliest tablets unearthed show the Sumerians *started recording in a pictographic mode*. Each sign was a picture of one or more objects and represented a word whose meaning was identical too or closely related to the object pictured. Gradually, they simplified the form and reduced the number of the signs until their pictographic originals were no longer apparent, graduating to a more conventionalised and purely phonetic system of writing in the style known as *cuneiform (wedge-shaped) characters*.

The corner of the smooth cut edge of a wooden stick was pressed obliquely on soft clay tablets, which were then baked and filed as ‘documents’ for posterity. Clay tablets were also made by rolling an etched metal cylinder on a wet slab of clay and by using sharp reeds and symbolic objects, which they pressed into the clay tablets. Once the prepared clay slabs with the etched characters were baked the smooth hard tablets were permanent, in that they could not be erased or altered. The intact clay tablets are referred to as ‘**documents**’ / ‘**letters**’ and the broken pieces as ‘**fragments**’. Tens of thousands of such clay tablets, prisms and cylinders have so far been unearthed. It has been estimated that several hundreds of thousands of these written treasures are still waiting to be surfaced. There are literary works, including hymns, poetry & stories, works on social interaction astronomy, mathematics, architecture and volumes of school text books and methods of teaching. There were ‘junior’ and ‘high’ scribes, Royal and Temple scribes. The Sumerian ‘*professors*’ called ‘*big brothers*’ had also prepared the oldest dictionary known to humankind.

In comparison, the earliest known examples of writing in **Egypt**, not in alphabetical characters but in similar pictorial hieroglyphic script, have been dated about the same time. While the Sumerian cuneiform alphabetic script is likely to be among the first to have ultimately evolved into a continuous narrative form, there were many ancient civilizations, which had developed similar suggestive meaningful markings, which were clearly explicit and connotational.

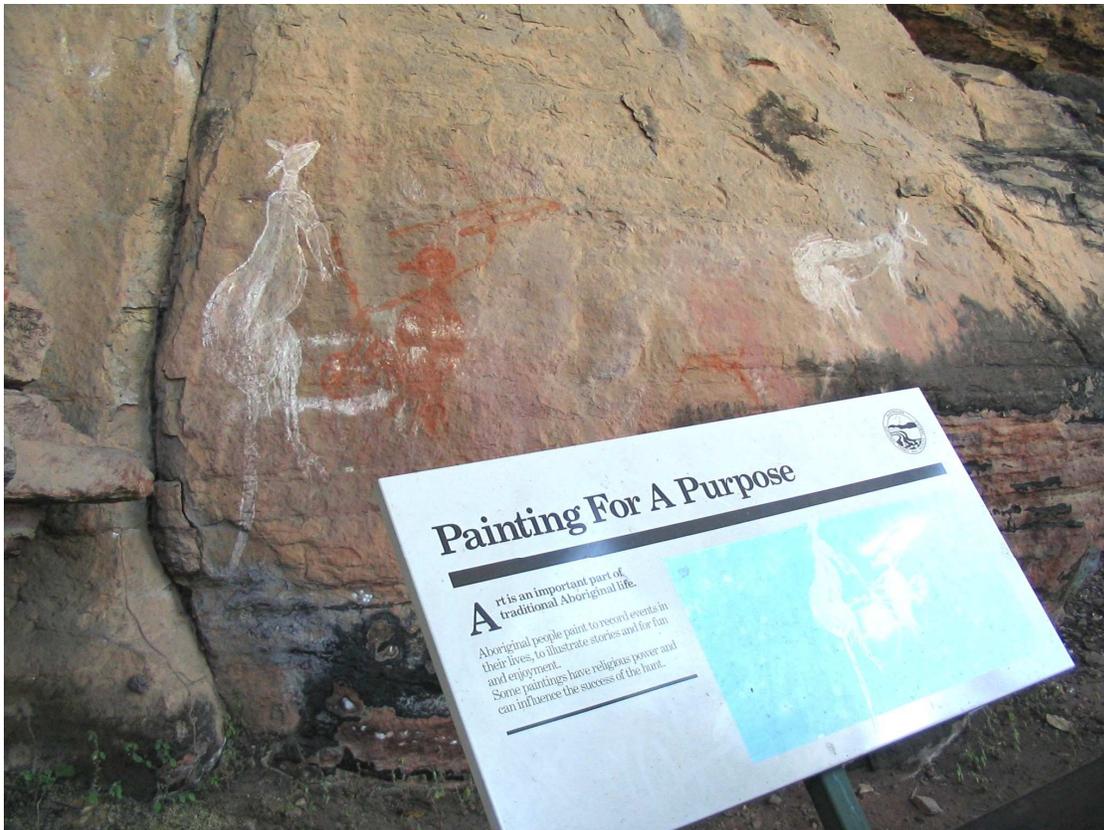
Still, the later Sumerian clay continuous narrative clay ‘documents’ must be credited to have been among humankind’s early ethical ideals, spiritual, social and political ideas. By **3100 BCE** the population of Sumer had increased to the point where people were living in urban well-organised cities of Mesopotamia Ur, Erekh, Eridu... etc., which had already developed a preponderance of those elements previously noted as constituting civilisation (i.e. settling down from nomadic wanderings into an orderly structured environment). The Semitic scribes of Sargon I in Agade (Biblical: Akkad) came later ca. 2340 BCE to mimic such Indo-Iranian documentation and it was not until a millennium later that Hebrew writers too began their precious documentation.

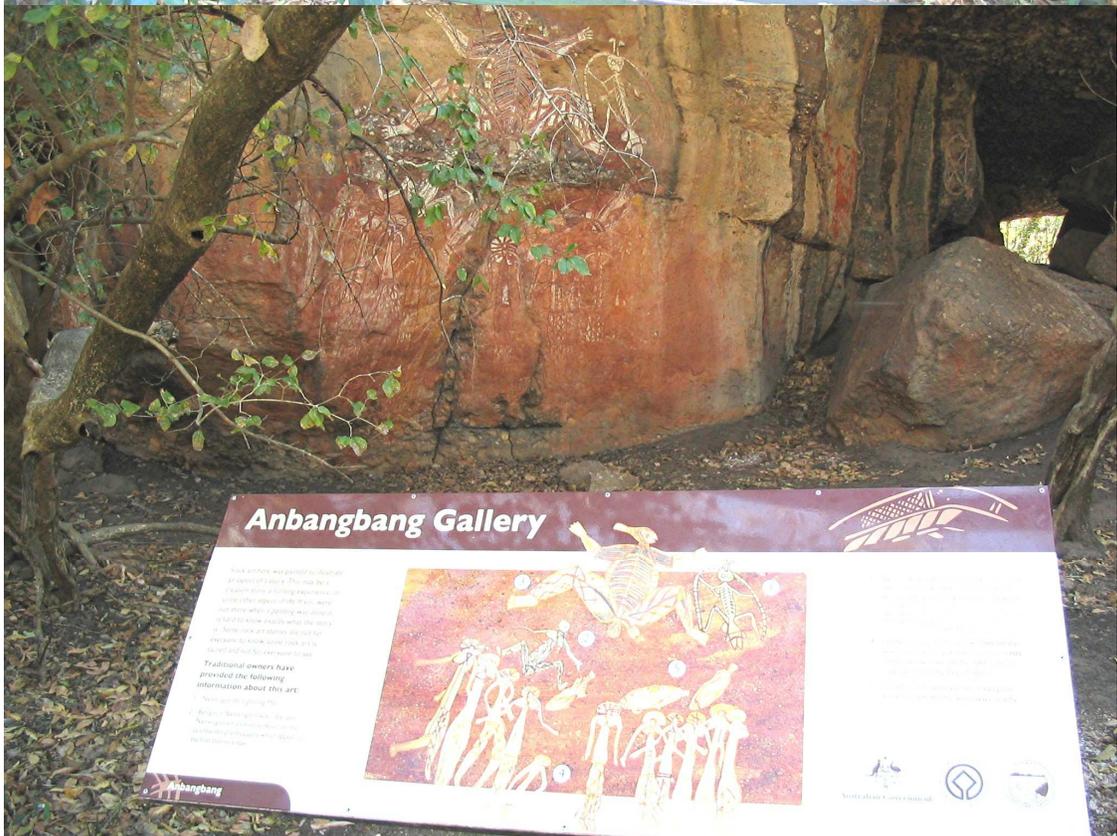
### **Prior notion**

This article endeavours to hypothesise the possible basis of the presumed ‘sudden emergence of Sumerian writing’ on clay tablets, which history records as ‘without any prior notion’. History also records that the **Indic group of these Indo-Aryans** would have left their ancestral homeland, Ārya Avarta **6000 years ago (during the early part of the Middle Bronze Age of Central Asia)**, maybe as refugees due to intolerable circumstances in the ancestral land or maybe as migrants in the quest for greener pastures and more amicable climes, elsewhere or as traders and conquerors. After migrating to the region of present Iraq ca. 4000 BCE they would have seriously began documenting their economic and administrative needs and vital matters of their daily life. Since these included the first evidence of writing, this first phase of Sumerian civilization, to about 28 BCE is called the *Proto-literate period*.

### **An Australian story conveyed ‘in writing with a purpose’**

While **continuous narrative writing, conveying a message** could have started in Sumer, single symbols, pictorial representation with indicative strokes, glyphs, marks representing names, places, tracks, maps, divine beings, etc. are known to be much older. **The oldest known such picturised serial writings with symbolic representative markings on rocks started in Australia, ca. 40-50,000 years ago** with paintings and carvings showing symbols, representing maps, rituals and divination. These have survived through the millennia since the Aboriginal people used indelible Earth material. Coloured earth, rocks and semi-precious stones were powdered and admixed with natural plant adhesives to create pastes of different hues and consistency as ink and paint in their purposeful ‘story-telling’. Below, as National Heritage is a series of photos showing *the story of a ‘happening’* in four stages by imaging and using suggestive markings on rocks in the Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory. Regretfully, cramped and restricted moving space in front made it impossible to obtain a correct depth of field to make the narration plaques in English easily readable.





## The Indo-Iranian oral tradition (and ‘shrouded’ allusion to writing)

Let us now search for some ‘pointers’ in the Ṛg Vēda itself, which may indicate or provide a hint that **the Ṛg Vēdic & Gathic peoples, in all probability knew some form of cursive writing or at least suggestive marking to help categorise and guide them in the memorising of their incredibly vast and voluminous oral material.** To my mind, oral transmission may certainly have been facilitated by spaced markings to help count the rhythmic metering (patterned recurrence of the beat) of their massive poetic hymns. Even Āyurvēda, the Vēdic medical treatise in several volumes, was composed in hymns in rhythmic beat form. The assumption that they could not read or write probably springs from the fact that no writing material, pictographs have been excavated on Indian soil. Yet, in the Indic migrations of the Indo-Iranian peoples there is plenty of archaeological evidence of symbolic writing and markings.

The Vēdic sages, it would appear, ‘inscribed and engraved’ words (on some material). This may indicate that **they certainly knew how to scribble ‘suggestive markings’.** It would have otherwise taken a tremendous amount of mental effort to compose and to commit to memory the vast amount of material with all the intricacies involved in remembering and comparing the vast number of chapters involved. It would not be unreasonable to expect them to apply their already attained knowledge in their homeland to their newly settled state.

There are, certainly, a number of **references in the Ṛg Vēda, which appear to allude to the art of writing. The translations by western authors seem to avoid even the very thought that some sort of cursive written markings could ever be deemed to exist at such an early period.** These cursive strokes/suggestive markings - ‘**akshara**’, meaning written/scribbled characters in the Sanskrit and, to this day, meaning the written alphabetical character/letter in the Prakrit group of languages (including Hindi, Gujarati.... - literally indicating ‘**indelible /imperishable markings**’, say, compared to ‘**forgettable words**’). Monièr-Williams’ Sanskrit-English Dictionary gives the meanings - ‘imperishable, unalterable; a syllable; a letter’. The following lines from Ṛg Vēdic verses offer, to my mind, some remarkable pointers towards the presence of the written markings of the spoken syllables:

**Ṛg V: i, 164.39** ‘.....trakvō **aksharē** paramē vyōmani yasiman  
dēvā adhi vishvē nishēdhu’

**‘what will he, who knows not this, do with the syllable? But for them,  
who do know it, they will stay assembled’.**

Again in **Rig V: iii, 55.1** (trans. of Ralph T. H. Griffith - The Hymns of the **Rgveda**):

*‘Ushas pūrvā adh yarth vyūshur mahadh vi-jashē **aksharam** padhē go -I  
Vrata Dēvāvām upnu prabhū shanm mahadh dēvānām aśuratvam ēkam’ -II*

**‘At the first shining of the earliest mornings the  
One Absolute Reality was manifest in the path of its light’ I  
Now, shall the statutes of the Gods be revered;  
great is the Gods’ Supreme and sole Dominion II**

With respect, I would like to take the liberty of revising Griffiths translation as follows: -

**‘At the time of the dawn of the earliest of the mornings  
the scribbled markings became manifest in the path of its light’ I**

*Now, shall the statutes of the Dēvās be revered; there is but  
only one Creator among all the Divinities' II*

Ṛg V: x, 62.7 clearly talks of **gōmantam akshivanam** (trans. of Ralph T. H. Griffith - The Hymns of the Ṛgveda):

- *'cattle ears being branded by the figure of '8 (eight) mark',*  
which clearly again indicates that some sort of written markings were prevalent '  
'....srujanta vadhatō vrajam gōmantam śrivanam I  
srahastram mē dhadhatō aśta kranyaś.....' II  
'.....the priests have cleared the stable full of steeds and kine, I  
giving to me a thousand with their 8-marked ears.....' II

Note that the word '**akshivanam**', which is a derivative of the word '**akshar**' meaning **alphabetic letter /character** has been translated as '**written marking/ a scribble**' (with respect) by the same author (Griffith), who has previously ventured to translate the word '**akshar**' as '**the Absolute Reality**'. To this day, the word '**akshar**' in the Prakrit group of languages (as described above) means an **alphabetical written character/letter**.

At a time when vast portions of the Vēdic (and Gāthic) Text had to kept in memory (unseen) the written word would be expected to be held/revered almost as a supreme divinity. It was not at all uncommon for the Indo-Iranian peoples to personify outstanding human qualities/ attributes/ achievements.

Ṛg V: x, 71.4 (translation below of Ralph T. H. Griffith - The Hymns of the Ṛgvēda): refers to the '**visible word**' (**Vedic: 'Vāk/ Vāc**' - personified as a visible beautiful woman, who fondly remains well attired for her husband to behold and admire like the '**written word**' which can be '**seen**' (that is, a visible written scribble, compared to the word by mouth, which can only be heard but cannot be seen).

*Ut tva: pashya na nadh dharsh Vāca mut tvaha: śu avan na śu nōtya ēnām I  
Utō tva smai tanva vi-sāstrē jāyēv patya ushti suvāsā II  
'one man hath never seen the sacred word and yet he seeth: I  
one man hath hearing but hath never heard her'. II*

Ṛg V: x, 125.4 again **emphasises**:

*Myā sō annamati yō vipashyati -I  
ya praniti yaim shranaōtyuktam -II  
'The man who sees, who breathes, who hears whatever is spoken, -I  
Through me alone obtains his sustenance.' -II <sup>11</sup>*

'**Through me**' could possibly be taken, here, as '**through the written word**' in a personified sense. Monièr-Williams' 'Dictionary too talks of '**speech personified**' in various manners or forms e. g. as **Vāc Abhrint in Ṛg Vēda x, 125**. She is also represented as having been created by Prajā-pati and married to him. In the later commentaries, she is called the **Mother of the Vēdas** and wife of Indra but, most frequently, she is identified with **Saraswati, the Divinity of Speech**

*personified*. Apte, V.S. too, in his Sanskrit-English Dictionary, mentions ‘*Vāchyas*’ as a visible epithet of Bṛihaspati/ Brāhman/ Saraswati - personifications of speech/word/voice/sound.

Let us, now examine the verses of the Hymns in **Rig V: x, 71, verses 1 to 11 and Rig V: x, 125, verses 1 to 8 dedicated to ‘Vāca’** to confirm whether there are metaphoric hints that ‘*Vāca*’, **this beautiful lady, well attired for her husband to behold** and admire, are in fact scribbled markings. These ‘visible’ markings (compared to the invisible oral word) could thus have been personified as the ‘**written word**’, which, like the lady, can be seen to understand and admire.

This translation of the verses **Rg V: x, 71.1 to 11** are after Ralph T. H. Griffith:

- 71. 1:** When men, (Brihaspati, giving names to objects), sent  
out Vāca’s first and earliest utterances,  
All that was excellent and spotless, treasured within them,  
was disclosed through their affection.
- 71. 2:** Where, like men cleansing corn-flour in a cribble, the  
wise in spirit have created language  
Friends see and recognise the marks of friendship; their  
Speech retains the blessed signs imprinted.
- 71. 3:** With sacrifices the trace of Vāca they followed, and  
found her harbouring within the Rishis  
They brought her, dealt her forth in many places:  
Seven singers make her tone resound in concert.
- 71. 4:** One man had never seen Vāca and yet he seeth:  
One man hath hearing but hath never heard her.  
But to another hath she shown her beauty, as a fond  
well dressed woman (would) to her husband.
- 71. 5:** One man they call a laggard dull in friendship:  
They never urge him on to deeds of valour.  
He wanders on in profitless illusion: the voice he  
Heard yields neither fruit nor blossom.
- 71. 6:** No part in Vāca hath he who hath abandoned his own  
dear friend who knows the truth of friendship.  
Even if he hears her in vain he listens: naught knows  
He, the path of righteous action.
- 71. 7:** Unequal in the quickness of their spirit are friends  
endowed alike with eyes and hearing.  
Some look like tanks that reach the mouth or shoulder,  
others like pools of water fit to bathe in.
- 71. 8:** When friendly Brāhmins sacrifice together with  
mental impulse which the heart hath fashioned,  
they leave on far behind through their attainment,  
and some who count as Brāhmins wander elsewhere.
- 71. 9:** Those men who step not back and move not forward,  
Nor Brāhmins nor preparers of libations,  
having attained to Vāca in sinful fashion spin out their  
Thread in ignorance like spinsters.

- 71. 10:** All friends are joyful in the friend who cometh in triumph, having conquered in assembly.  
He is their blame averter, food-provider: prepared is he and fit for deed of vigour.
- 71. 11:** One plies his constant task reciting verses: one sings  
The holy psalm in śakvari measures.  
One more, the Brāhman, tells the lore of being,  
and one lays the rules of sacrificing.

This translation of the **Ṛg V: x, 125** is after Abināsh Chandra Bose (1931-1991):  
**Vāk / Vāc on herself in first person (the Dēvi Sūkta)**

- 125. 1:** I move with Rudras and with Vasus, I move  
With Adityas and All-Gods by my side,  
And both Mitra and Varuna I support,  
I support Indra, Agni and the two Asvins.
- 125. 2:** I uphold Soma the destroyer of the foe,  
I sustain Tvāstri and Pushan and Bhāga;  
I reward with wealth the offer of oblation  
And the devout worshipper pouring the Somā.
- 125. 3:** I am Queen, the gatherer of treasures,  
the Knower, the first among the holy ones.  
The Dēvās have established, in many places,  
Me who live on many planes, in many form.
- 125. 4:** The man who sees, who breathes, who hears what's spoken,  
Through me alone obtains his sustenance.  
There are those who dwell by my side, but know not.  
Hear thou who hast hearing; I tell thee the sacred truth.
- 125. 5:** Yes, I myself say this, - and these my words  
must needs be welcome to the Dēvās and men –  
One whom I might make mighty –  
make of him a Brāhmana, a Rishi, a gifted man.
- 125. 6:** For Rudra I stretch out the strings of his bow  
To slay the fierce enemy of the holy man,  
And for the people I engage in battle,  
And through the Earth and the Heaven I spread.
- 125. 7:** And on the summit I bring forth the Father  
my home is within waters in the ocean,  
From where I extend to all existing worlds,  
And yonder heaven I touch with my forehead.
- 125. 8:** And it is I, who like the wind, breathe forth,  
and set all existing worlds in motion.  
Beyond heavens and beyond the earth am I,  
And all this I have become in my splendour.

It appears possible from these allegorical verses that **'Vāk/ Vāc'**, *the written word would have been so precious that it had to be personified (in the Indo-Iranian tradition) in metaphors.*

**The written word has been raised allegorically almost to the level of a divinity** - although not quite. The very fact that she was made to talk in the first person takes away most of the high esteem generally apportioned to the Vēdic divinities. Besides, she is also made to appreciate the divinities, even revere them. These facts could have taken the gloss away and, thus, the chance of Vāka being raised to the status of a Vēdic Divinity worthy of deep reverence away.

The *'I' [(aham); ahami is 'I am']* could well be referring to the *'written word/ the text'*, the *'friends' (Skt: sakhiyā/Aves: Hakhaya;* singular in Skt is Sakhi & in Aves is Hakha) to the *'guild of scribes' and 'friendship' (sakhiyāha)* to their *'much prized art'*. This appears to be some sort of 'grey zone', which has remained not easily discernible. Possibly, during the late emerging times of *Proto-Indo-Aryan and Indo-Aryan 'pre-history' (of the Bronze Age)* it would have been akin to heresy to declare or admit the sacred oral words of the sacred 'śrutis' (the word 'śru', both in Vēdic and Avestan languages mean to hear/ listen with concentration/ obey) could ever be made to be seen - the Rīśis, it would appear, thus, having been obligated almost to the point of maintaining a 'conspiracy of silence'.

In the Vēdic/Avestan Primeval Homeland the Bronze Age has been estimated as occurring thus:  
**Early Bronze Age: ca. 4000-1800 BCE.** Time line of the Proto-Indo-Iranian peoples as one.  
**Middle to Late Bronze Age: ca. 1800-1500 BCE.** Time line of the schism among the Indo-Iranians into the Vēdic-Devāyasnic & the Gāthic-Mazdāyasnic peoples.  
**Late Bronze Age: ca. 1500-1200 BCE.** Time line of migration in south western and south eastern direction. In India - the Early Bronze Age of the Early Harrapan Civilisation (now called the Saraswati-Sindhu Civilisation) occurred ca. 3300-2600 BCE

The equivalent Aves. word is *'Vach / Vāch/ Vākhś'* (an Aves. 'given word/ promise' becomes *'Vachan'* in the Prak. group of languages). (See article- [The Avestan 'given word'](http://www.avesta.org) in Zoroastrian Archives - [www.avesta.org](http://www.avesta.org) Kerr, Sam: [Sassanian Dynasty - Historical Perspective](#) and other articles). It is worthy of note that in the text of the Gathas and Avesta too there is no word for reading or writing. The oral texts, memorised in the ancient Indo-Iranian tradition of the Bronze Age, were put down in cuneiform script text on leather hides and parchment for the first time during the reign of Darius I (the Great) 521-486 BCE.

However, the 'Divine Sacred word' in the Śrutis of the Vēdic Texts is the *'Mantra'* and its equivalent in the Revealed Religion of Zarathushtra is *'Māñthra'*.

Indeed, during his dialogue with Ahura Mazda Zarathushtra and his 'Good mind' - Vōhu Manō' appears to be referring to 'Vākhś' merely as a (meaningful) 'voice', 'words uttered or chanted' compared (like Śrutis of the Vēdas ) to *'Māñthra'* as the 'Divine Holy Word' of Ahura Mazda in the dialogue of the 'Revelation'.

**In verses 6, 7, 8 & 9 of Gatha Ushtavaiti, Yasna 29** this distinction becomes apparent as the dialogue proceeds in the form of inquiry and response.

Verse 6 mentions *'Then spoke Ahura Mazda'* in the third person by using the word *'vaocat'* (a derivative of *'vācha'* to justify the metric rhythm of the beat).

Verse 7 refers to the 'Divine Holy Word of Ahura Mazda' of his Revelation as *'Ahurō Māñthram'*.

In Verse 8, Ahura Mazda continues, and compliments Zarathushtra, granting him ‘sweetness of speech’ as the metric beat is extended to justify the obligatory rhythm of the last line.

and, ‘*vācha*’ becomes ‘*vakhśāthrahyā*’

Verse 9, as Ahura Mazda continues. He refers to ‘*Vācham*’ (Gath: Vachəm, again, a derivative of ‘*vācha*’ to justify the metric rhythm of the beat) as the ‘*words of a person*’.

‘...*the words of one devoid of courage....*’

*Whereas, the Divine Holy Words’ actually uttered by Ahura Mazda are ‘Ahuro Māñthram’*  
- *our best and only guide - thy Divine Holy Word*

**Gatha Ushtavaiti, Yasna 44.17 ‘*Vākhsh*’ as his voice and ‘*Māñthra*’ as the ‘Holy Word’**

‘...*with voice convincing would I lead mankind*  
*to Perfect Life Eternal with the help of Āshā*  
- *our best and only guide - thy Divine Holy Word*’

& in **Gatha Spənta Mainyu, Yasna 50.6 ‘*Māñthra vāchəm*’,** he refers to his ‘Voice as the Singer’ (i.e. propagator of the ‘Divine Holy Words’).

***I, indeed, thy ‘singer’ O Mazda will lift up my voice....***

It is also possible that the deeply established traditional practice of oral transmission of (at least) the Gathas and Ṛg Vēda was favoured, not because written copies of these texts could not be made (at the time) but because oral transmission of the rhythmic hymns alone was certainly much more easy to propagate to budding novices. The education, too, of new scribes would certainly have been expected to be a laborious and cumbersome task. Besides, the readers of the texts would have been even fewer. The propagation of the notion of the vibrational and spiritual potency of the utterances and the formal protection of the oral art through the establishment of a more practical tradition may have been, therefore, constantly favoured, encouraged and pursued.

## **Last word:**

It is interesting to note, that my above searching discourse appears still more relevant from the fact that, although in the Gathas/Avesta and in the Ṛg Vēda there is no word for reading and writing, the slightly later texts of the Yajur Vēda, the Athārvāvēda and the Taittiriya Samhitā, in fact, actually mention the word ‘to write’.

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