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Historiography and palaeography of Sasanian Middle Persian inscriptions

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Historiography and Palaeography of Sasanian Middle Persian Inscriptions

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DE L'UNIVERSITÉ PSL

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Historiography and Palaeography of Sasanian Middle Persian inscriptions

Soutenue par
Olivia K. C. Ramble

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Sasanian Middle Persian Inscriptions

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Introduction

"*There*. Can you see them?"

"No, I can't see anything."

Hussein[1] burst out laughing and took both my shoulders to make me face the right direction.

"No*, there*. Now, can you see them?"

I stared blankly at the boulders that had piled up over millennia at the foot of the cliffside, in the direction he was pointing. The blazing Iranian sun in the early afternoon bleaches everything, flattens out any relief and curve, chases away all shadows. It distorted my sense of space, distance and volumes. For all my squinting, all I could see were rocks, rocks and more rocks of different shapes and varying shades of light grey, ochre and pink.

"No, I'm sorry, I still can't."

Hussein sighed, resigned.

"Fine, come, I'll take you up close".

I followed him further away from the plain and closer towards the cliffside, doing my best to keep up as he hopped lightly from boulder to boulder. Hussein had spent his childhood walking the plain and cliffs of Marvdašt with his family's flock of sheep, and his sharp eyes had evidently memorised every pebble of this mineral landscape. He told me his dream was to study engineering in Switzerland.

It was only when he deposited me directly in front of them that I finally saw the trio of funerary inscriptions that I had been looking for helplessly with my colleague Milad since that morning. They are known as the Taxt-e Tāvūs inscriptions and are engraved next to each other in three little alcoves carved into the side of a large boulder, lost among the sea of rocks at the foot of the Kūh-e Rahmat mountain. Each inscription adorns its own alcove, written in an elegant arch over it in cursive Middle Persian script **[Fig. 0.1]**. On the top of the boulder are little circular pits thought to be either ossuaries or bowls for libations linked to the three funerary inscriptions. I knew I would never be able to find their location again without help – even after having been shown them once – and immediately set to work. I took out my tripod and set up my camera on it. I lodged a black billiard ball as best I could in a crack in the boulder

[1] The name has been changed.

next to the inscriptions, while on the other side of the trio Milad held a green billiard ball which we had somehow managed to screw onto the tip of a stick with the help of the hotel receptionist in Shiraz. The shiny balls reflect the light of the flash and direct it towards the inscriptions, helping to create a play of light and shadows which brings out the curved lines of the writing, otherwise crushed and made almost entirely invisible by the blinding sun.

Hussein watched us silently, sitting comfortably on his haunches, perched perilously on the edge of a boulder right above us.

"If you're interested in that sort of thing I could show you more, you know."

I stopped clicking my camera and looked up at him, shading my eyes with my hand to see him properly.

"You mean you know of other inscriptions like this in the area?"

"Sure. Caves, alcoves, interesting rocks. And inscriptions, too." He smiled mischievously. "I know where they are, but I won't tell you."

"Why not?"

He waved his hand impatiently.

"I know you – if I show you where they are, you'll just take pictures and go right back to Tehran, and you won't stay for dinner with me and my mum."

***

Preparing for fieldwork in Iran.

The doctoral project proposal for which I received a grant from the Ecole pratique des hautes études in October 2017 was organised around the *in situ* study of Old Persian and Middle Persian inscriptions. My Masters had explored the reuse of Achaemenid sites (550-330 BCE) five hundred years later by the Sasanian dynasty (224-651 CE) and addressed the thorny question of the Sasanians' historical memory of the Achaemenids. It had made me appreciate the fundamental importance of an inscription's location and medium – a ruin, a spring, a dynastic site, a private property – for understanding its significance and for retracing its author's motivations in having it carved. One of the main focuses of my doctoral research was to study the way inscriptions engage with their surroundings both linguistically, with direct reference to features of their natural and built environment, as well as physically, through their placement, layout and palaeography. I planned to visit each one, record its coordinates and make a map to better appreciate their distribution. I was particularly intrigued by the case of

sites where inscriptions accumulate over millennia: hundreds of writings in different scripts and languages may be grouped together in one place or on one ruin, while the neighbouring monument or rock is left completely bare. Evidently, in certain locales and under certain circumstances – that remain difficult to define fully – a dynamic is created whereby writing invites more writing. I wanted to see for myself whether Middle Persian inscriptions are visible and legible to the passer-by – Old Persian inscriptions, for instance, are usually placed too high up to be deciphered from the ground – and hoped to gain an insight into the possible symbolic and pragmatic aspects of monumental inscriptions.[2] In this respect, I was interested not only in considering the significance and status of monumental rock-cut texts in their ancient Iranian context, but also in recording what these represented for contemporary Iranians, in particular what locals had to say about the ancient writings – their (imagined) history and content, and what beliefs they attached to them. As it turned out, this aspect became much more important – and came much more naturally – than I had anticipated. As the opening anecdote illustrates, it is often impossible to find epigraphic texts, even well documented and many times published, without the help and goodwill of local villagers who know them well from passing them every day, or from their childhood spent herding sheep in their vicinity, seeking refuge beneath the rocky outcrops on which they are engraved to hide from the sun, rain and village gossip.

This information never features in published text editions and I planned to visit Iran in person and record as many inscriptions as possible *in situ*. I was awarded a generous travel grant by the Institut français de Recherche en Iran (the IFRI, at the time directed by Denis Herrmann) in early 2018 and, through the help of Professor Cyrus Nasrollahzadeh, received a formal invitation from the Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies of Tehran to conduct research in Iran. After many months' wait, I was able to leave in late October of that year for eight weeks, with my research visa in hand. It was my third time in Iran but the first time I had left the big cities of Tehran and Isfahan to spend time in different archaeological sites as a researcher. I quickly realised that my (clearly over-ambitious) plan to visit all Old Persian and Middle Persian inscriptions in a couple of months would have to be heavily revised. Because of troubles on the border with Iraq, the French embassy refused to let me travel to the first two major sites I was hoping to visit, Bīsotūn and Tāq-e Bostān, located in the north-western Iranian province of Kermānšah. That meant I also had to abandon any hope of seeing and

[2] Anthropologist of writing Béatrice Fraenkel argues that the 'symbolic' function of 'displayed writings' (*écritures exposées*) – these are not destined to be read and therefore do not have a primarily informative function – has to be considered in the context of practices of display, Fraenkel 1994, 110.

photographing the little-studied Middle Persian private inscription engraved in the vicinity of the town of Meškīn, in the north of Iran, close to the border with Azerbaijan. The inscription commemorates the foundation of a fortress and enjoins the passerby, should the sight of the construction please him, to make a wish for the builder's soul. Apart from being particularly relevant to my research interests concerning possible pragmatic aspects of monumental writings – the author's wish that the sight of his inscription will trigger blessings to his soul is an excellent instance of this – there are very few published images of the text and the existing editions present many lacunae that cannot be improved for lack of new material;[3] I was therefore hoping to take many and much better photographs of the inscription, perhaps enabling a new reading of it.

Taxt-e Suleymān and Hamadān.

Another unexpected frustration was the period of several weeks I had to wait to receive the official letters granting me access to the archaeological sites of Fārs and allowing me to take photographs of the ancient inscriptions. I could see my precious research stay slowly being swallowed up by administrative disappointments. To soothe my nerves, I set off north by bus to visit the sites of Taxt-e Suleymān and Hamadān with two colleagues; at least it would be an opportunity for me to experiment with the photographic equipment I had invested in before leaving. Taxt-e Suleyman is a geological wonder in a volcanic landscape in west Azerbaijan: a thermal spring bubbles up from 60 metres deep in the earth's entrails and collects in a large lake, perched on top of a hill at over 2200 metres in altitude; in the Sasanian period, a fortified site was built around it to host an important Zoroastrian sanctuary dedicated to Ādur Gušnasp, the much-revered cathedral Fire of kings and warriors. Because of the peculiar mineral make-up of the soil in that region, the landscape all around boasts a myriad different colours, ranging from green to blue and copper red **[Fig. 0.2]**.

Hamadān, now a sprawling modern city, was once known as Ecbatana and was a capital of the Achaemenid empire. On the outskirts of the modern town are two monumental trilingual (Old Persian – Neo-Babylonian – Elamite) cuneiform inscriptions engraved high up in the cliffside of mount Alvand (four metres from current ground level), commissioned by Darius (r. 522-486 BCE) and Xerxes (r. 486-465) respectively **[Fig. 0.3]**; it was based on the formulaic royal titulatures which begin these two inscriptions that the German epigraphist and philologist Georg Friedrich Grotefend laid the groundwork for a phonetic decipherment of Old Persian in

[3] See Nyberg 1970; Frye and Skjærvø 1996; as well as chapter 8.

the nineteenth century, thereby providing the key to the world of cuneiform scripts. The inscriptions are oriented full east (perfectly, to the degree, as I was able to confirm); to their right they overlook a great cascade, the waters of which crash down from Mount Alvand into a flowing river. The rocky panels on either side of the cascade and inscriptions are scribbled with different coloured graffiti written in modern Persian. An old man in charge of the site's maintenance was sweeping away the leaves fallen from nearby trees to keep the path that led to the two inscriptions clear. With the help of my colleague Milad Abedi (University of Zurich, CeRMI) I asked him in my bad Persian what he thought the inscriptions were about. He cheerfully replied that he had unfortunately never learned to read but that he knew of people who thought the inscriptions held the key to old treasures hidden inside the mountain by ancient kings – this belief seems to have been widespread enough and current for some time: the site is known as Ganjnāmeh, literally 'inscription/letter of the treasure'. The legends surrounding Darius and Xerxes' rock-cut texts have made their mark on Iran's toponymy. From this first outing away from Tehran I took away the importance of striking topographical features – volcanic lakes, crashing waterfalls – that provided ancient sites with a numinous aura and may have been at the root of their significance in the first place. In both Taxt-e Soleymān and Ganjnāmeh, locals – including employees responsible for the sites' upkeep – had marvelous stories concerning the vestiges in their care. The veil of mystery that shrouded these ancient writings evidently provided a fertile ground for folklore – an aspect of these engraved texts that was no doubt as old as the texts themselves.

Pasargadae.

Upon my return to Tehran, the letters that permitted me to visit the archaeological sites of Fārs had finally been issued by the Research Institute of Cultural Heritage and Tourism. I was invited by the French archaeologist Sébastien Gondet (Laboratoire Archéorient, Lyon) to join his French-Iranian team at the site of Pasargadae, where they were carrying out electro-magnetic prospections in the gardens to the south of Pasargadae – these allow archaeologists to generate stratigraphic analyses without having recourse to excavations. I photographed the trilingual cuneiform inscriptions on the Achaemenid vestiges and noted their distribution among the ruins. The epigraphic texts seemed to have been invested with two main roles. The first was to adorn the porticoes of the royal palaces: engraved in pairs at four metres above ground, one on either side of the porticoes' gateways, the cuneiform inscriptions are visible but not legible to the bystander. As such, they mark the entrances to the palaces (Palaces R and S),

the liminal spaces between the interior and exterior of royal spaces.[4] Trilingual inscriptions are then engraved on the hems of Darius and Xerxes' dress and highlight the refined royal apparel like a ribbon of lace or ornament: these inscriptions identify the dynast on whose clothing they are carved, and blend into imperial iconography; at one metre above ground they are both visible and legible.

Experimenting with RTI photography.

The site of Pasargadae also hosts five Middle Persian funerary inscriptions; this was my first encounter with life-size epigraphic texts in this script. They are engraved directly on the bedrock which lines the ground to the north-east of the site, on the inside of the old fortification walls; the inscriptions were first documented in the 1970s by the British archaeologist David Stronach. In the vicinity, a pit or *astōdān* (ossuary), also carved out in the bedrock, as well as numerous cairns along the ridges of surrounding hills, make up the funerary landscape of this part of the site. Despite having David Stronach's *Pasargadae* with me, I had to be physically taken to the inscriptions' location by members of Sébastien Gondet's team: the light lines carved in a small section of the immense bedrock are difficult to spot and easily missed or mistaken for natural cracks and scratches. The technique used by some epigraphists to photograph such lightly carved curves is to wet them with water to create a stronger contrast and bring out the engraving. However, this has the significant disadvantage of precluding the photographer from using a flash, because the wet surface reflects the bright light right back, making the image barely usable. This group of Middle Persian inscriptions was therefore my first opportunity to try out the photographic material for Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI) I had brought with me. RTI is particularly well adapted to the study of damaged or rubbed out inscriptions and is used by epigraphists working on ancient Greek inscriptions. It consists in taking a series of 20 to 30 photographs of a given inscription with a camera set on a tripod so as to be perfectly still; the camera never moves but an external flash is set off at a different angle for each one of the 20 or so pictures, working clockwise around the inscription; the inscription is framed by two reflective surfaces to direct the flash's light towards it. The RTI software, which is completely free of charge and accessible to all, then groups all the pictures of the same inscription into a single image – with the play of light and shadows created by the different flash angles, this composite image is almost three dimensional and can be 'navigated'

[4] This joins Magaret Cool Root's observations concerning Persepolis' "performative porticoes", see Cool Root 2015.

to read each different section, word or letter of the epigraphic text in a grazing light that is particularly favourable to it. The instructions on the RTI website, which are thought out to help researchers set up their outdoor 'studio' in rudimentary field conditions and with little expense, had recommended the use of Christmas tree baubles or billiard balls set up on sticks as a good reflective surface for the flash, in the absence of more professional equipment. With no Christmas baubles in sight, Milad and I spent a day in Shiraz looking for a set of billiard balls – along with other necessaries, such as a black, tightly-fitted schoolgirl's veil for myself: the camera's strap kept making my headscarf slide off my head – before joining Sébastien Gondet's team at Pasargadae. I was very favourably impressed by the results produced by RTI **[Fig. 0.4]**, and although I would have liked to make many improvements to my setup – such as two more tripods to set up the reflective surfaces and hold them perfectly still, as well as a bigger flash and even a better camera – I believe this is an accessible and almost cost-free way (save for the camera and tripod, which any photographer would need) to produce working-quality images of rock-cut texts in the field and work towards their digital conservation.

Persepolis.

It was the end of November when we left Pasargadae for Persepolis. Dr. Hamid Fadaei, director of the Persepolis World Heritage Site, and Mohammad Jawad Owladhussein (Centre for Epigraphical Studies, Persepolis World Heritage Site), vice-president of Persepolis, welcomed us warmly and, thanks to the authorisation letters from the Research Institute of Cultural Heritage and Tourism, were able to invite us to stay for a few nights in the dormitory of the house of archaeology located on the site of Persepolis itself. Over the next few days, we visited the different directors' offices in the archaeological complex (the Persepolis palaces, Naqš-e Rajab and Naqš-e Rostam), introducing ourselves to Mr. Fallahi, Mr. Khaledi and Mr. Habibi, and obtaining permission from them to photograph and record the coordinates of the inscriptions and the monuments under their supervision. Crucially, I was given authorisation to visit the sites and monuments at dawn, before these opened to visitors, to take advantage of the softer, grazing light of the sun in the early hours – much better adapted to photography – and to (briefly) move the protective cords around the inscriptions to get fully frontal pictures of them; Darius' *tačara*, the access of which is normally denied to most visitors, was also opened for us. Work could begin.

Every morning we would wake up before dawn and cross the great terrace of Persepolis as the sun was rising. A pack of a dozen friendly street dogs who seemed to have grown

accustomed to our daily commute would follow us from our hostel door all the way up the great double staircase of Persepolis and into the ruins to lie down comfortably on the cool polished marble vestiges, enjoying the early morning rays as they filtered through the Achaemenid columns while we busied ourselves with our photographs – until 9 o'clock rolled around and a guard came to chase them away with a broomstick, complaining to us about their strange new habit as we packed up our apparel and replaced the protective cords to make way for the tourists.

The shorter trilingual inscriptions of Persepolis seem to obey the distribution of their counterparts as I had observed it at Pasargadae: they adorn doorways and gates and embellish the folds of royal clothing. At Persepolis, they are also carved on the internal and external façades of six stone window frames which rhythm the portico of Darius' *tačara*; as such, this can probably be viewed as an extension of their function as markers of liminal spaces.[5]

The 'generations of writing' of Darius tačara.

Darius' *tačara* was my first encounter with the extraordinary phenomenon of the accumulation of writings in certain specific locales. Engraved, scratched, pecked and painted onto its polished stones are hundreds of inscriptions and drawings, added to the monument over 2500 years. On a single doorway or window frame we find, juxtaposed to one another: the trilingual cuneiform inscriptions of the site's founder, the Achaemenid king Darius (r. 522-482 BCE); Middle Persian inscriptions commissioned by a Sasanian prince, 700 years later; the Arabic Kufic inscriptions of Buyid emirs (945-1055 CE); bilingual Persian and Arabic inscriptions by Injuid rulers (1325-1353 CE); a saying attributed to Ali ibn Abi Talib, followed by a few Persian verses by Sa'di that are repeated some decades later by another visitor, in explicit reference to his predecessor; Hebrew graffiti with a star of David carved on the folds of a young prince's clothing, evidently echoing the Achaemenid practice of engraving cuneiform inscriptions on the hems of sculpted royal apparel; the dated signatures in Roman capital letters of British, French, Dutch and other travellers from the seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries, many of whom had themselves visited Persepolis to take mouldings of (or to hack out[6]) the

[5] Much longer trilingual cuneiform texts have also been conserved at this site, however, engraved on the external façade of the terrace, as the centerpiece of the Apadana staircase and at regular intervals on the base of Darius' *tačara*.

[6] Cornelis de Bruijn carved out part of the Old Persian inscriptions that adorned the king's robes on the southern doorway leading to the *tačara*'s portico, see Schmidt 1953, 223-224.

Achaemenid inscriptions; petroglyphs representing livestock and even board games – a Nine men's Morris and a game of noughts and crosses. The Persian and Arabic inscriptions seem to outdo each other in beauty, offering a magnificent display of different calligraphic styles – Kufic, Naskh, Thuluth, Nastaʿlīq and their many variants **[Fig. 0.5]**.

In this way, the many secondary inscriptions[7] of Persepolis are not scattered at random throughout the site but collect in specific places **[Fig. 0.6 and 0.7]**:[8] by contrast, not even the smallest inscription can be found on the more impressive and ornate buildings of the Terrace such as the Apadana or the broken columns of the Hundred Columned Hall. In fact, a guard explained to me that the very reason tourists need a special permit to enter the *tačara* is that whenever the monument is left open to visitors, these apparently feel the irresistible urge to add their name to it, each time damaging and disfiguring the structure's ancient stones a little more. This curious phenomenon intrigued me and the study of the internal organisation of the 'generations' of writings at Darius' *tačara* was the subject of a first article upon my return to France.

The site of Naqš-e Rostam.

Having finished our work at Persepolis, we moved on to the sites of Staxr, Naqš-e Rajab and Naqš-e Rostam, similarly arriving very early to enjoy the cooler morning hours for our visits and photographing. At Naqš-e Rostam, I was granted the extraordinary privilege of climbing up into the great tomb of Xerxes, carved directly into the living rock of the Kūh-e Hussein mountain, to the extreme east of the site. Mr. Habibi, the archaeologist in charge of the site also gave me the extraordinary permission to walk down to the foot of the monumental Kaʿba tower and photograph the great trilingual inscription of Šābuhr I (r. 239/42 – 270) as well as the high priest Kerdīr's Middle Persian inscription that are engraved on its façades: these inscriptions are almost entirely invisible from current ground level, and access to the tower base is usually restricted.

The sacred quality of the Kūh-e Hussein mountain is at least as old as the Elamite period: a bas-relief depicting the Elamite god Napiriša and his consort Kiririša is engraved to

[7] The many writings just described are secondary inscriptions in the sense that they do not belong to their medium, the ruins of Darius' *tačara,* in its original state. The notion of primary and secondary epigraphy was first put forward in Ragazzoli *et al*. 2017 (see chapter 8).

[8] Another is on the façades of the main entrance gate, known as the Gate of all Nations.

the west of the cliffside at Naqš-e Rustam. The mountain's funerary function dates for its part at least to the Achaemenid period, when the kings of that dynasty had their monumental cruciform tombs directly carved out of the living rock **[Fig. 0.8]**. In the Sasanian period, Naqš-e Rostam was a dynastic sanctuary and numerous bas-reliefs and inscriptions were commissioned by kings and high officials on the cliffside, between the monumental tombs that rhythm the rockface, as well as on Achaemenid ruins such as the Ka'ba tower. The funerary function of the Kūh-e Hussein mountain, if not of the site of Naqš-e Rostam itself, certainly survived the Achaemenid period: around the corner from the site, further north along the cliffside is a rocky recess known as Šāh Esmā'īl, where dozens of *astōdān* are carved out in the rockface with later Middle Persian inscriptions scratched above them; a free-standing ossuary believed to date from this period was similarly erected on the ridge of the mountain above the Achaemenid ruins and is visible from the ground at Naqš-e Rostam **[Fig. 0.9]**.[9] Archaeologists have identified the possible traces of a cistern at Naqš-e Rostam: the presence of a spring flowing from the living rock in this spot could well be at the root of the site's importance as a caravansary – it is well located on the main axes that crossed the Achaemenid empire – as well as its possible cultic significance from time immemorial.

Exploring the Kūh-e Hussein mountain.

My Masters had been dedicated to Naqš-e Rostam, its many-layered history and the intricate articulation of its different vestiges. Aware of the ancient cultic importance of the Kūh-e Hussein mountain and its many funerary vestiges from different time periods, I asked whether it would be possible to walk up the side of the mountain to see the site of Naqš-e Rostam from above. Mr. Habibi agreed and kindly offered to accompany us on our hike; one of his friends, who had grown up as a shepherd boy in the area, joined us; we brought tea in a big thermos and I had a large cake of dates and nuts that I had bought in Shiraz, so we looked forward to having breakfast in the mountain. After half an hour's climb we reached the top of the cliff edge and enjoyed a spectacular view of the Achaemenid tombs, the Ka'ba tower and the Sasanian bas-reliefs from the heights. Vestiges of stone monumental remains scatter the cliff top. A late Middle Persian inscription was found in this zone (and published in 1979)[10] and

[9] On the subject of the funerary landscape between Naqš-e Rostam and Staxr, with the publication of recently found inscribed ossuaries, see Cereti and Gondet 2015.

[10] Nadjmabadi 1979.

Mr. Habibi brought us to it so I could photograph it. Milad and I noticed it was engraved, like those at Pasargadae, directly on the bedrock, next to and within the ancient fortification walls: these are easily visible, for the brick remains leave a several-metre-wide ribbon of red earth that winds along the cliff edge. Having photographed the inscription, I suggested we continue our hike along the mountain trail we had been following.

We had been walking for only a few minutes when I stopped dead in my tracks – right under my feet was another rock-cut text in cursive Middle Persian script; exactly like the first, it was carved directly in the bedrock, to the right of the fortification wall as we went along the mountain ridge. It was a section of the trail where there were boulders and an extensive bedrock; I searched excitedly in a radius of about thirty metres around it, this time my eyes riveted to the ground; in a matter of minutes I had spotted four more, often only realising they were there after walking all over them a number of times. The sun was already high; I set up my tripod and billiard balls and photographed them as best I could. Mr. Habibi was called back to the site for work but kindly suggested that his friend Khalid[11] could stay with us so we would be allowed to continue our hike; the unstated rule was that if we were going to step away from the main sites, we had to accept some light supervision. We convened with him that we would return all together at dawn the next day to take proper photographs and coordinates of the set of inscriptions we had just stumbled on.

Mr. Habibi was very excited and seemed convinced we had just documented 'new' (*jadīd*) inscriptions. I was more dubious – there were a dozen isolated Middle Persian cursive inscriptions known in the Fārs region, scattered through different publications; in the absence of any work providing a systematic inventory of them with clear directions and, even better, proper coordinates, it was nearly impossible to know whether the ones we had just photographed had been recorded or not.[12] It also seemed unlikely that this series, located so close to the first – published – inscription, remained entirely undocumented. Khalid, Milad and I walked on, following the red ribbon of brick remains which guided us along the mountain ridge – by the time we finally took refuge from the blazing sun under a small rocky outcrop to have our tea and cake, we had photographed eight more inscriptions in Middle Persian cursive script. I was starting to think that Mr. Habibi must be at least partially right, and thanks to an

[11] The name has been modified.

[12] The main compendia of Middle Persian cursive inscriptions include Oryan 2003, Akbarzadeh and Tavousi 2006, https://sites.uci.edu/sasanika/ (Touraj Daryaee ed.), and now Nasrollahzadeh 2019.

unbelievable stroke of good luck we had perhaps added, if not thirteen, at least a handful of previously unknown texts to the meager corpus of Middle Persian inscriptions that morning.

As we drank our tea, an old shepherd with a bent walking stick walked by and sat with us while his sheep desperately nibbled a few scorched thorns nearby; from his jacket he took out a large transparent plastic water bottle filled with what was probably one of the world's strongest alcohols, a special *eau de vie* made with raisins (*araq-e kešmeš*); he was apparently completely immune to this drink, to the ferocious sun and heat, and to their combination. I thought it best to stick to my tea. He was quite unimpressed when we told him excitedly about our finds and confirmed that the inscriptions dotted a trail that was well trodden by local herdsmen; he thought we would probably find others if we walked on.

We did – we photographed one more, beautifully conserved example that was carved on a flat stone jutting out a few centimetres above ground level, a few minutes' walk from where we had shared our tea with the old shepherd. Like most of the other dozen we had catalogued that morning, it was engraved in a single straight line – most ran roughly between 50 cm to 1m long – and was perfectly oriented east to west, so that if one stood in front of it (to read it) one would face full north. By that time my GPS had entirely run out of battery and I was unable to record our coordinates; I was very concerned I would never again be able to find the last few inscriptions we had just photographed. It was 3pm, we had no more water, we had barely eaten, and had a couple of hours walk in the scorching heat to face before getting back to the site; the boys were nursing a splitting headache; we had to turn back. Khalid told me not to worry; pointing a heavily ringed finger to his temple he assured me he had memorised the location of every inscription. He was right – when we returned the next morning at dawn with Mr. Habibi and fresh equipment, a new memory card for my camera, a full thermos of tea and lots of water, Khalid guided us better than any GPS to every single one of the scattered and hardly visible inscriptions we had photographed the day before. As I would be many times more along this trip, I was struck by the extraordinary visual acuity, spatial memory and sense of orientation of those used to walking the mountains with their animals since their early childhood.

Documenting the cursive inscriptions of Fārs.

I only had a couple more weeks left in Iran before flying back, and Milad and I embarked on a marathon to visit the more scattered and much smaller sites of Fārs known to harbour Middle Persian inscriptions. We drove to the (now dried) spring of Maqsūdābād **[Fig. 0.10]**, the grottos

of Hājjiābād and Tang-e Borāq,[13] the gorge of Tang-e Xošk, the three alcoves at Taxt-e Tāvūs, the rocky outcrop of Meidānak. Each time, the car could only take us so far, to the foot of mountain, to the entrance of the gorge or the beginning of the dell. Each time, the last couple of miles or more had to be made on foot to get to the special topographical feature that was marked by the inscription: a water source, a cave or rocky recess high up in the cliffside, a rocky outcrop on a cliff. Each time we needed to be physically brought to the inscription or group of inscriptions by a local, and preferably a shepherd to have any hope of finding it. The taxi driver poked fun at me every day for eagerly crying out "*čupun!*" (colloquial for *čupān*, 'shepherd') and making the car stop whenever I caught sight of an old man or child with a flock of sheep grazing by the side of the road – by then, I had developed an unshakable faith in their knowledge of the landscape and their visual and spatial memory, as well as their kindness. In the dell of Hājjiābād we had to brace ourselves against the barking guard dogs of a Bakhtiari (a semi-nomadic tribe) encampment to finally find a dignified old lady who pointed us in the direction of the right grotto without saying a word. In Tang-e Borāq, after hours of searching up and down, slipping and sliding along the mossy cliffside, it was an old shepherd grazing his sheep on the other side of the gorge who helped us find the inscription: after we had explained our quest to him with big gestures, imitating writing in the air, he threw a stone straight across the gorge and hit the exact spot we were looking for on our side of the cliff. At Tang-e Xošk, we disturbed a large nomadic family's picnic to ask our way and ended up being escorted by three jeeps and an army of giggling children all the way to the inscriptions at the bottom of the gorge – I could hear their squeals of laughter and the pitter-patter of their little feet trying to keep up as we slowly drove along the bumpy bottom of the dried riverbed. It also turned out there was a third inscription, in addition to the two we were expecting from existing publications; it is inscribed on the same boulder as the other two but had been covered in mud until recently.

My encounter with the young Hussein at Taxt-e Tāvūs opened this introduction. I of course accepted his gracious invitation to share a meal with his mother and happily took refuge from the heat and sun in their lovely, bright blue and fully carpeted home. A guard dog greeted us with a half-hearted bark before being told off and Hussein's mother put sour cream, mountain herbs and bread in front of us; the cream was made from the milk of the handful of cows the family depended on for a living. We spent a few hours talking about Hussein's hopes to go abroad, exchanging stories and photos. Hussein then took us on a tour of his favourite

[13] See chapter 8.

spots in the area; we saw caves, alcoves, rocks dotted with bullet marks and a special tree which he said nobody knew the species of. Only when the last rays were disappearing did he take us to the inscription he had promised to show us. We walked over into the neighbouring valley, carefully crossed a large dumpsite with broken bottles and medical equipment and climbed the cliffside. In a tiny recess, a pit was carved out of the bedrock – this was the first hint. The night was fast approaching and Hussein used the flashlight of my phone to find the carvings he was thinking of. And there it was – lightly engraved in large rounded, curly Middle Persian letters was an inscription that had so far escaped all documentation. As I stared in disbelief Hussein looked at me anxiously: "You are disappointed? Is this not what you were looking for? We call it the Greek inscription around here, because it is old and not in Persian". Milad and I both hugged him. I set up my camera while Milad and Hussein each held a billiard ball on either side of the inscription, ready for my flash.

Not all our excursions were successful, however. A tall and elegant young shepherd I stopped near lake Parišān to show him the picture of a Middle Persian inscription and explain what I was looking for shook his head gravely and told me I was in the wrong valley entirely. He wore a big blanket of raw brown wool with colourful embroidered edges that fell to his ankles to protect him from the sun. A curious bystander called us over to inquire what we were searching for – he looked at the image on my phone, nodded and said to follow him. Milad and I scrambled after him eagerly. When we arrived in a little nook in the cliffside he pointed to a large boulder triumphantly: "Look! Don't you think it looks like a camel if you look at it from this angle?" We stared. "And look! If you walk over to this side and squint it looks like an old woman with a big nose. You can see it even better at sundown. Villagers think there is treasure behind this boulder in the mountain side". Many locals and shepherds to whom I showed pictures of Middle Persian inscriptions referred to the rock-cut texts with the all-encompassing New Persian word *naqš* 'form/drawing'. There is no doubt that even if the great majority of those whom I met were indeed illiterate, they could perfectly well tell the difference between an inscription, a sculpted relief and an oddly-shaped rock. Yet, like odd trees and other striking natural features of the Iranian landscape, the ancient carvings were only some of the many visual markers, with no particular hierarchy, that made up their environment: such markers no doubt allowed them to locate themselves in their vast surroundings but also allowed them to read stories into the mountains, cliffsides and plains, bringing this majestic landscape to life and endowing it with a numinous aura.

Locals we met were very proud – with excellent reason – of their mountains and their secrets, and protective of them too. Indeed, in some cases, we met with resistance when we

asked about Middle Persian inscriptions carved in the area. At Meidānak near Kāzerūn, after several hours driving back and forth in the boiling hot taxi looking for a small funerary inscription engraved in the village's vicinity, we finally pulled up next to two old men sitting by the road. When we explained what we were looking for, they were immediately suspicious. They first feigned ignorance: they knew of nothing corresponding to what I was describing in the area. I showed them a book where the inscription was published. They asked to see what was in the bag with my tripod, concerned it might be some treasure-hunter's tool to carve out the inscription. They demanded to see my official letters and then shrugged when I produced them, saying they had a nephew in the print shop in the town nearby who could make up a fake letter like that in under a minute. I tried to show them that my letter was stamped but saw it was no use. Deciding there was no point in insisting and that I had better write off my day, I took out my eternal thermos of tea and date and nut cake. Milad, the taxi driver and I sat with the two old men, who produced a lump of sugar from their coat pocket, and we all shared sweet tea and pleasantries. As we packed up our things to go, they said they would take us to the inscription; evidently a brief introduction had been necessary to allay their suspicions. According to local legend, it was an inscription written by a grieving father in honour of his beloved daughter, who had died on the eve of her marriage; it in fact happens to be the funerary Middle Persian inscription of a woman, but whether the legend is a recent one, subsequent to the first publication of this epigraphic text, or older, is impossible to tell. A few days later, when Milad and I were visiting the Sasanian royal town of Bīšāpūr, the two old men called us to say they knew of old ink inscriptions in a nearby cave that they would be happy to show us. I was leaving the next day for Tehran and could not follow up on their invitation; I decided to come back as soon as I could. Milad tells me that they still call him now and again to say hello and ask when I might be back for tea.

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Returning to France.

It was only upon my return to France, when I was able to finish the edition of the photographs I had taken and compare them with publications of known Middle Persian inscriptions that I was able to confirm that many of the epigraphic texts we had documented in Fārs must have indeed escaped previous surveys. These include the dozen or so inscriptions on the Kūh-e

Hussein mountain behind the site of Naqš-e Rostam,[14] the third inscription documented at the bottom of the Tang-e Xošk gorge, and the inscription in the environs of Taxt-e Tāvūs, on the other side of the Naqš-e Rajab site in the Kūh-e Rahmat mountain, shown to us by the young Hussein. I wrote a full report of my fieldwork for the IFRI and forwarded all my images to both Mr. Owladhussein who had welcomed me at Persepolis, as well as Prof. Nasrollahzadeh, who had provided me with an invitation to allow my research visa. I received a second generous three-month travel grant and invitation from the IFRI in January 2019 to return to Iran as soon as possible with better equipment to continue my fieldwork and the documentation of Middle Persian inscriptions. Unfortunately, I was never able to do so. Growing unrest and tense political relationships between France and Iran meant that although my research visa was granted on the Iranian side, the French embassy refused to let me travel in the run up to my departure. The travel bans enforced globally because of the Covid pandemic then precluded me from re-applying for a visa. It also became clear that it would not be possible for me to present the previously undocumented inscriptions I had photographed in December 2018 in the context of an academic convention, or to work on them in any form of publication or even participate in any type of report describing them in either Iran or Europe.

Beginning work on the doctoral dissertation.

Although it was not possible for me to pursue my fieldwork in Iran or fully conduct research on the first results yielded by my short excursion in Fārs, this initial experience documenting rock-cut texts in the field with the help of villagers and shepherds thoroughly shaped my subsequent work on Sasanian history and historiography and pervades the eight chapters of my doctoral research. Most importantly, I was able to return to Iran many times, through the eyes of the 17th, 18th, 19th, and 20th century travellers to whom the first few chapters of my doctoral research are dedicated. My own experience in the field made me fully appreciate the difficulties of fieldwork – above all its unpredictability and the need to adapt and capitalise on its vagaries – but also its surprises, and the unexpected circumstances which sometimes lead to the documentation of research material. Examining texts *in situ* allowed me to replace them in their natural and built environment and to take the full measure of their dynamic relationship with striking features of the landscape and topography in which they are embedded: these often determine the placement of an inscription, but the rock-cut text itself in turn becomes a

[14] It is difficult to give an exact number because it is not clear in the case of some very faint traces of writing whether the words constitute a separate text or are the tail end of a better carved inscription.

determining marker of the locale's significance, transforming it irreversibly. Discussing the ancient rock-cut texts with those whose environment they make up made me sensitive to the issues of reception and interpretation which, as the first chapters of the following research will show, play no small part in a text's decipherment.

Thesis outline.

The focus of my doctoral research project is to investigate writing practices in early Sasanian Iran as reflected in the small corpus of Sasanian inscriptions by examining the rock-cut texts in their physical, historical and textual environment and by studying salient features of their palaeography. The small subfield of Sasanian Middle Persian epigraphy consists in the edition of individual or groups of inscriptions accompanied by the study of their historical importance and linguistic specificities. In order to consider the corpus as a whole, my first task was therefore to situate research on Middle Persian inscriptions within the broader context of Iranian epigraphy and Iranian studies: the first four chapters of the following doctoral thesis are dedicated to the historiography of Middle Persian epigraphy.

The first chapter explores the sporadic references to "Persian" inscriptions, scripts and alphabets in Late Antique historiography and in Arabo-Persian chronicles. Its aim is twofold. First, it critically examines the relevant passages in textual sources that were contemporary but 'external' to Sasanian Iran, such as the works of Roman, Byzantine, Syrian and Armenian historiographers, in order to assess to what extent the information contained in Late Antique historiography can be relied upon for the study of Sasanian scribal practice. It then discusses the descriptions of Sasanian inscriptions and scripts in Persian accounts that immediately followed the empire's demise, in the chronicles of Arabo-Persian authors. These illustrate the rapid disuse and loss of knowledge of the Middle Persian script(s): lapidary Middle Persian in particular soon ceased to be recognised as the monumental counterpart of Middle Persian cursive. The sources discussed in this chapter are those which early modern European scholars had at their disposal when they first studied Sasanian inscriptions and Zoroastrian manuscripts: their examination therefore helps to lay the groundwork for the history of the decipherment of the Middle Persian cursive and monumental scripts.

The second chapter retraces the rediscovery of Middle Persian inscriptions by early modern European travellers, which began the long road to the decipherment of the rock-cut texts. It highlights the central role played in this respect by the identification of the great ruins at the site of Čehelmenār with the famous Persepolis of Classical historiography: the

association was made by Spanish-Portuguese travellers in the 17th century and soon excited the curiosity of European scholars and adventurers. The fascination of Western scholarship for the cuneiform inscriptions engraved on its ruins, the rise in popularity of travel literature and the increasingly violent competition between European learned societies to be the first to draw the sumptuous Persepolitan ruins and their mysterious inscriptions spurred a series of dedicated expeditions. The documentation of Middle Persian inscriptions can very much be seen as a by-product of travellers' drawings of the site's more 'exciting' vestiges. Remarkably, when travellers first started returning from India with Zoroastrian manuscripts written in Avestan and Middle Persian cursive no link was made by scholars between the writing system engraved in the Sasanian inscriptions and that in the Zoroastrian manuscripts because of the difference in the style of script used.

With ***the third chapter*** we move away from the field and its adventures and into the carpeted cabinets of 18th century library orientalists, many of whom had never left their country, let alone Europe, when they first set eyes on the drawings of Middle Persian inscriptions brought back by travellers and began working on their decipherment. Investigating their first steps towards securing the first letters of the monumental Middle Persian alphabet and their early breakthroughs in identifying key words in the inscriptions serves to define the pivotal role played by the nascent field of Middle Persian epigraphy within the broader research field of ancient Iranian epigraphy, and in particular with respect to the decipherment of Old Persian cuneiform. Through the relatively narrow prism of Middle Persian epigraphy, we also gain a precious insight into the main tropes of scholarly debates and ideology that animated Western scholarship during the early modern period: one of the recurring contentions between European scholars concerned the nature of the Middle Persian language – was it an Indo-European language with Semitic loanwords or a Semitic language with Indo-European loanwords?

The fourth chapter proposes to concentrate on the history of research, or 'biography', of a single epigraphic text, to provide a focus when following the progress in scholarly understanding of the main points of contention concerning the Middle Persian script and language – such as the relationship between monumental and cursive Middle Persian, the use of heterograms and the difficulty of distinguishing language from writing system – throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. This methodological approach is inspired by Béatrice Fraenkel's adaptation of the notion of a 'cultural biography of things' – put forward by Kopytoff in 1986 – to the special case of writing (texts, inscriptions and inscribed objects), in the context of her seminar at the Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS) on the anthropology of writing. It allows us to chart out the evolving scholarly interests and knowledge of inscriptional

Middle Persian but also to investigate the complex 'life' of a given text. The epigraphic text chosen as the focal point for this chapter is Šābuhr I's bilingual inscription at Hājjiābād: through the 'biography' of this inscription, we witness such important turning points as the shift in gravity from war-torn Europe to the Parsi community in India for the funding of important research projects and cornerstone publications, as well as the emergence of a market for forged Sasanian inscriptions.

The fifth chapter is dedicated to the history of the emergence of the Middle Persian heterographic writing system. The historiographical study developed in the first four chapters highlights past scholars' difficulties in distinguishing the Middle Persian language from its writing system. This is reflected in more recent studies in the contention over whether the language of certain post-Achaemenid Aramaic texts should be considered as 'bad' Aramaic or can be accurately described as early examples of (Parthian and) Middle Persian heterography. This chapter argues that any constructive resolution of such difficult questions must take into account the circumstances in which the Middle Persian script arose. The roots of the heterographic writing system lie in the monolithic Aramaic scribal tradition developed in the context of Achaemenid chanceries. Scripts such as Parthian and Middle Persian did not only derive their graphemes from Aramaic: Imperial Aramaic came hand in hand with an established administrative protocol, epistolary conventions as well as fixed formulae and vocabulary, which shaped Late Antique Iranian scribal tradition. As such, Middle Persian must be studied against the backdrop of a mosaic of scripts – such as Parthian, Elymaean and Characenean – which emerged with the rather sudden disappearance of the centralised, normalising influence of Achaemenid chanceries.

The sixth chapter reviews the earliest, pre-Sasanian Middle Persian written vestiges, which consist – as we know it – in a corpus of inscribed coins from Persis as well as a number of inscribed silver vessels. The pre-Sasanian script of Persis has been described as Aramaic 'degenerating' into Middle Persian. Furthermore, because of the nature of the vestiges which survive from this early period, scholarship has tended to assume a diachronic evolution from a lapidary to a cursive form of writing. However, a close palaeographic examination of the legends engraved on the Persid coins and silverware reveals a rich emerging local scribal tradition, firmly anchored in the region throughout the Seleucid and Parthian period. It notably presents the experimentation of different grapheme styles and the aesthetic combination in certain cases of more formal 'archaising' letters with innovations. Above all, this small corpus of written vestiges betrays the existence of a local *cursive* scribal tradition, presenting the use of certain simplified but also a marked interest for the use of ligatures and stylistic flourishes.

The seventh chapter offers a palaeographic analysis of the first Middle Persian written documents that are securely datable to the Sasanian period. These are all manuscript vestiges and comprise several parchment fragments, an ostracon, and a series of dipinti found in the ruins of Dura-Europos, a city on the southwestern bank of the Euphrates in modern day Syria. They were found along with Parthian manuscript remains – parchments, ostraca and dipinti. This small corpus of early Sasanian written documents testifies to the resolutely bilingual nature of the empire's administration in the early third century and confirms the synchronic use of a multiplicity of script styles within a given manuscript, ostracon or dipinto, a feature of Middle Persian scribal practice that was already suggested by the pre-Sasanian Persid material. It illustrates the rise in the use of ligatures, scribal embellishments and even prototypes of 'corrupted' word forms – typical of certain oft-occurring heterograms – which are all usually described as a peculiarity of much later, post-Sasanian Middle Persian cursive script.

The eighth and last chapter examines a choice of early Sasanian inscriptions. Epigraphic texts constitute the bulk of our written vestiges for this period. Yet, through certain features of their palaeography, as well as through the reference to a number of administrative and legal manuscript documents and to aspects of scribal practice such as the signing and sealing of contracts, inscriptions betray a trace of the now lost Sasanian manuscript material. The first aim of this chapter is thus to highlight to what extent Sasanian inscriptions were embedded in a rich manuscript tradition which provided the literary, administrative and legal backdrop for these monumental texts. However, the three-dimensional and monumental nature of inscriptions also means they are embedded in a physical context. Strikingly, authors of inscriptions systematically mobilise a number of linguistic tools to refer to key features of their inscriptions' natural and built environment. The analysis of the inscriptions' interdependence with (lost) manuscript documents on the one hand, and their relationship with their natural and archaeological surroundings on the other, helps to define the special status and significance of monumental rock-cut texts, and in particular their possible administrative, legal and religious qualities within the broader landscape of Sasanian written vestiges.

Chapter 1

Sasanian inscriptions and Persian scripts in Late Antique historiography and Arabo-Persian chronicles

I. Sasanian inscriptions and Persian scripts in Late Antique historiography.

The "Persian" version of Gordian III's epitaph.

Sporadic references to "Persian" inscriptions or inscriptions in other languages – such as Greek – commissioned by Sasanian kings, as well as to a "Persian" script, can be gleaned from sources contemporary with but external to the Sasanian empire, in the works of Roman, Byzantine, Syrian and Armenian historiographers.[15] The passages are for the most part vague, and when they do provide details, these are likely to be fanciful literary embellishments. However, if the content of the inscriptions they describe is often imagined, the accounts selected below evoke characteristic aspects of epigraphic practices implemented by the Sasanian crown. These historiographies were also the main sources on which early European scholars based themselves for their work on the Middle Persian writing system, heavily influencing their understanding of the subject, and as such, they serve to highlight key issues concerning the history of the study of Middle Persian texts and inscriptions.

The *Historia Augusta*, a collection of (spurious) biographies of Roman emperors probably composed in the late fourth or the early fifth century CE, closes the "Life of the Three Gordians" with the violent death of Gordian III (r. 238-244 CE) at the hands of his own army during his campaign against the Persians, and records that a tomb was built for the young emperor near the Roman camp of Circesium on the Euphrates.[16] The monument was purportedly engraved with an epitaph in five languages including Greek, Latin, Persian, Hebrew and Egyptian. The Antioch-born Roman soldier and historian Ammianus Marcellinus,

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[15] Strictly speaking, not all Armenian and Syriac historiographers can be considered as sources that were 'external' to the Sasanian empire; by 'external' sources here, I mean literature not directly produced or commissioned by the Sasanian crown.

[16] *Historia Augusta*, *Vita Gordianorum*, 34; Chastagnol 2018.

writing in the fourth century, reports seeing the cenotaph near Doura Europos while marching through Mesopotamia in the emperor Julian's (r. 331-363 CE) army, but does not mention an inscription.[17] Unsurprisingly, the authenticity of an extraordinary quinquelingual inscription recording Gordian III's deeds has been called into question. Xavier Loriot for example suggests that the choice and number of languages can be explained by the sources on which the author of this passage bases his account.[18] Ammianus Marcellinus, who is thought to have been an important source of information for the narrative, describes the Egyptian hieroglyphic writing system in his *Histories* and provides a translation for an inscription engraved in hieroglyphics on an obelisk brought back to Rome and set up in the Circus Maximus.[19] The Greek, Latin and Hebrew triad for its part evokes the trilingual inscription allegedly engraved on the *titulus crucis*.[20] Loriot further observes that the "intellectual context" of the time may have played a part in the *Historia Augusta*'s excursion on Gordian's epitaph: the turn of the fifth century was the period when Jerome redacted his commentaries by explicitly referring back to the Hebrew original and describing himself as "*hebraeus*, *graecus*, *latinus trilinguis*"; Jerome similarly praises Epiphanius of Salamis for being "*pentaglossos*" and defends Origen of Alexandria's knowledge of Greek, Syriac, Hebrew, Egyptian (Coptic) and Latin.[21] As Loriot points out, this last list is particularly interesting as it corresponds closely to the five languages on Gordian's epitaph, albeit with Syriac replacing the Middle Persian. More generally, we may consider that these five languages made up the core idioms of biblical study, translation and exegesis in Late Antiquity. The composition of a multilingual inscription to honour Gordian III is not inconceivable, and many bilingual and trilingual inscriptions from Mesopotamia and Iran include at least one of the languages cited in the list (Greek, Middle Persian and Parthian in Iran; Latin, Greek and Palmyrene at Palmyra for example[22]). Reports of such epigraphic texts may well have inspired the account in the *Historia Augusta* while the list of exotic idioms it

[17] Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* XXIII.5.7; Rolfe 1982-1986, II, 336-337.

[18] Loriot 2009.

[19] Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* XVII.4.17-23; Rolfe 1982-1986, I, 326-331. On Ammianus Marcellinus as a source for the *Historia Augusta*, see Syme 1968, cited in Loriot 2009, 45, n. 4.

[20] Gospel of John 19:20, "[…] *ubi crucifixus est Jesus, et erat scriptum hebraice, græce, et latine*".

[21] Jerome, *Apologia adversus libros Rufinum*, II, 22 and III, 6; Lardet 1983, 162-163 and 230-231.

[22] Huyse 1999a; As'ad and Delplace 2002.

offers probably represents the main languages with which Roman historiography came into contact in Late Antiquity.[23]

Husraw II's inscribed ex-votos.

More directly involving the Sasanian crown is a series of inscriptions recorded by the Syrian scholar Evagrius Scholasticus and the Byzantine historian Theophylactus Simocatta, respectively writing in the late sixth and in the early seventh centuries. Both report the dedication, in their lifetime, of inscribed ex-votos by Husraw II (r. 590-628 CE) to the shrine of Saint Sergius at Sergiopolis south of the Euphrates[24], in the context of this Sasanian king's victory over Wahrām VI Čōbīn (r. 590-591 CE) and his "restoration" to the throne thanks to the political and military backing of the Byzantine emperor Maurice (r. 582-602 CE).[25] The first votive offering includes a golden cross with an extensive text detailing how Husraw II, who had been forced to seek refuge in Roman territory, upon hearing that his enemy was marching upon him, turned to Saint Sergius – renowned for granting petitions – and vowed to send to his shrine a golden cross studded with jewels should his men succeed in ousting Wahrām Čōbīn's general Zādspram. According to Evagrius Scholasticus this text was engraved in Greek directly on the cross, while Theophylactus Simocatta records that the text was put into writing "in Greek characters" (*Ἑλληνικοῖς γράμμασιν*) in a letter sealed and sent to the shrine by the Sasanian king.[26] Regardless of this difference in media, both historians record the text as beginning with the words "This cross, I, Husraw, king of kings […]."[27] The formula, which opens with the close deictic directly followed by the description of the object on which the inscription is engraved, is typical of a 'label' inscription, and, although not exclusive to Middle Persian epigraphy, is found in commemorative, votive as well as funerary Sasanian inscriptions, royal and private alike. This first dedication is closely linked to another even more lavish offering by the king at the same shrine, this time in thanks for the pregnancy of Širin,

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[23] Or which the author of the *Historia Augusta* imagined/expected were used in the lands where Gordian was slain.

[24] Resafa, ar. Ar-Ruṣāfa, a city located in the Roman province Euphratensis, in the desert of northern Syria

[25] Theophylactus 5:1, 13-14; Evagrius Scholasticus 6:21.

[26] The Byzantine historian does separately refer to the cross as being inscribed with the circumstances of its dedication, but what language this text was in, or how it differed from the content of the Sasanian king's letter, he does not clarify.

[27] "Τοῦτον τὸν σταυρὸν ἐγὼ Χοσρόης Βασιλεὺς Βασιλέων […]"; de Boor 1887, 212; Bidez and Parmentier 1898, 235.

Husraw II's Christian wife. Evagrius describes the ex-voto as a disc (or paten) engraved with a long dedicatory text starting with the words "I, Husraw, king of kings, son of Hormizd have placed the inscription upon this disk".[28] The inscription recounts Husraw II's forbidden love for Širin and the miraculous fulfilment of their wish for a child no more than ten days after the Sasanian king visited Saint Sergius with his petition. It also expresses Husraw II's satisfaction at having vessels engraved with his name in the martyr's shrine: for Martin Higgins this is a pointed suggestion – falling short of an order – that inscriptions directly engraved on the objects were to mention Husraw II as the donor.[29] There follows an itemized list of the offerings which includes Širin's personal Christian cross along with the equivalent of its value in gold coins (several thousand staters),[30] with strict instructions concerning the coins: these were to be melted into several objects including a golden disc (paten), a bowl, a cross and a censer, while any surplus left over after these objects had been fashioned would belong to the sanctuary in (future) thanks for the happy outcome of Širin's pregnancy and any later aid to her and Husraw II. Theophylactus gives a very comparable account, with the difference that the text detailing the dedication and the Sasanian king's instructions is, here again, put in a letter – this time opening with a standard epistolary introductory formula "To the great martyr Sergius, Husraw, king of kings" – sent along with the offerings.[31] Martin Higgins, in his extensive comparative study of the two accounts, concludes that the discrepancy in this passage indicates that Evagrius based his account on a direct examination of the ex-votos themselves – the Syrian scholar explicitly states that "This is the language of the offerings of Husraw" – whereas Theophylactus' sources recorded the dedicatory text in the form of the royal missive that accompanied the offerings.[32] Because the paten itself is described by both historians as being fashioned from the money gifted by Husraw II, we may suppose that the Sasanian king sent a letter with instructions for engraving the vessel rather than having it manufactured and inscribed before gifting it. The mechanism of Husraw II's votive dedication to the shrine can thus be reconstructed as follows: Husraw II sent a large sum of money with a letter of dedication

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[28] "Ἐγὼ Χοσρόης, Βασιλεὺς Βασιλέων, υἱὸς Χοσρόου, τὰ ἐν τῷδε τῷ δίσκῳ γεγραμμένα […]", Bidez and Parmentier 1898, 236.

[29] Higgins 1995, 94, 96.

[30] The wording in both accounts is problematic and there is some debate as to whether both the promised cross and its replacement value in staters were sent or only the sum of money equivalent to the value of Širin's cross, see Higgins 1995, 93-94, n. 4, with further references.

[31] "Τῷ μεγαλομάρτυρι Σεργίῳ Χοσρόης, Βασιλεὺς Βασιλέων, […]"; de Boor 1887, 214.

[32] "Ταῦτα τὰ παρὰ Χοσρόου ἀναθήματα λέγει […]", Bidez and Parmentier 1898, 237; Higgins 1995, 93.

(in what language is more difficult to determine) and the vessels were manufactured locally and engraved in Greek, according to the Sasanian king's instructions. For our purposes it is important to note that Husraw II's lavish dedications to a Christian shrine – that was held in special reverence, as Michael and Mary Whitby note, by the Miaphysite Arab tribes of upper Mesopotamia, suggesting that the Sasanian king was eager to win their support[33] – included a special commission to manufacture vessels ostentatiously inscribed with his name and with the circumstances of his votive offering in a local language, thereby directly addressing a Byzantine audience. The custom of dedicating inscribed ex-votos in shrines is certainly not unique to the Sasanian world. Nevertheless, Husraw II's extensive list of instructions – detailed in an inscription directly engraved on an object exposed on the site of the dedication – concerning the use of the funds as well as any surplus left over after the sum had been spent according to the donor's wishes, and which included specific (ritual) good works (in this case the creation of special vessels "for the mysteries" engraved with the king's name) to be carried out in his name and for his benefit, is strongly reminiscent of Sasanian dedicatory practices as illustrated in foundation inscriptions from the Sasanian heartland.[34]

Ardašīr I's boundary stones in Armenia.

In his *History of Armenia*, Movses Khorenatsi similarly records the commission of inscriptions by the Sasanian crown in Armenia.[35] The episode relates the engraving, or more exactly the re-engraving, of boundary stones delimiting Armenian villages and estates by Ardašīr I (r. 224-240 CE), in the early years of his accession to the throne. As such, it both illustrates the use of inscriptions to delineate territory and describes an act of *damnatio memoriae* by the newly invested monarch. According to the Armenian scholar, the large stone markers were originally commissioned by the Armenian king Artaxias I (r. 188-161 BCE), who used them to redistribute the land when he settled many foreigners in Armenia. Having overthrown the Arsacid dynasty and claimed control over Armenia, Ardašīr I embarks on a systematic reorganisation of the territory – evoked in rather positive terms by the historian despite his

[33] Whitby 1986, 132, n.4.

[34] See for instance Šāpūr I' inscription at the site of Naqš-e Rostam (Huyse 1999a) and Mihrnarseh inscription at Fīrūzābād (Henning 1954).

[35] Mahé 1993, 23, 209-210; the date of this text is much debated, with some scholars arguing it was composed in the second half of the fifth century and others preferring a much later date, see the discussion on this problem in Mahé 1993, 18-20.

evident hatred for the heathen invader – which includes the restoration of traditional institutions, the restitution of their "ancestral estates" to local aristocratic families, the establishment of fire altars and the destruction of cultic statues erected by the Arsacid satrap and the complete redrawing of inner boundaries.[36] Movses Khorenatsi insists on the fact that Ardašīr I is keen to impose his name everywhere: he replaces Artaxias' name with his own both in the archives and on the boundary stones, so that these now read "Ardašīrakan". The Armenian historian does not tell us which language the stone markers were either initially engraved in or later re-engraved, but archaeological campaigns have revealed a series of boundary stones bearing inscriptions in Aramaic which display the name and titulature of Artaxias, confirming the first part of Movses Khorenatsi's account at least.[37] The Armenian historian adds that Ardašīr I, envious of Artaxias' boundary stones, decides to implement the practice in the "country of the Persians", putting his name on each so that that of his predecessor might be forgotten: it is not clear from this addendum whether Movses Khorenatsi is referring to the territory of Armenia as the (new) "country of the Persians" and is therefore simply alluding to the episode of Ardašīr's re-inscription of the Armenian boundary stones, or whether he is suggesting that the Sasanian king also decided to erect – or replace – stone markers in the Persian heartland. Either way, the practice of inscribing boundary stones is described as an Armenian/Parthian tradition adopted by the Sasanians. Although private Middle Persian stone property markers and inscriptions engraved in the living rock identifying the owner of an estate are certainly known from the Persian heartland, engraved boundary stones commissioned by the Sasanian crown have not (yet) been excavated.[38] The practice of *damnatio memoriae*, particularly in the sphere of royal inscriptions, is on the other hand attested. Wahrām I (r. 271-274 CE)'s label inscription at Bīšāpūr for instance is usurped by his uncle Narseh (r. 293-303 CE), in the context of a bitter contest for the throne.[39] The inscription, which identifies the king in the bas-relief next to which it is engraved as Wahrām I, is partly effaced by Narseh who replaces his brother's first name with his own, very much in the manner described by Movses Khorenatsi: by means of this ruse Narseh usurps both the inscription and the bas-relief, as the royal figure becomes re-labelled as himself.

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[36] Mahé 1993, 228. Movses Khorenatsi correctly adds that Ardašīr I is succeeded by his son Šābuhr, but the chronology of the passage is problematic because the Armenian chronicler places these events in the reign of the Roman emperor Probus (r. 276-282 CE), who came to power after the reign of these two Sasanian kings.

[37] These inscriptions were published in Perikhanian 1966.

[38] See the Tang-e Xošk and Maqsūdābād inscriptions for instance.

[39] Herrmann, Howell and MacKenzie 1980-1983, II, 14-19.

Agathias' "Persian writings".

Other late antique sources allude to works written in or translated into "Persian" and one even briefly describes a "Persian" alphabet. In his narrative of the reign of Justinian I (r. 527-565), the Byzantine lawyer and historian Agathias provides an account of the Roman military's exploits against the Persians and other enemies of the empire in the years from to 552 to 559. His narrative includes two long excursuses on the Persians for which he makes a point of informing his readers that he is basing himself on first-hand "Persian" sources.[40] The first digression focuses on the Zoroastrian pantheon as well as Persian funerary and marriage traditions and presents the usual fascinated horror concerning incestuous marriages and the rites of exposure of the dead, well known from earlier Greek historiography.[41] The second excursus however does away with much of the literary ornaments of the first and recounts the rise of the Sasanian empire with details of the main events that took place under each king in chronological order, up to the reign of Husraw I (r. 531-579). As such, it follows to a greater extent the official Sasanian national tradition of the *Xwadāy Nāmag* as it has been preserved in Arabo-Persian chronicles and epic works from the Islamic period.[42] At the end of this excursus, the Byzantine historian justifies the reliability of his account by explaining how he obtained his material: seeking to base his chronicle directly on Persian sources, he asked his friend Sergius, an acclaimed Syrian interpreter and praised by the Sasanian king Husraw himself, to travel to Persia and consult the royal annals in person. Sergius was able to gain access to these and took notes of names and dates as well as the most important events of each reign, composing an "outline" of the national chronicle in Greek for Agathias. There has been some debate concerning the language of the archives consulted by Sergius. Baumstark, in his work on the rich literature which Syriac translations constituted in Late Antiquity, suggests that the annals may originally have been composed in Syriac rather than Middle Persian; this is a possibility that Suolahti seems to make space for in his discussion of Agathias' sources for his Persian excursuses.[43] For Averil Cameron however, the importance of Syriac as a mediatory

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[40] Agathias, *The Histories*, II, 23-28 and IV, 24-30. To what extent Agathias actually means 'Middle Persian' rather than just 'Sasanian' when he says 'Persian' is difficult to decide.

[41] Although Agathias also illustrates the funerary practices with examples from his own time; see Cameron 1970; de Jong 1997, 229-250; Hämeen-Anttila 2018, 14-21; on the interpretation of descriptions of Sasanian burial practices see also Herman 2010.

[42] Cameron 1970, 112-113; on the *Xwadāy Nāmag,* see most recently Hämeen-Anttila 2018.

[43] Baumstark 1894, 368-368 and Suolahti 1947, 6, n. 1, citing the former.

language between the Greek and Persian worlds notwithstanding, the royal annals of the Sasanian kings could not have been redacted in anything other than Middle Persian, the empire's "official language".[44] Agathias himself certainly regards the annals as highly authoritative first-hand "Persian" sources. He describes Sergius' account as being directly made after "Persian books" (*ἐκ τῶν Περσικῶν βίβλῶν*) and is very proud of his efforts to procure first-hand information, stating that he deems his account of Kawād's reign to be more trustworthy than that composed by Procopius, precisely because his follows the "Persian writings" (*τοῖς Περσικοῖς χειρογράφοις*); the documents are also explicitly referred to as "royal annals" placed into the care of "guards" (*τους τῶν βασιλικῶν ἀπομνημονευμάτων φρουρούς*), from whom Sergius had to ask for permission to consult to the texts.[45] The accuracy of Sergius' summary of the Sasanian national tradition is a separate matter. As both Suolahti and Cameron have observed, certain passages of Agathias' account betray an important Christian Roman/Syrian bias: certain glosses such as the scathing descriptions of the Sasanian kings – Šābuhr I is described as a "bloodthirsty" (*μιαιφόνος*) and wicked ruler; the victory of Odenathus of Palmyra against him is celebrated – have no place in Sasanian royal annals.[46] However, whether this reading of the events is wholly supplemented by Agathias/Sergius or stems from a Syriac version of the Sasanian national tradition is more difficult to determine: we have after all no real detail concerning the location of the "royal annals" or the "guards" that protected them. The two Persian excursuses are not the only passages where Agathias refers to "Persian" writings: he records for instance that Husraw I had Greek authors such as Aristotle and Plato rendered into Persian for him.[47] Here again, Agathias' assurance that the original Greek works were directly translated into Middle Persian is difficult to verify: a compendium of Aristotle's works was indeed composed by the Christian Paul the Persian for the Sasanian king, but the extant manuscript is in Syriac.[48] As Christensen has noted, this Syriac summary may in turn have been translated into Middle Persian:[49] interestingly, the preface of another work by Paul the Persian, again a Syriac commentary of Aristotle, informs the reader that the text was translated into Syriac from "Persian", suggesting that a lost Middle Persian version of the

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[44] Cameron 1970, 162.

[45] Agathias IV, 30; Cameron 1970, 134-135.

[46] Agathias IV, 23-24; Cameron 1970, 139-142; Suolahti 1947, 10. While for Cameron the bias of Agathias' account is distinctly Syrian Christian, for Suolahti the "spirit of this description is fully Roman".

[47] Agathias II, 28.

[48] [BM ms 988], on Paul the Persian and his work, see Bennett 2003 and Teixidor 1996/1997.

[49] Christensen 1936, 422, n. 4.

commentary existed.[50] If no Middle Persian translations of Greek or Syriac medical, philosophical and logical works have survived – quite apart from the matter of their influence on certain prominent Middle Persian texts such as the *Dēnkard* – we do have an example of a Middle Persian translation of Syriac Christian liturgical material: fragments of a manuscript bearing a Middle Persian version of the Psalms of the Old Testament were found in Chinese Turkestan, indicating that written Middle Persian translations of Syriac texts did circulate widely.[51] That Syriac/Aramaic was a necessary or habitual "stage" for the transposition of Greek works into Persian and vice versa is also suggested by the Arabic chronicler Tabari, who records that when Alexander took with him "the books of the Persians" containing all manner of sciences, these were first translated into Aramaic and then into Greek.[52] Christensen considered that there was no good reason to believe that Husraw I could not read or understand Syriac.[53] Although there remains a real possibility that Sergius' first-hand sources were indeed in Middle Persian and that Syriac translations of Greek texts were put into Middle Persian for Husraw I, in view of the huge prominence of Syriac as a mediatory language between the Greek and Persian worlds, we may consider that locally composed Syriac annals would certainly have been regarded by Agathias as being a "Persian" text, and indeed in many ways they would have been.

Epiphanius of Salamis' "alphabet of the Persians".

A more pointed allusion to a "Persian" alphabet as opposed to a Syriac one is found in the works of Epiphanius of Salamis, described admiringly as a *pentaglossos* by Jerome. His *Panarion* is a refutation of various religious sects that he brands as heretical. The work's longest section is dedicated to the Manichaeans, a powerful group in his time and whose leader, Mani, he evidently regarded as a dangerous competitor. If the focus of his attack is Mani himself, to whom he dedicates a sizeable (partly fabricated) biography, Epiphanius also discusses the latter's work, citing lengthy passages of it. In particular, he mentions a compendium, the

[50] [Cod. 50] in Scher 1906, 498; Bennett 2003.

[51] The composition of this Middle Persian version of the Psalms has been ascribed to the reign of Husraw I, based namely on the context of intellectual exchange which is described as fostering in such contemporary sources as Agathias, as well as his purported tolerance towards Christians, see Christensen 1936, 422; for the main edition of the text, see Andreas and Barr 1933.

[52] Perlmann 1987, 94.

[53] Christensen 1936, 422, n. 4.

"Mysteries of Manichaeus", organised in twenty-two sections, to match the number of the letters in the Syriac alphabet.[54] The symbolic interpretation of the composition of a work in as many parts as there are letters in the alphabet used to write it is a recurring motif: Origen thus attaches special to the division of the Old Testament in 22 parts, said to correspond to the 22 Hebrew letters.[55] The constituent elements of the holy text are seen as being mirrored by its overall structure, effecting a meaningful microcosmic-macrocosmic relationship between part and whole. This motif may be compared to elaborate explanations of the cosmological significance of writing systems found in Arabo-Persian chronicles: thus in Ibn al-Nadīm's *Fihrist* the 28 letters of the alphabet are said to correspond to the 28 stations of the moon while that the maximum number of letters which a word can contain, seven, reflects the seven "heavenly bodies".[56] In order to justify Mani's interest in the symbolic number of the Syriac letters, Epiphanius feels it necessary to add a gloss clarifying that "most Persians" use the Syriac alphabet besides their own "Persian one", in the same way that Greek is widely used by many nations that also have their own writing system: Syriac is thus portrayed as a *lingua* (or perhaps a *scriptio*) *franca*, used by the peoples subject to the Sasanian empire. He then adds with a certain contempt that other Persians also pride themselves in knowing the oldest dialect of Syriac as well as Palmyrene, including its letters. The distinction made between knowledge of the language and knowledge of its writing system as well as the special focus placed on the Persians' familiarity with the Syriac and Palmyrene script is striking. Although it would seem that Epiphanius is referring to Persians in general rather than only to Manichaeans, it is worth highlighting that the revolutionary script which Mani introduced was closely related to – perhaps even mainly based on – the Palmyrene and Syriac *estrangelo* scripts.[57] The Manichaean script contains a core of 22 letters with additional alphabetical elements introduced by Mani himself, and was used to write a number of Iranian as well as Turkic languages. Evidently, Epiphanius did not know enough about the "Persian" alphabet to differentiate the

[54] Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion*, *Anacephalaeosis* V. 66, *Against Manichaeans* 13.1-6; Williams 2013, 240.

[55] (Origen in) Eusebius, *Church History*, VI. 25; Maier 2007.

[56] Dodge 1970, I, 19. More generally, such cosmological interpretations of numbers and number systems, although not necessarily linked to the alphabet, are familiar from Middle Persian texts also: symbolic significance is attached to the rules of backgammon and chess as well as to each of the six numbers on the dice in a dedicated text, *Abar Wizārišin ī Čatrang ud Nihišn Nēw Ardaxšīr*, see Panaino 1999; on the literary *topos* of the cosmological interpretation of the game's rules, see Gardner 2020.

[57] On the Manichaean script see Durkin-Meisternernst 2005.

Manichaean from the Middle Persian one but this passage does suggest that he was aware of a script specifically used to write Iranian languages.

Syriac or Middle Persian, Middle Persian or Syriac?

The passages discussed above show that Late Antique historiography barely had any direct contact with either inscriptional or manuscript Middle Persian. If some accounts do echo epigraphic practices that are characteristic – although not exclusive to – Sasanian Iran, these instances are only recorded because they were displayed by the crown outside the empire's heartland, in Armenia and Mesopotamia, and in languages other than Middle Persian, such as Greek. It would seem that certain historiographers did entertain the notion of a writing system specifically used by the "Persians", although whether this was only an assumption on their part, hearsay, or any real knowledge of written Middle Persian is unclear. The closest reference to a "Persian" writing system is Epiphanius' excursus on what is probably the Manichaean script and which he enquired about only because he saw its creator as a dangerous rival. What these accounts do illustrate is the huge importance of Syriac as a mediatory language (script) in the exchanges between the Sasanian empire and Byzantium, an aspect of the linguistic landscape of Late Antique Iran that is testified by Arabo-Persian chronicles also. In this respect, it seems that there may have been a certain lack of distinction in some sources between Syriac and 'Persian'. The difficulty of determining either the language of the chronicles consulted by the interpreter Sergius – or that of the translations of Greek works prepared for Husraw – is an instance of this, as are the two lists of five languages recorded respectively by the *Historia Augusta* and Epiphanius, in the former of which Middle Persian is substituted for Syriac to better suit the story's context.[58] Likewise, the Bishop of Salamis' statement that some Persians use the Palmyrene and Syriac alphabets – although this is possible – may point to an amalgam between the Middle Persian/Manichaean script and the Syriac and Palmyrene alphabets, perhaps because of their resemblance: the relative aesthetic affinity between all Aramaic derived scripts, similarly led several early European scholars working on the Sasanian

[58] The difficulty of determining whether in some instances the Middle Persian script or the Syriac one is meant, is extended to accounts of spoken Middle Persian. Agathias' Persian excursus alludes to the importance of Syriac interpreters at the Sasanian court and Procopius similarly records that talks between Husraw and the ambassadors of Vitigis were enabled by a Syriac-Greek interpreter: again, either the King was fluent in Syriac or perhaps a second translation by a Syriac-Middle Persian interpreter is implied, Procopius, *Bellum Persicum*, II,2.3, cited in Cameron 1970, 161-162.

inscriptions of Naqš-e Rostam – little distinction was drawn at first between the Parthian and Middle Persian versions – to assume that these were carved by Palmyrene mercenaries.[59] That (Middle) Persian could be written in Syriac or vice-versa may also be suggested in certain Arabo-Persian chronicles: al-Nadīm for instance curiously records – after al-Muqaffa‘ – that Syriac was one of the seven idioms of the Sasanians, adding that in the region of Sawād, correspondence was effected in a form of Syriac Persian (*pārsi*).[60]

It is worth noting that the ambiguity concerning what exactly is meant by ‘Syriac/Assyrian’[61] finds a counterpart in earlier Greek and Roman historiography. There is evidence for instance that Old Persian inscriptions, because they were engraved in a cuneiform script, were described as being in ‘Assyrian’ or ‘Syriac’.[62] Herodotus, in his account of the crossing of the Bosporus by Darius’ army on a bridge of boats, reports that the Achaemenid king set up two pillars of marble, respectively bearing an inscription in “Assyrian characters” (*γράματτα* […] *Ἀσσύρια*) and a version in Greek, listing the different peoples of his army.[63] Similarly, Ctesias – apud Diodorus of Sicily – describes the monumental inscriptions at Bīsotūn, ascribed to the Assyrian queen Semiramis, as being engraved in “Syriac letters” (*Συρίοις γράμμασιν*).[64] This amalgam may explain the curious observation by Ammianus

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[59] The Abbé Barthélémy, who followed Hyde in this hypothesis, was namely encouraged by Epiphanius’ observation concerning the Persians’ use of the Palmyrene script, Barthélémy 1759, 588-589.

[60] Dodge 1970, I, 24.

[61] On the interchangeability of these two terms in Greek historiography, see Schmitt 1992, 21-22.

[62] This was first suggested by Münter 1818, 93-94; see also Quatremère 1835, 126-127. Perhaps this amalgam played a part in the fact that cuneiform-inscribed monuments were ascribed to Assyrian rulers. For a full overview of the occurrence of the phrase *Ἀσσύρια γράματτα* and its variants in Classical historiography, and a study of what Greek historians meant by it, see Schmitt 1992.

[63] Herodotus, *The Histories*, IV.87; Godley 1982, 288-291.

[64] [Ctesias in] Diodorus of Sicily, *Bibliotheca Historica*, II.13; Oldfather, 1946, 390-393. On the other hand, Strabo’s sources, which seem to have been particularly reliable, apparently distinguish between a “Persian” script and a “Syriac” one. In his *Geography* Strabo – citing Onesikritos – reports the content of Darius’ funerary inscription with surprising accuracy, recording the description of the Achaemenid king’s declaration of his royal qualities, namely his horsemanship and skill at archery as well as his loyalty to his friends. The inscription is said to be bilingual, with one version in Greek and the other in “Persian”. Strabo does not clarify what characters either of these versions is engraved in, but in his description – after Aristoboulos – of Cyrus’ tomb at Pasargadae and the bilingual inscription purportedly engraved on it, he reports that one version was engraved in Greek but written in Persian letters, while the other was in Persian. The notion put forward here that Greek could be written in a different, local, alphabet is particularly striking. In his description of Cilicia, the same author records – again after Aristoboulos – that the tomb of the Assyrian King Sardanapallus was engraved with

Marcellinus that before Alexander gave Greek names to the cities of Persia these bore local names in the "Assyrian tongue".[65] Very much in the same way that the term "Assyrian" became a *pars pro toto* designation of the different cuneiform scripts – which must have been striking to Greek travelers just as it fascinated early European travelers to Persia – it is possible that in the works of some Late Antique historiographers 'Syriac' was a rather all-encompassing designation.

II. Persian scripts and Sasanian inscriptions in Arabo-Persian chronicles.

The languages of Persia in the Kitāb al-Fihrist.

Much more detailed accounts of the different languages spoken within the borders of the Sasanian empire and in particular the scripts used to transcribe the (Middle) Persian language are recorded in Arabo-Persian chronicles dating from the early centuries after the fall of the Sasanian empire. Nevertheless, although the chroniclers were in some cases of Iranian origin and well-acquainted with Middle Persian, the information contained in their testimonies is not always easy to interpret. The oldest account of the different languages and writing systems of Iran is found in al-Nadīm's *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, a bibliographer and copyist from Baghdad.[66] In the introduction to his work, he expresses his intention to produce a catalogue of all the books and papers written in Arabic available in his time, including the works of foreign peoples that were later translated in Arabic, promising to describe and record the different original scripts of their authors. The passage concerning the languages and writings of the Persians is composed after the testimony of an earlier chancery secretary, the Persian-born al-Muqaffa',known for his Arabic translations of Middle Persian texts and in particular the *Xwadāy Nāmag*.[67] Al-Muqaffa' died in 757 CE, making it possible to date his testimony to the very early Islamic period. He describes the idiom called *pārsi* as comprising a set of five languages: *pahlavi*, spoken in 'Fahlah' (Esfahān, Rey, Hamadān, Nihāvand and Azerbaïjan); *dari*, the language of the court (*dar*); *pārsi* itself, the language of the Zoroastrian priests and

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an inscription in "Syriac" characters. Strabo, *Geography*, XV.3.7-8 and XIV.5.9; Jones 1982-1989, VII, 164-169 and VI, 340-341.

[65] Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res gestae*, XIV.8.6; Rolfe 1982-1986, I, 68-69.

[66] Dodge 1970, I.

[67] Dodge 1970, I, 24; on al-Muqaffa', see Latham 1997 and for his translations of Middle Persian works and especially the *Xwadāy Nāmag*, see Hämeen-Anttila 2018, 89-99, 128-130.

other learned men; *xuzi* that of the kings and nobles when they spoke in private and finally *soryāni* the idiom of the people of Sawād. He adds, as was mentioned above, that a "sort of *soryāni-pārsi*" was used for correspondence. Very similar accounts can be found in other authors such as Xwārizmī's *Mafātīh al-'ulūm* and Yāqūt's *Mu'ǰam al-buldān*, albeit with small variations,[68] and Gilbert Lazard, who dedicated an exhaustive discussion of this description of the linguistic landscape of pre-Islamic Iran, has shown that these two latter accounts most probably stem from the older passage by al-Muqaffa'.[69] As Lazard observes, the neat, symmetrical repartition of the languages across both the regions of the empire and the social classes of Persian society make it a very suspicious description. Nevertheless, attempts have been made to determine what idioms each of these names represented. The term "*soryāni*" can relatively safely be equated with Syriac/Aramaic, while it has been suggested by Spuler that "*xuzi"*, the tongue of the royal family when speaking in private, could be a reference to Elamite.[70] This hypothesis is entertained by Lazard but the sudden reference to a language used specifically in the context of the Persepolis administration in the Achaemenid period seems very difficult to support. Concerning the three languages *pārsi*, *pahlavi* and *dari*, Lazard's study demonstrates that equating one name to a specific language or dialect is overly simplistic, and that the meaning of each given term evolved, designating something different depending on the context and period it was used in. Namely, if etymologically speaking the term Pahlavi refers to Parthian, it is used in the Islamic period to describe both spoken and written Middle Persian. Lazard explains this shift by showing that the term gradually came to mean "all things old and noble" becoming an adjective applied to many aspects of culture: in Ferdowsi's epic it qualifies heroes, their body and their arms, evoking their bravery, moral code and the richness of their attire.[71] In other words, it encompasses the general idea of Iranian antiquity, a noble time period, as well as the notion of "Iranian origin". In this respect, Middle Persian is simply the language of "ancient times". Similarly, whereas in Middle Persian manuscripts written Middle Persian itself is called "*pārsīg*", in the passage described above it refers to the spoken tongue.

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[68] For instance, *pārsi* is, as well as being the language of the Zoroastrian priesthood, is also said to be the language particular to the region of Fars while *soriyāni* is equated with 'Nabatean'.

[69] Lazard 1971, 362-363 and Lazard 1995, 141-148.

[70] Spuler 1952, 243 and Lazard 1971, 363.

[71] Lazard 1971, 380 and Lazard 1995, 89-105.

The seven scripts of the Persians according to Ibn al-Muqaffa'.

Following this passage is a section dedicated to the various writing systems of different peoples. It begins with a praise of the best Arabic calligraphers, copyists of the *Qur'ān* as well as book binders and al-Nadīm likens bad handwriting to a 'disease' and 'sterility' of culture; he gives a symbolic interpretation of the Arabic alphabet and writing system (already mentioned above) in which the number of letters, its rules of ligature and declensions are given cosmological correspondences.[72] The author then moves on to the Syriac alphabet, certain features of which will be used to explain the Middle Persian one.[73] The "Nabatean" dialect of Syriac is said to be the original language spoken by God to Adam and that used by the people of Bābil, later becoming corrupt and giving the Syriac known in his time. Al-Nadīm records that while some say that the Syriac alphabet used in Christian texts was taught to Adam directly by an angel, others describe the Syriac script as the product of a deliberation among scholars: here, the chronicler's anonymous source observes that this is the case with other writing systems too. The chronicler finally describes three types of Syriac scripts, of which *estrangelo* is said to be the finest and the best.

The Persian script(s) is (are) treated at significantly greater length.[74] At several intervals, the chronicler alludes to the testimony of a "priest", suggesting he collected his information (partly) from a member of the Zoroastrian clergy.[75] Two mythological Persian kings are alternatively given as its forebear, Biwarasp and Jamšīd. The latter is said to have learned writing from the Devil, whom he subjugated and forced to reveal his secrets.[76] The diffusion of writing in Persia however is ascribed to Zoroaster, the "lord of the law of the Magi", who spread his gospel in a multi-lingual book.[77] Al-Nadīm then describes a mosaic of seven different Persian scripts, again after al-Muqaffa', which more or less corresponds to the latter's account of the multi-lingual landscape of Iran, where each idiom fills a specific social-

[72] Dodge 1970, I, 18-22.

[73] Dodge 1970, I, 22.

[74] This passage is also discussed in Tafazzolī 1993.

[75] Dodge 1970, I, 22-27.

[76] This legend, including the idea that the Persians have seven scripts, is recorded in a Middle Persian text known as the *Dādestān ī Mēnōg ī Xrad*, 27, 23, Anklesaria 1913, 59. For a commentary on this tradition, see de Jong 2009.

[77] Remarkably, this appears to be an oblique description of the practice, in Zoroastrian manuscripts, of articulating Avestan passages with interlinear Zand (Middle Persian) translations and commentary – both made up the revelation.

geographic role. The chronicler even provides a sample for each script, although only five survive in the manuscript. The first script discussed is the writing of/for religion "*dīn dabīrīyah*", a name apparently containing the Middle Persian term *dēn*, "religion". The promised sample is lost, but it is tempting here to see an allusion to Avestan: it is said to be the special prerogative of the *al-wastā*/*al-wastāq*, which is probably a garbled rendering of the term "*abestāg*".[78] The second script mentioned is a mysterious "cosmogonical" writing: with as many letters as there are days of the year, it is said to have been used to describe all the phenomena of the world, from natural, physical realities like the sound of water, to physiognomy and expressions ("the beckoning of the eyes"), as well as more elusive experiences such as the ringing of the ears. Even in the chronicler's own time this script seems to have had a legendary quality: the priest Amād himself admits that all this science was translated into Arabic and that no example of the alphabet survived. The next two scripts are closely related in form – both comprise 28 letters – and name: the *kašteh* and *nim-kašteh*.[79] The first was specifically employed for economic transactions and legal documents, and also engraved on seals, coins and other objects. The sample provided features certain recognisable letters of the Middle Persian alphabet, such as a cursive *mem* and a*lef* as well as a lapidary style *dalet* although the orientation of the characters is confused. Its variant, the *nim-kašteh*, was used to write scientific treaties: here again it is possible to discern in the drawn example several characters belonging to cursive Middle Persian, such as the attached *āleph-nūn* pair with all the variant readings that this graphic unit offers. The *nim-kašteh* script is differentiated from the seventh and last alphabet of the Persians, the *rās saharayah*, also used to write treaties of philosophy and logic but comprising 24 letters as well as dots. The fourth type of writing ascribed to the Persians is the "royal writing" or *šāh dabīrīyah*, which died with the Sasanian monarchy: it was secret and used only for royal correspondence. This particular script is differentiated from yet another, the *zār* ("court"?) *saharayah*, also exclusively used in the context of confidential royal correspondence but to communicate with foreign nations. The promised sample has not survived, but Ibn al-Muqaffa' reports that the alphabet was composed of 40 letters, adding that each character corresponded to a definite sound and contained no "Nabatean" words: the observation concerning the phonetic value of characters indicates that

[78] Dodge however translates *al-wastā* "by religious devotees" Dodge 1970, I, 24, 47; see also Tafazzolī 1993.

[79] It is exceedingly difficult to decide what Persian words these appellations stood for; still, it is worth noting that the adjective *šekasteh* 'broken' describes certain styles of modern Persian calligraphy such as *šekasteh nastaliq*, a modified form of *nastaliq*.

the chronicler was aware of the fact that in the other Persian scripts graphemes could represent different phonemes, while the reference to "Nabatean" words seems again to allude to the Middle Persian heterographic writing system. The last Persian script mentioned in this account is the *rasā'il* script, a term meaning "missives" in Arabic, and a possible reference to its specialised function as an "epistolary" form of writing. The use of this style for correspondence and other manuscript documents – as opposed to epigraphy – is further suggested by its Persian name, *nāmeh dabīrīyah*, "book" or "letter/document" writing. According to the chronicler it is also sometimes called *hām dabīrīyah*, perhaps an allusion to its widespread use: in marked contrast to both the *šāh dabīrīyah* and the *zār saharayah* described above, both also reserved for correspondence but in the context of the court, *rasā'il* is said to have been employed by all classes except for the king. Ibn al-Muqaffa' reports that this script is written "just as the tongue speaks" and is devoid of any diacritic signs, observations that probably aim to illustrate a highly cursive form, written fast and with no ornamentation.[80] The chronicler adds a final, striking piece of information concerning *rasā'il* writing: it includes Syriac words belonging to the original dialect of Bābil. The few strokes in the sample of this script as it survives are suggestive of highly cursive Middle Persian as it is known from manuscript documents such as those in the Tabaristān archive, redacted in a highly cursive, stenographic-like style:[81] it features what could be an *alef*, and highly cursive *yod*, *kaf* and/or *gimel* characters as well as an imitation of linked Middle Persian cursive letters.

rawārašn spelling: an explanation of the Middle Persian heterographic writing system.

Al-Nadīm's account of the seven Persian scripts closes with an addendum concerning what the author calls a special 'spelling' used in Middle Persian. This convention, he notes, is known as *rawārašn* and can be written both with "connected" and "unconnected" letters. This observation indicates that the chronicler considers attaching letters in Middle Persian as a stylistic choice, and also that *rawārašn* was not thought of as a style but belonged in different graphic registers. He estimates that about a thousand words were concerned by this special spelling. These, he continues, are used to describe "things that are similar", which introduces the notion of a synonym-like quality of the *rawārašn* terms. The author then provides a very

[80] It is unlikely that by the expression "as the tongue speaks" the chronicler is suggesting that this particular form was read exclusively phonetically: he develops the notion of phonetic vs. heterographic writing in his explanation of arameograms.

[81] See for instance the manuscript documents published in Gyselen 2016, 121-192.

clear example of *rawārašn* with the Middle Persian terms for "meat" and "bread": he explains that these two words are respectively spelled "*basarā*" and "*lahumā*" in their written form – a sample of each of which he provides in his text – but read out as "*gušt*" and "*nān*". Not only is this account essentially correct, but the chronicler's rendering of the terms' respective arameographic forms is also impressively accurate. The term "*nān*" is indeed written with the form LHMA and the drawing of the heterogram is perfect. His explanation of Middle Persian *gōšt* is slightly corrupted but still evidently inspired by a direct example. The arameogram for this term is recorded as BSLYA, although, since 'r' and 'l' are virtually interchangeable in Middle Persian, the chronicler is very close. His rendering of the heterogram is a little more confused, although the initial *bet*, *resh* and final *alef* are discernable. He concludes by observing that *rawārašn* can be used for any word in Persian that needs a substitution while those that do not require an alternative spelling are "written as they are pronounced". This extraordinary passage is an informed description of the use of heterograms in Middle Persian writing. The term *rawārašn*, although it was somewhat mangled in the Arabic manuscript transmission, is itself a remarkable survival of the technical term which described the practice of using heterographic writing: *huzwāreš*.[82] In particular, the differentiation made between the written form and the spoken word, and again the possibility of choosing to write an arameographic form – for clarification – or a phonetic spelling are all notions that were not thoroughly grasped by European scholars until the nineteenth century, such accounts were crucial in consolidating the understanding of the heterographic writing system. In addition, the author's reference to a set number of words – a symbolic thousand – points to the notion of a glossary of arameograms: an example of such a text has indeed been preserved and is known as the *Frahang ī Pahlāwīg*; it includes both terms used in the chronicler's demonstration.[83]

***Assessing Ibn al-Muqaffa'**'s account of the different scripts of the Persians.*

It would be meaningless to attempt a forced rationalization of this account and find, based on the paleographic descriptions it provides, an instance of each "script" in the Middle Persian epigraphic and manuscript material that has survived: the magic number seven making up the

[82] See Sunderman 1985, 107, n. 34. On the term *huzwāreš*, see Durkin-Meisterernst 2004. I also thank Milad Abedi (pers. com.) for pointing out to me that because Arabic manuscripts do not always use diacritics or dots – which would, namely, differentiate 'r' and 'z' – perhaps the word recorded by al-Nadīm ought to be read *zawārašn* rather than *rawārašn*, making it even closer to the original Middle Persian term.

[83] Nyberg [Utas] 1988.

set of Persian scripts as well as the overlap in the functions of several of the writing systems and the extreme specialisation of others warns against this. Nevertheless, several important aspects help paint the graphic landscape of Middle Persian as these chroniclers encountered it. First, the passage tellingly describes the seven forms of writing as variant Persian scripts rather than different alphabets used to transcribe the many languages spoken in the Persian empire. The use of these scripts or "styles" is described as depending on the context of writing or the form of the support: royal or not, sigillographic, numismatic, manuscript/epistolary. The use of diacritics (dots) is also clearly documented and considered as forming a separate style, perhaps explaining the existence of the two alphabets for writing scientific works. Most importantly, the account testifies to the synchronic use of the different styles, with only the royal scripts being discontinued with the collapse of the sphere which they belonged to. In this respect it is tempting to associate – as did Quatremère – the first script described in the passage, *kašteh*, with the stylised alphabet of Sasanian glyptic and numismatics.[84] The original Persian name behind the arabised form is difficult to identify, but both the paleographic description and the written sample associate it with the simplified monumental Middle Persian script known from Sasanian seals and coins. The fact that the second script – apparently a more cursive form based on the drawing – is referred to as *nim-kašteh* would suggest that the term *kašteh* may have designated a paleographic quality, for instance that of being "attached/detached" or "ornate": in this respect it is worth noting that the chronicler specifically comments on the possibility of writing arameograms in both a "connected" and "unconnected" fashion.

The phonetic alphabets of the Zoroastrians and Zoroastrian exegesis according to Mas'udi.

The languages and scripts of Persia are also treated in the works of the Arabic – and also Baghdad-born – geographer and historian Mas'udi, roughly contemporary to al-Nadīm. Of the numerous works which he wrote, only two can be confidently ascribed to him, the *Murūj al-ḏahab* and the *Kitāb al-Tanbīh,* the first of which is dated to 943-944 CE. Two chapters of his *Murūj* are dedicated to the history of the Persian empire from *Gayōmart* all the way to the end of the Sasanian dynasty.[85] The historian first mentions a Persian script in direct connection with the advent of the 'prophet' Zoroaster, a native of Azerbaijan who is said to have "brought" a

[84] Quatremère 1835, 416.

[85] Barbier de Meynard and Pavet de Courteille 1862-1877, II, 21 and 23, 95-105 and 132-138; for recent translation of this passage in English, see Hoyland 2018, 79-105.

book containing his gospel to the Zoroastrians (*majūs*) in the time of king Gushtasp: this book, Mas'udi reports, is commonly called "*zamzamah*" or "murmurings" – the Zoroastrian priests were perceived as "mumbling" their liturgies – but really named the "Avesta" (*bistah*), and written in an alphabet containing 60 letters. Zoroaster's followers could not understand the language of the religious texts, so he added a commentary to the liturgies, known as *zand*, as well as a commentary of the commentary, called *Pazand*.[86] This exegesis includes yet another stratum: after Zoroaster's death, the religious experts composed glosses and explanations of both levels of commentaries, which form a unit referred to as the *baridah*.[87] The Avesta is said to comprise twelve thousand volumes written in golden lettering: Mas'udi adds that the liturgies were too long to be remembered in their entirety so that when these are recited, a first priest chants a first section, then a second priest continues the recitation and so on. The Arabic historian's relatively fine understanding of the exegetical process as well as his keen observations concerning the recitation of liturgies during rituals – although of course the question–and–answer structure of the performance has nothing to do with the Zoroastrian priests' poor memory – indicates that his account is based on first-hand evidence. The historian's description of the Avestan alphabet also, although the number of letters is rounded up to the higher decimal is surprisingly accurate. This account is related to an analogous passage in the *Tanbīh*.[88] Here, the core liturgical material – the part unintelligible to the Persians – is described as being written on 12000 skins, corresponding to the 12000 volumes evoked in the *Murūj*. Mas'udi also observes that the book is composed of 21 chapters, which seems to be a reference to the 21 Nasks or books. He records the names of the most commonly recited "sections" and it is easy to discern in these the titles of the main Avestan liturgies such as the *Abān yašt*. The alphabet of the Avesta is again said to comprise 60 vowels and consonants, and Mas'udi adds that a distinct grapheme is attributed to each of these. Some of the letters from this alphabet, he continues, are found elsewhere – could the Middle Persian alphabet be meant here? – while others have fallen into disuse. The invention of this writing system is attributed to Zoroaster and called *dīn dabīrah*, which the historian translates as "religious" or "holy" writing. This name corresponds exactly to that given in the *Kitāb al-Fihrist*; however both of

[86] Barbier de Meynard and Pavet de Courteille 1862-1877, II, 124-126. On the term *pazend*, see Lazard 1995, 133-140 and Azarnouche 2014.

[87] Barbier de Meynard and Pavet de Courteille suggested this may be a distortion of *Bundahišn*; see also Azarnouche 2014, 85-86.

[88] Carra de Vaux 1897, 131-134; see also Hoyland 2018, 87-89.

Mas‘udi accounts are consistent in giving the number of the script’s letters as 60 whereas Ibn al-Nadīm does not record it, which may be an indication that the former had access to information which the latter did not. The *Tanbīh* also credits Zoroaster with the invention of a second alphabet, called *kashan dabīrah* by Zoroastrian priests, which the Arabic historian translated as “universal” writing. This alphabet, which allowed one to put into writing the languages of all peoples, as well as the song of birds and cries of animals, is described as comprising 160 characters, each representing a different sound. This description is strongly reminiscent of the parallel passage in the *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, although in the latter the “universal” Persian alphabet is said to be composed of 365 graphemes, a more distinctly “cosmological” number. The name of this “universal” alphabet in the *Kitāb al-Fihrist* is transliterated as “*wach*” or “*wiš*”, while in Mas‘udi’s account the different manuscripts variously record the terms *kasan*, *kashat* and *kasab*: it is difficult to determine what Middle Persian word these terms transcribe.[89] These minor but core discrepancies may indicate, again, that the two accounts did not depend on the same source. The emphasis placed in the *Tanbīh* on the distinct phonetic value of each character is particularly noteworthy, suggesting that the author was aware of the phenomenon – particularly striking in cursive Middle Persian – of one grapheme corresponding to several phonemes; it may also indicate a certain understanding of the revolutionary redaction of the Avesta, which was entirely based on the phonetic value of each syllable to record the liturgies as (phonetically) accurately as possible: these were until late confined to the memory of priests and transmitted exclusively orally. The Arabic chronicler closes his account by expressing his admiration for these two scripts, remarking that no other writing system had more letters than these: to illustrate his claim he gives the examples of the Greek alphabet and its 24 letters as well as the 22 letters of the Syriac and Hebrew scripts, correctly recording the composition of each of these three writing systems. The *Tanbīh* adds that the Persians have five other writing systems, bringing the total of Persian scripts to the seven described in the *Kitāb al-Fihrist*. Although Mas‘udi does not describe these five other scripts in detail, he does observe that some of them contain “Nabatean” words: this possible reference to the arameographic writing system may indicate that Avestan was correctly understood, by contrast, not to use any heterograms.

[89] Although Dodge observes that *watch* is Arabic for “small”, Dodge 1970, 24, n. 48.

Ishodad of Merv's account of the Middle Persian heterographic writing system.

Before turning to the descriptions of Sasanian inscriptions and Sasanian inscribed objects in Arabo-Persian chronicles, a word must be said of another striking account of the Middle Persian heterographic writing system, recorded in a Syriac Christian text. Remarkably, the introduction to the *Commentary on the Genesis* by the ninth century Persian-born Bishop and theologian of the Church of the East Ishodad of Merv, indicates that some knowledge, albeit garbled, of the specificities of the Middle Persian writing system also made its way into Christian exegesis, several centuries after the fall of the Sasanian empire.[90]

Ishodad of Merv begins his *Commentary* by listing the different Greek and Syriac translations of the Hebrew Bible, and then provides an account of the invention of the Hebrew letters: these are said to have been created *ad hoc* by Moses to write the Laws dictated to him orally - through apparitions – by God. Ishodad then reports that just as Moses created the Hebrew alphabet, Solomon is said to have invented the letters of the alphabets of other nations, and in particular the Syriac. The case of the creation Persian writing system was a more complicated matter, however: it was the invention of a man called Nebo[91] who was originally from Mesene but brought up at the court of the king of Assyria. Most significantly, Nebo only created the Persian script[92] *after* having first learned Hebrew and Syriac. As a result, the Persian writing system is the hardest one of all, for one has to *think and write* in Mesenean but *read* in Persian. According to Ishodad, Nebo did this on purpose so that the Persians would not be able to claim being the sole inventors of their script and his labours would not fall into oblivion.

Scholars such as Franz Altheim and Ruth Stiehl, as well as Peter Coxon, have rightly identified this passage as describing the Middle Persian heterographic writing system, although they have reached different conclusions.[93] Altheim and Stiehl seem to have taken Ishodad of Merv's account quite literally, as a proof that Middle Persian heterography was an *ad hoc*, early

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[90] For a translation of the relevant passage, see van den Eynde 1955, 7, and Coxon 1970, 16-17; on Ishodad of Merv and his commentary of the Syriac Bible, see van den Eyde 1955, i-xxv.

[91] Nebo was the divine patron of writing in the Babylonian tradition which may explain his appearance here, van den Eynde 1955, 7-8, n. 8, and Coxon 1970, 19. For a different interpretation, see Altheim and Stiehl 1969, 31.

[92] In his translation of this passage, Peter Coxon translates the Syriac term *sipra* as 'language' rather than script; in his edition and translation of Ishodad's *Commentary on the Genesis*, Ceslas van den Eynde renders *sipra* by 'écriture' (script), which makes most sense in the context of this passage and which is the translation followed here.

[93] Altheim and Stiehl 1969, 31-32; Coxon 1970, 18.

Sasanian creation: Ardašīr must have conquered Mesene/Characene shortly before defeating the Parthian king Artabān and the invention of both Parthian and Middle Persian heterography can therefore be securely dated to the 220s CE.[94] Based on the script of the coins of Characene/Mesene, which they judge to be (near-)identical to the Mandaic script, Altheim and Stiehl also conclude that Parthian and Middle Persian heterograms must be Mandaic in origin.[95] Through a detailed comparative analysis of the Characenean (numismatic) script and Mandaic palaeography, Coxon rejected Altheim and Stiehl's conclusion that Mandaic was spoken in Mesene/Characene: all that can be said is that the language at Mesene/Characene was Aramaic; there is not enough evidence from Ishodad's passage to identify which type of Aramaic this was exactly.[96] Coxon is also critical of Altheim and Stiehl's view that Parthian and Middle Persian heterography was an *ad hoc*, politically motivated, invention rather than the result of a centuries' long process stemming from the time when Aramaic was the *lingua* (or *scriptio*) *franca* of the Achaemenid empire.[97]

The fifth chapter is dedicated to the history of the emergence of the Middle Persian heterographic writing system, and the debate concerning the formation of arameograms will not be dealt with further here. For the purposes of this first chapter, suffice is to highlight the importance of 'Mesenean' (Aramaic/Syriac) as a 'blue-print' for the Middle Persian writing system in Ishodad of Merv's account: this somewhat joins Mas'udi's observation that some of the scripts of the Persians contain 'Nabatean' words. Most striking perhaps is Ishodad's eloquent description of the discrepancy between what is written and what is pronounced/read in Middle Persian: although it is not as detailed as al-Nadīm description of *rawarašn*/*zawarašn* spelling, it nevertheless provides an accurate depiction of the use of heterography in practice. Crucially, the Aramaic elements in Middle Persian are not explained as loanwords so much as being an intrinsic part of the writing system: this distinction between writing system and language would not be fully grasped by western scholars working on Middle Persian until well into the nineteenth century.

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[94] Altheim and Stiehl 1969, 32.

[95] Altheim and Stiehl 1969, 30, 32.

[96] Coxon 1970, 18-19.

[97] Coxon 1970, 18.

Sasanian inscribed objects in Arabo-Persian chronicles from the early Islamic period.

Mas'udi's works describe a number of inscriptions on Sasanian objects and although these are for the most part fictitious, some examples testify to characteristic Sasanian epigraphic practice. Several passages of the *Murūj* namely refer to the use of engraved rings and seals by Sasanian kings: Wahram V is said to have worn on his finger a ring that bore the maxim "by (good) actions, great are the thoughts": while the phrase is reminiscent of the ubiquitous gnomic formulae known from Sasanian glyptic, this particular example also evokes the Zoroastrian triad of good behaviour "good thought, good actions, good words".[98] Husraw II for his part is said to have owned nine different seals, each used for a different purpose and in a different context, recalling the way in which the various Persian scripts are ascribed to a particular sphere of use. Thus, one seal, a ruby engraved with the king's portrait and titles, sealed his correspondence with foreign kings; another, a gold ring mounted with a carnelian gemstone bore the words "Khorasan Xureh" (Khorasan *xwarrah*?) and sealed the empire's archives; the seal for the postal network was an onyx depicting a horse in full gallop with a legend that – appropriately – read "celerity"; while a bezoar engraved with a fly was applied to the king's meals and medicines. Beyond the colourful literary character of this description, many of the engraved images described here are found in the Sasanian glyptic corpus and so are performative terms or formulae like "celerity" (although this particular term is not attested), while the association of the king's portrait with a legend containing his name and titles is reminiscent of Sasanian numismatics.[99] The passage also highlights important aspects of Sasanian sealing practice: beyond the expected use of seals for royal correspondence and in the field of law, the passage testifies to the protective quality of certain Sasanian seal engravings.[100]

Sasanian poems and the Arabo-Persian inscriptions of the tačara.

Similarly, Husraw I Anuširawān is said to have owned a gold table inlaid with gemstones and bearing a long inscription in verses engraved all around the tabletop's rim.[101] Here again the verses, although certainly spurious, recall the genre of Middle Persian 'wisdom sayings'

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[98] Avestan *humata hūxta huvaršta*, see Boyce 2004.

[99] For a discussion of the *formulae* engraved on Sasanian seals and their possible continued use in the Islamic period, see Gignoux and Kalus 1982.

[100] On magic seals from the Sasanian period see Gyselen 1995.

[101] Barbier de Meynard and Pavet de Courteille 1862-1877, II, 204.

(*andarz*), with the first maxim praising the well-earned meal and warning against wasting food. Mas‘udi describes Husraw as a good king, whose praise was sung by poets, and he records a few verses of such panegyrics: “Where did Anuširawān, best of kings go?” asks the poem, death did not spare him and his palace is deserted; “Where are the kings of old that the winds of East and West blew away?”, it laments again.[102] The chronicler explicitly says that these verses are taken from the Arabic Christian poet Adi ibn Zayd al-Ibadi, a secretary at the court of the son of Husraw, Hormizd IV (r. 579-590 CE). He similarly reports that the Nestorian priest and poet Waraqah Ibn Nawfal, who died in the early seventh century, wrote a poem about Hormizd IV himself, which continues the motif of the transience of human life and compares the Sasanian king to Solomon, taken away on the wings of the wind. Now, the poems cited from Sasanian sources by Mas‘udi are strongly reminiscent of a series of Arabo-Persian inscriptions engraved on the ruins of the *tačara* at Persepolis. Several take up the theme of the long-vanished rule of Husraw, which becomes an epitome for the evanescence of life, power and riches. A poem in both Arabic and Persian commissioned by the last Injuid ruler Sheikh Abu Ishaq (r. 1335-1357) from the famous calligrapher Yahya Jamali Sufi and engraved in exquisite Thuluth lettering on the ruins begins: “Where are the first great monarchs called Husraw? Their stores of treasures gone and themselves also”.[103] These lines are quoted again in another inscription at the *tačara* by the Timurid Sultan Ibrahim (r. 1415-1435). Melikian-Chirvani has noted that the couplet is taken from a poem by the ‘Abbasid poet al-Mutanabbi (915-965 CE), a contemporary of Mas‘udi.[104] These verses are combined in some inscriptions at the *tačara* with the second, closely related motif, evoked in Mas‘udi’s *Murūj* in relation to Hormizd IV: the poem engraved in different locations on the *tačara* proceeds to introduce the figure of Solomon, carried on the “wings of the wind” which finally took him away forever. In this way it would seem that this genuine Sasanian material, recorded in the Arabic chronicles became a set of motifs reworked and recombined in tenth century Arabo-Persian poetry that found its way onto the ruins of Persepolis when these vestiges crystallised a meditative nostalgia for Persia’s pre-Islamic past.

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[102] Free translation based on Barbier de Meynard and Pavet de Courteille 1862-1877, II, 204.

[103] Sharp’s translation in Mostafavi 1978, 225-226.

[104] Melikian-Chirvani 1971, 24.

The "Pahlavi" writings of "A Thousand Columns".

A passage of the *Murūj* suggests that Mas'udi visited the ruins of Persepolis: in a section dedicated to Fire temples he describes visiting a monument in the vicinity of Staxr that was still highly venerated by the Zoroastrian community.[105] He marvels at the proportions of the building and the beauty of its stone sculptures and attributes its transformation into a Fire Temple – from a temple previously dedicated to the idols – to the mythical Persian queen Homay. He records that in his time it was considered to be the ancient mosque of Solomon – indicating that the association of the site with this mythical king goes back at least to the tenth century – but makes no mention of the Old and Middle Persian inscriptions of the ruins. These are on the other hand mentioned in an anonymous Persian chronicle, the *Mojmal al-Tawārikh*, composed in the early 12th century.[106] It dedicates an extensive chapter to the ancient Persian kings, recording their exploits and often linking their mythical foundations to genuine archeological sites. Citing Tabari, it records that the Persian king Kay Kāwus employed the services of Solomon "king and prophet of Syria" to build extraordinary monuments in the province of Fars – for the latter had harnessed the power of the *devs*, capable of miraculous works – and namely the structure known as the "Throne of Solomon".[107] Although it would be safe to assume that Persepolis is meant here, from the rest of the passage it appears that the chronicle has conflated the sites of Persepolis and Tāq-e Bostān, a confusion which probably stems from the fact that many pre-Islamic ruins were attributed to Solomon in popular lore: the chronicler notes that this foundation story of the "Throne of Solomon" is refuted by Hamzah al-Isfahani, who observes that the sculptures of the building depict boars, a creature most despised by the Jews and therefore an unlikely iconographic choice for Solomon's architectural program. As Mohl has remarked, this seems to describe the Sasanian monuments of Tāq-e Bostān which represents a royal hunt featuring boars, an animal absent from the Persepolitan repertoire.[108] Continuing the description of the "Throne of Solomon", still according to the (unnamed) work of Hamzah al-Isfahani, the *Mojmal al-Tawārikh* adds that many Pahlavi inscriptions are engraved on its ruins, and that a Zoroastrian priest was once brought to the ruins, known as "A Thousand Columns" to decipher the ancient carvings: the *mōbad*, reading the inscriptions, reported that they recorded the building of the monument by the mythical king

[105] Barbier de Meynard and Pavet de Courteille 1862-1877, IV, 76-77.

[106] Najmabadi and Weber 2000.

[107] Najmabadi and Weber 2000, 40.

[108] Mohl 1841, 324, n. 1.

Jamšīd (and not Solomon) as well as the day and the month of its erection. The chronicler remarks that many more such Pahlavi inscriptions were engraved on the stones, but that, unable to read the ancient writings, he did not record their meaning.[109] Investigating Hamzah al-Isfahani's own – extant – historical works, it is difficult to identify what passage the Persian chronicle is alluding to. Indeed, if the *Annals* composed in the first half of the tenth century in Arabic by this Isfahan-born historian do ascribe the building of a "Thousand columns" to the Persian queen Homāy,[110] it makes no mention of any inscriptions.

Deciphering the "Pahlavi inscriptions" of "A Thousand Columns".

The episode of the Zoroastrian priest's purported reading of the "Pahlavi" writings on the ruins poses several questions. Despite the conflation between the sites of Tāq-e Bostān and Persepolis, and although both are engraved with Middle Persian inscriptions, it is safe to assume that the many "Pahlavi inscriptions" described in the anonymous chronicle after Hamzah al-Isfahani's account are those of Persepolis rather than of Tāq-e Bostān: the texts are said to be carved on "A thousand columns", a near-metonymic name particularly well suited to the Achaemenid ruins. What exactly was meant by "Pahlavi" is more difficult to determine: as Lazard's study highlighted, "Pahlavi" was applied to all things "Persian" and "old". Only two small Middle Persian inscriptions are engraved at Persepolis, rather lost among the ruins of the monumental terrace. The multitude of inscriptions described, as well as the utter helplessness expressed by the chronicler concerning their illegible characters may suggest that it is the much more numerous and otherworldly cuneiform inscriptions that are meant here. The summoning of the *mōbad* to read the carvings and the latter's interpretation of the old writings is particularly striking. Because of a slight ambiguity of formulation, the content of the inscriptions deciphered by the priest can be understood as being more or less historic or cosmogonic: he either determined that "the building was erected by Jamšīd, and in what year and in what month" (Mohl), or what "month and what day the creation of the world took place" (Quatremère).[111] Now, on either side of the Middle Persian inscriptions of the *tačara* are engraved two Kufic texts, commissioned by the Buyid ruler 'Aḍud al-Dawla in 955 and which relate exactly the same event [**Fig.1.1**]. The first text, placed directly adjacent to the Middle

[109] It is not always clear here whether it is the author of the Persian chronicle speaking, or whether he is still citing Hamzah al-Isfahani.

[110] Just as in the *Murūj* but unlike the twelfth century chronicle, who credits Solomon/Jamšīd with its erection.

[111] Compare Mohl 1841, 324-325 and Quatremère 1840, 406-407.

Persian inscriptions on the doorway, declares that the Buyid prince came to the ruins after a military victory and summoned a specialist to read the inscriptions; the second, located on a nearby windowpane, confirms that a *mōbad* from Kāzerūn came to the ruins and read the inscriptions—what he read however is not recorded in the memorandum.[112] Now, Hamzah al-Isfahani lived in the time of the Buyid ruler and dedicated an important work to him. We may speculate that the historian had firsthand information about ʻAḍud al-Dawla's visit to Persepolis as well as the episode of the Zoroastrian priest's purported decipherment of the enigmatic inscriptions. It is also possible that the historian traveled to Staxr, visited the Achaemenid monument after 955 CE and read the two inscriptions, left there by the Buyid ruler, which inspired his account of the event and which he supplemented with local legend. Finally, although it is fairly clear that the many "Pahlavi inscriptions" of "A Thousand Columns" recorded in the *Mojmal al-Tawārikh* are probably the cuneiform carvings, the fact that the Kufic inscriptions are placed directly adjacent to the Sasanian inscriptions may suggest that it was indeed the Middle Persian vestiges that interested the Buyid ruler and that he had had examined by the priest summoned from Kāzerūn. This may in turn suggest that the monumental Middle Persian script was still recognised as such in the tenth century. That it could not be deciphered, however, is fairly certain both from the fact that the Buyid inscriptions vaguely refer to the epigraphic vestiges as "the writings" and remain silent on their content, while the content of the "Pahlavi writings" reported by the Persian chronicle is completely spurious.

Sasanian inscribed monuments in Arabo-Persian chronicles from the early Islamic period. Other monuments purportedly engraved with Middle Persian inscriptions are mentioned in the Arabo-Persian chronicles of the Islamic period, and while some are evidently fabricated others were likely recorded from firsthand evidence. An example of the first instance is the series of epitaphs purportedly engraved on the tombs of Sasanian monarchs and recorded in Hamzah al-Isfahani's *Annals*. Like a number of Arabo-Persian chroniclers, the historian makes a detailed description of a "Book of Portraits" of the Sasanian kings, which contained a representation of the monarchs "as they were in the moment of death" accompanied by an account of their reigns. Masʻudi says he personally saw this work when he visited a noble Persian family in Staxr, and some have wanted to see in this "Book of portraits" the "Royal Annals" consulted by Agathias's

[112] Frye 1966.

friend, the Syriac interpreter Sergius.[113] The chroniclers describe at length the Sasanian rulers' robes and crown, but Hamzah al-Isfahani also unexpectedly includes a citation of the tomb inscriptions for the kings Wahrām IV, Wahrām V Gōr and Husraw I.[114] These epitaphs, which combine expected moralising themes such as the impartiality of death or again which ask the reader not to disturb the tomb – a familiar trope of ancient funerary inscriptions in general – are clearly the fruit of the author's imagination. Other passages recording Middle Persian epigraphic texts are, however, more credible. The Arabic geographer Ibn Hawqal, writing in 977 CE, mentions an inscription written in "Pahlavi" on a Fire temple located close to lake Jūr in Fars recording the sum of money – 30 000 000 silver coins – given for the construction of the sacred building.[115] Middle Persian inscriptions declaring the foundation of Fire temples have not survived as such but several aspects of this anecdote encapsulate fundamental religious and epigraphic practices characteristic of Sasanian Iran. The endowment of sacred Fires was made for the benefit of one's soul and such foundations (*ruwānagān*) were a key institution of Zoroastrian religious, economic and juridical life in the Sasanian period. It involved the donation of a sum of money or capital by the founder to provide for religious services or charitable works to be performed for the sake of his own soul and/or the soul of his relations.[116] Precise instructions for the allocation of the funds were delineated by the founder and written in manuscript contracts sealed according to strict protocol. There is evidence that the terms of the endowment could also be engraved in stone: this is illustrated most prominently by the second part of Šābuhr I's inscription at Naqš-e Rostam.[117] "Foundations for the soul" also included projects of public utility: the inscription commissioned by Mihr-Narseh inaugurating the bridge near Fīrūzābād – namely asking each passer-by to give a blessing to the endower and his children – is often evoked as an example of a memento marking such a

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[113] Carra de Vaux 1897, 150-151; Hoyland 2018, 102-103; although see Hämeen-Anttila 2018, 36-37, 234-236, also with an English translation of this passage.

[114] Daudpota 1932, 100-105; for a recent translation of the section dedicated to the Sasanian 'Book of portraits' in Hamza al-Isfahani, see Hoyland 2018, 62-77.

[115] Kramers and Wiet 2001, II, 270; this passage is cited in Quatremère 1840, 407. This description recalls a passage in the work of his predecessor *al-Istakhri*, who mentions an inscription engraved on a Fire temple in the vicinity of Fīrūzābād: although he does not clarify what language it was written in, it is likely to have been Middle Persian, see Engeskau 2020, 180.

[116] Macuch 1991.

[117] Huyse 1999a.

charitable foundation.[118] It is likely that when authors from the early Islamic period like al-Isfahani and al-Muqaddasi mention inscriptions on bridges, statues or cities, they are describing Middle Persian inscriptions works commissioned by Zoroastrians in the context of the institution of *ruwānagān*.

The Zartošt Nāmeh and the shift from the Middle Persian to the New Persian script.

Knowledge and use of Middle Persian did not immediately disappear with the Arabic conquest of Persia: the post-Sasanian Tabaristān archive shows that a highly cursive form of Middle Persian continued to be used on a daily basis for redacting contracts and other economic transactions, while the seals these documents are stamped with display the early semi-monumental Middle Persian typical of the glyptic and numismatic registers, showing a remarkable continuity of this style throughout the Sasanian period. Nevertheless, the 9th and 10th centuries CE were the period that saw the adaptation of the Arabic script to the Persian language.[119] The earliest known manuscript in Persian redacted in a variation of the Arabic alphabet is a compendium of pharmacology known as the *Kitāb al-Abnīya*; the manuscript dates from the early 11th century but is a copy of an original probably written a century earlier.[120] The prologue of the *Zartošt Nāmeh*, the oldest extant Zoroastrian text written in Persian and thought by some scholars to have been composed as early as the second half of the 10th century CE, describes the shift from the Middle Persian to the New Persian script.[121] The author explains the premise for his composition as follows: a *mōbad* asked him to record the ancient stories recorded in his work because these were written in a script – Middle Persian – which no one could read any more and were gradually being forgotten; he thus specifically encouraged him to put the religious epic poem into the beautiful "*dari*" language and writing. As Lazard observed, this passage would seem to suggest that, by the 10th century, Middle Persian was already virtually inaccessible to most, including members of the Zoroastrian community;[122] we may also consider however that this introductory anecdote is the author's claim to authenticity. Nevertheless, the use of Middle Persian did gradually become

[118] Henning 1954.

[119] For a description of the gradual introduction of the Arabic script in Iran in the aftermath of the economic 'boom' which this region witnessed in the wake of the growing cotton trade, see Bulliet 2009, 140-142.

[120] Paul 2000.

[121] *Zartošt Nāmeh*, v. 14-28; Rosenberg 1904, 2-4. The date of the composition of the *Zartošt Nāmeh* is much debated, however.

[122] Lazard 1971, 366.

circumscribed to the sphere of the Zoroastrian clergy, the members of which continued to copy Middle Persian religious manuscripts well after the fall of the Sasanian empire—and well beyond Iran. Indeed, it is among the Parsi community, the Zoroastrians who migrated and settled in India during the first centuries of Islam, that numerous Middle Persian manuscripts were kept and copied.[123] It is also from India and with the help of Parsi priests that Western scholarship first encountered and gained access to Middle Persian manuscript texts. The Arabic sources discussed in this chapter appear to have kept a faint trace – both in some of the writing samples and in the paleographic descriptions of a specifically 'royal' writing – of the existence of a monumental Middle Persian script. By contrast with cursive Middle Persian, however, the stylised lapidary script had completely fallen into disuse and its decipherment forgotten, explaining the unsuccessful attempts of experts of the Zoroastrian scriptures to read Middle Persian epigraphic vestiges. The rediscovery of inscriptional Middle Persian, as well as the role of manuscript Middle Persian in this rediscovery, is the subject of the following chapters.

[123] After their reintroduction to India from Iran.

Chapter 2

Rediscovering Persepolis and its inscriptions: early European travellers to Persia

I. When Čehelmenār becomes "Persepolis".

European diplomatic embassies, religious missions and travelling merchants in Persia.

In outlining the history of research concerning Middle Persian epigraphy, the first difficulty lies in choosing a starting point. The Buyid inscriptions of Persepolis show that Sasanian epigraphy attracted attention and attempts at interpretation soon after the fall of the Sasanian empire. Furthermore, although for many centuries they were not the subject of documentation and research as such, the epigraphic, sculptural and architectural vestiges of ancient Iran were given names, attributed with legends and even magical powers. These traditions not only form an integral part of the history of Achaemenid and Sasanian ruins and inscriptions but also influenced toponymy and inspired poetry, and continue to do so to this day: like natural features such as rivers and mountains, ruins and inscriptions and the stories attached to them shaped the living landscape of Iran.[124] Most importantly for the purposes of this study, local legends also had a direct impact on travellers' interpretation of the vestiges, influencing their reading of the inscriptions, including the versions in Greek, although this was an alphabet with which these adventurers – scholars in the case of many of them – were well acquainted. Nevertheless, in order to retrace the emergence of Middle Persian epigraphy as a discipline within the broader framework of ancient Iranian studies, this chapter will concentrate on the history of the first systematic recordings of Sasanian inscriptions by European travellers in the 17th and 18th centuries that began the long road to the decipherment of these epigraphic texts.[125]

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[124] See for instance toponyms such as *Ganjnāmeh*, *Naqš-e Rostam*, *Takht-e Jamšīd*, all directly derived from legends attributed to ancient Iranian vestiges.

[125] There exists an important literature on the more general history of European travellers' reports on Iran and its antiquities; some bibliographical references are given here, organized by theme. For a history of Early Modern European travellers' exploration of Persia, see Gabriel 1952; concerning the veritable fascination which the monuments of Persepolis in particular exercised on European travellers, photographers and archaeologists, see

A first aspect that this historiographical approach highlights is the central role played by the fascination of Western scholarship with the Achaemenid cuneiform inscriptions of Persepolis in the rediscovery of Middle Persian epigraphy: the recording of Sasanian inscriptions was, at first, only a by-product of excited travellers' drawings of the site's much more intriguing vestiges. Ironically, it was Silvestre de Sacy's decipherment of inscriptional Middle Persian that was to provide the key to the Old Persian script, in turn opening up the world of cuneiform writing to scholarship. In this respect, a fundamental turning point was the identification by early Spanish-Portuguese travellers of the sumptuous ruins of "Forty Columns" with the famous "Persepolis" of classical Greek historiography. This suggestion sparked the interest and imagination of Western scholarship. Čehelmenār was also a particularly attractive site for the purity of the nearby rivers and the bountiful orchards of the Marvdašt plain and was located just off a major axis between the port of Bandar Abbas on the Persian Gulf and the royal court of Esfahān via Shirāz. It soon became a favourite watering place for weary diplomatic embassies, religious missionaries and travelling merchants heading north from the port or south from the court and keen to see its legendary vestiges.

António de Gouveia (1575-1628), a friar of the Augustinian order and professor of Theology posted in the Portuguese colony of Goa, was chosen in 1601 by the king of Spain and Portugal Philip II to go to Persia, with a double mission: the first was the "spiritual conquest" of as many souls as possible and the second was to lead a diplomatic embassy to the Persian king Shah Abbas I (r. 1587-1629), with a view to signing a treaty of alliance against 'The Turk'.[126] His narrative illustrates the bitter rivalries between different Christian orders wanting to be picked for such a mission and more generally testifies to the fundamental role of religious bodies in international diplomatic relations: thus, apart from concluding a treaty, the embassy was to encourage the Safavid king not to make peace with the Ottomans, allowing the Portuguese to keep a privileged relationship with Persia, essential to furthering their commercial interests as well as their missionary ambitions in the East. It also highlights the strategic importance of the island of Hormuz: the Augustinians had a convent there, a definite

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Vuurman 2015; for a study of the descriptions and drawings of the ruins of Persepolis by Early Modern and Modern European travellers, see Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1989 as well as Sancisi-Weerdenburg and Drijvers 1991; for the history of the rediscovery of the archaeological site of Persepolis in particular, see Mousavi 2012; for Early European travellers' perceptions of Zoroastrians in the 17th and 18th centuries, see Firby 1988 as well as Ramble (forthcoming, d) "The rediscovery of the ancient Persians and their world view".

[126] de Gouveia 1646, 12-13.

advantage that led to the choice of their order for the mission.[127] In his description of the site of Čehelmenār, the Augustinian father draws attention to the strange inscriptions covering the ruins, observing that the curious characters were neither Persian, nor Arabic, nor Armenian nor Hebrew.[128] After local legend, he describes part of the structure as a "tomb", the construction of which was variously attributed to either Cyrus or Artaxerxes, declaring that it dwarfed in both size and beauty even the lavish Mausoleum of Halikarnassos that Artemisia II of Caria commissioned for her husband (and brother). He adds that the local inhabitants bitterly complained about the amount of attention that the ruins attracted from passers-by and travellers, even resolving to destroy the vestiges: these were so hard however that they resisted both fire and iron. This anecdote incidentally shows that the interest for Čehelmenār was not a phenomenon propelled by Western orientalism but well-established already.

Pyramidal characters and Chaldean mementos: the inscriptions of Persepolis.

Gouveia's description of the site is mentioned rather dismissively by another diplomat of King Philip II, García de Silva y Figueroa (1550-1624), but it was evidently the Augustinian priest's identification of "Forty columns" with an important Achaemenid site that decided him to make a detour by the ruins. Figueroa was commissioned to travel to Persia in 1614 to establish a crucial treaty of alliance guaranteeing the joint kingdoms of Spain and Portugal monopoly of the island of Hormuz and an exclusive relationship with Persia for the silk trade. Like Gouveia, Figueroa first sailed to Goa, only reaching the port of Bandar Abbas in 1617. He began his journey up north to Esfahān, but Shah Abbas, who had evidently changed his mind about his promise to the king of Spain, asked the frustrated and anxious ambassador to wait a further few months in Shirāz. Figueroa describes his detour via Persepolis as a near-chance event but his proposed etymology for the name of Shirāz – a deformation of 'Cyropolis' – is already preparing the reader for an excursion into Persia's glorious Achaemenid past.[129] On the eve of his departure from Shirāz the camels meant to carry the one hundred and fifty loads of pepper that were part of the embassy's gift to the Shah were delayed by several days: in his impatience, Figueroa decided to set off north, with only a "dervish" to serve as his guide. He travelled four miles north-east off the main road to the "illustrious ruins" of Čehelmenār, marvelling at the

[127] For a study of the Catholic missions to the East in the 17th century, see Alonso 1967; on the missions to Persia of the Portuguese Augustinians in particular, see Flannery 2013.

[128] de Gouveia 1646, 81.

[129] Figueroa 1667, 118.

lush and well-watered plains of "Margastan" surrounding the site. He took with him Diodorus of Sicily's account of the palaces and tombs of Persepolis, later admitting that Gouveia's "confused" description of the site had intrigued him, encouraging him to study the passages in classical historiography dedicated to the Achaemenid foundation and to come to investigate the great remains. Comparing the course of the river called Bradamir with that of the Araxes described by the Greek historian, Figueroa argues that they must be one and the same stretch of water: the latter was famously crossed by Alexander when he marched from Susa to Persepolis, and the ambassador concludes triumphantly that the ruins of Čehelmenār must be the old Achaemenid site.[130]

He embarks on an impassioned description of the monumental remains: the entrance portico is held up by two winged horses "with the pride of lions in their eyes" and the stone in which the exquisite sculptures are carved is said to be of such high polish that one could catch one's reflection in it. Figueroa also dedicates a substantial passage to the site's different epigraphical vestiges.[131] He first reports that some of the porticoes are engraved with inscriptions in unknown characters, entirely different and certainly more ancient than the Hebrew, Chaldean (Syriac), Arabic, Latin and Greek scripts. Examining these carefully, Figueroa notes that they are composed of different types of "pyramidal" elements, arranged in deliberate configurations that create distinct units. The ambassador then describes several small inscriptions in "Arabic, Armenian, Indian and Chaldean". The fact that the short texts were written in more or less recognizable alphabets and that they are less deeply engraved prompted Figueroa to observe that they must have been added at different points in history many centuries after the erection of the structure, at a time when it had become a "miraculous" ruin and a site of pilgrimage: he compares them to the mementoes carved on the walls of caravanserais or mosques by travellers and merchants wishing to leave a trace of their passage. It is noteworthy that the ambassador, without being equipped to decipher either the Old Persian or the other inscriptions engraved at Persepolis – there are no Indian inscriptions and the "Chaldean" characters are in fact Parthian and Middle Persian – was immediately able to recognize the epigraphical texts that were part of the architectural program of the site, and those that were added subsequently ("secondary inscriptions"). It is therefore only the "original" cuneiform

[130] Figueroa 1667, 141-143. For a detailed overview of the different passages in both Classical historiography and Early Modern European travellers' accounts which describe the Kur and Pulvār rivers (with the various names, including Bradamir, given to these stretches of water), see Duva 2018.

[131] Figueroa 1667, 158.

inscriptions of which Figueroa chose to have a careful drawing made, producing what is thought to be the first – and now lost – copy of the Persepolis cuneiform inscriptions brought back to Europe.

It was with great pomp that Figueroa wrote home to announce his discovery. Describing the monumental vestiges as far exceeding any other of the "world's miracles", marvelling at the size and beauty of the columns and sculptures that "shone" as if new, he cites the passages of the classical authors describing the location of Persepolis, which led him "by the hand" to the site. He includes a description of the cuneiform characters, adding a sample drawing of a wedged sign in the margin, the caption of which reads "inscription of unknown letters in fashion of a delta". This letter, originally written in Latin, made a great impression back in Europe and was translated only a few years later into English and included in Samuel Purchas' monumental collection of travel stories, the *Pilgrimes*, in itself a testimony to the growing popularity of travel literature in Europe **[Fig. 2.1]**.[132]

Epic journeys to the East and their heroes: the rise of travel literature in Europe.

Better copies of cuneiform inscriptions as well as further support for the Čehelmenār-Persepolis association reached Europe in the letters of Pietro della Valle (1586-1652), an extraordinary and eccentric personality and a precious source of information concerning the Near East – and Goa – in the early 17th century. A Roman aristocrat with a solid education in Classics and a devout Christian, he initially decided to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, setting off in 1614. Falling in love in Baghdad with Ma'ni, the daughter of a Nestorian Catholic (Church of the East), he married her, postponed his return to Europe and, emboldened by Shah Abbas I's religious tolerance, made plans to establish a colony of Church of the East Christians in Esfahān. When Ma'ni died several years later, pregnant with their first child, he decided to have her embalmed; hiding her corpse at the bottom of a trunk, he sailed home back to Italy to bury her in the family sepulchre in 1626, almost twelve years after leaving for his epic journey. His *Viaggi* are recorded in 36 long letters, most of which were published posthumously by four of the fourteen sons born from his marriage with Mariuccia, a young Georgian girl whom he had adopted with his first wife and brought back with him to Italy from Persia.

[132] Figueroa 1625, 1533-1535.

The fifteenth letter, sent from Shiraz and dated to October 1621 describes the Persepolitan ruins and its cuneiform inscriptions.[133] Again, della Valle's main reference for all things Persian are the classical authors. Thus, he notes that the Persians are excellent horsemen and, just as Xenophon describes in his Cyropaedia, they attach the horses' hind legs when they are kept in the stables to stop the animals from fighting.[134] The identification of the site of Čehelmenār with Persepolis is introduced as a fact, the ruins are the "illustrious" vestiges of the "ancient and superb" Persepolis which he had been eager to see, indicating that by 1621 already this idea had already been accepted in intellectual circles. He also identifies Persepolis with the Elymaïs of the first Book of the Macabees, reminding his readers that the term "Persepolis" itself was never the original name of the foundation, but one forged by the Greeks and "usurped" by the Latins, introducing a welcome – and rare – distance from classical historiography.[135] Della Valle then applies his observational skills to the vestiges. He decides that the figures carved on the Apadana represent a sacrificial procession because of the animals depicted in it: he notes that while sheep and bulls are a sacrificial animal common to all nations, horses are also known to have been sacrificed in Persia, which is probably an oblique reference to Arrian's description of the magi's sacrifice to the tomb of Cyrus.[136] He concludes that the entire structure was a temple, adding as further evidence that there are no remains of a vault covering the structure: the Greek historians regularly describe the Persians as sacrificing to their deities in the open.[137] His interpretations are, however, also tinged with local lore. Being short-sighted, he relied on his guides for the description of certain bas-reliefs: thus, he is told that the hovering figure in the winged disk represents a demon, and della Valle concludes that the king standing in front of the altar must be Jamšīd, based on the myth of the latter's subjugation of the *devs*.[138] The traveller even offers a popular etymology for the sorcerer-king's name, said in the Arabo-Persian sources to be formed on the term *xoršīd* (sun).[139]

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[133] della Valle 1745, V, 280-344; see also Gurney 1994. For a recent edition (in Italian) of Pietro della Valle's *Viaggio* to Persia and Persepolis, see Invernizzi 2001.

[134] della Valle 1745, V, 295-296.

[135] della Valle 1745, V, 312.

[136] For this much-discussed passage in Arrian (VI, 29.7), see most recently Panaino 2005.

[137] For a discussion of this *locus classicus*, see de Jong 1997, 127-129.

[138] He attempts to rationalize this however, proposing that Jamšīd may have historically been the Assyrian king Nebuchadnezzar whose dominion extended all the way to Persia, della Valle 1745, V, 334-335.

[139] On the name of Jamšīd see Skjærvø 2012.

His observations concerning the cuneiform inscriptions are particularly astute. Carefully examining the figures, he notes like Figueroa that it is the combination of the pyramidal elements that distinguish the different characters. He also proposes that the script must be written from left to right, like Latin and Greek, rather than from right to left like the Semitic scripts:[140] based on the orientation of the pyramidal elements, he brilliantly deduces that the latter follow the direction of the script, and his meticulous drawings of five cuneiform characters far exceed Figueroa's schematic sketch.

None of della Valle's works were published before Sir Thomas Herbert (1606-1682), an English courtier and historian in the reign of Charles I (1600-1649), set off for Persia from Dover on Good Friday 1626, and yet, he alludes in his *Travels* to the Roman aristocrat's description of Tabriz, testifying to the rapid circulation of ideas in Europe at that time. Herbert also cites Figueroa's account of Čehelmenār that was published in Purchas' *Pilgrimes* two decades earlier. His description of the "ribs and ruines" of Persepolis heavily draws on the Spanish diplomat's letter, sometimes paraphrasing whole sentences:[141] his hesitation concerning the style of the architecture – "Corinthian, Ionic, Doric or mixed" – echoes Figueroa's own musings, illustrating the extent to which contemporary travellers' accounts were emulated. Herbert took advantage of an English embassy sent to Shah Abbas I headed by Sir Robert Shirley, the architect of the flourishing English-Persian relations, and Shirley's counterpart the Persian ambassador Nuqd Ali Beg, although the latter committed suicide aboard their ship bound for India "having desperately poisoned himself for four days eating only opium" in fear of the Shah's reprisals for his "base misbehaviour" in England. The Persian ambassador is buried in Surat, and it is there that the British traveller first encountered a Zoroastrian community. Evidently well introduced in the Parsi community settled there, Herbert records astonishing (albeit warped) information, such as the departure of their ancestors from Persia on the death of the Sasanian King Yazdegerd – which he dates to 635 CE – as well as the name and genealogies of legendary Persian kings. He also records a story of the life of Zoroaster, the name of their "law-book" – "Zand-Avesta", divided into 21 parts – and reports that their Pope is referred to as a "distoore" and their priests as "herbood"s.[142] Herbert's travelogue includes English-Arabic-Persian lexicons, and he attempts an etymology for the name of Shiraz, which he suggests may derive either from the Persian term for "milk"

[140] della Valle 1745, V, 319-321.

[141] Herbert 1638, II, 143-146.

[142] Herbert 1638, I, 48-54.

(*šīr*) or the name of a particularly delicious date "sheerab", departing from Figueroa who saw in it a deformation of "Cyrus".[143] Nevertheless, like his predecessors, Herbert's understanding of Persian history and geography is firmly rooted in the classics, and he offers a detailed history of the strategic island of Hormuz – the "umbelick of the Gulf" – according to Roman authors.[144] Leaving India, the crew arrived at the Port of Gamrūn (Bandar Abbas), where they were retained for several weeks by the local sultan who refused to let them go until the "die is right", that is, until a suitably auspicious day; whether this reflected genuine concern for their welfare or was a ploy to delay their progress northwards to the king "solacing" by the Caspian Sea is less clear.

The chapter dedicated to Čehelmenār is directly entitled "Persepolis", although Herbert also equates the site with the Elymaïs from the Books of the Maccabees (Maccabees 6:1), probably in an oblique reference to della Valle's account.[145] His dramatic description of the ruins mingles awe and admiration and although it certainly reflected genuine fascination, it was clearly aimed at entertaining an English audience: seeing Persepolis, the "only brave antique-monument" in the whole of the Orient, would have been worth his efforts even if it had been a thousand times further off the road. The columns are said to "groan with the tyranny of time", and the traveller introduces a touch of nostalgia, invoking the reader's imagination when he observes that they once "stood in luster and perfection". The Gate of all Nations is further said to support a "monstrous" elephant and rhinoceros: his accompanying engraving offers a strange depiction of two pillars on which are perched an elephant and a rhinoceros, in itself an illustration of the mind's power to warp perception **[Fig. 2.2]**.[146] We also find the story – familiar from all the early travelogues – of Alexander setting fire to the ruins, an act of barbarity so unworthy of the Macedonian conqueror that it is ascribed to the prostitute Thais, who sought revenge for the Persian invasion of Athens: in Herbert's account, Alexander is described as trying to quench the flames with his tears.[147]

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[143] Herbert 1638, I, 133, see also 245-250.

[144] Herbert 1638, I, 113-119.

[145] Herbert 1638, II, 143.

[146] Herbert 1638, II, 145.

[147] On the archaeological testimonies for this literary *topos* of Classical historiography, see Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1993.

The "Antic Greek" inscriptions of Persepolis and Ardašīr as Alexander.

Coming to the inscriptions, Herbert describes a "mirror" of polished marble engraved with strange characters, "mystical" and "adverse to the intellect", conceding nevertheless that the figures are arranged with such symmetry and order that they could not "well be called barbarous": although these were "wrapped in the dim leaves of envious obscurity", there was no doubt that they concealed "some excellent matter".[148] Like della Valle and Figueroa before him, he could not ignore the deliberate character of the cuneiform shapes, immediately recognizing these to be a writing system rather than ornamental detail—a suggestion, tellingly, that would be made a century later by scholars examining the copies of these texts from the safety of their cabinets. Surprisingly, Herbert then adds that he thought some words resembled the "Antic Greek": although this could just be another trick of the mind, it may well be that the traveller saw the Greek legends of Naqš-e Rostam – which he proceeds to describe – and that the different inscriptions merged in his memory when he reworked his narrative.[149] Perhaps it is his glimpse of Greek inscriptions that prompted the English traveller to reject the local Persian tradition that associated the Sasanian bas-reliefs with the epic hero Rostam and to identify Alexander the Great instead in the monumental stone figures. Although he often dismisses their testimonies as fanciful, Herbert did make inquiries locally concerning the history of the ruins, recording that the "silly inhabitants" identify Jamšīd, Aaron, Samson and Solomon – "a wonder they leave out Rostam" – in the figure of the Achaemenid king engraved on the *tačara* and the *hadiš*, a structure which he suggests was a harem, a hypothesis that was to prevail well into the twentieth century.[150] Herbert's description closes with an explicit invitation to his readers to come and record the magnificent ruins: he deplores the damage done to the ruins by locals, who deface the stone and "cleave it asunder" to make tombstones and benches out of the carved blocks, estimating that a draft of "all the excellencies" offered by the ruins would take a "ready Lymmer" (a professional engraver) at least three months to execute.

Invitations au voyage: calling on professional draftsmen to record Persepolis.

A similar appeal to record the remains of Forty Columns is found in the travelogue of Johann Albrecht von Mandelslo (1616-1644). This German nobleman took advantage, very much like Herbert, of a diplomatic embassy sent in 1638 first to Moscow and then the Persian court by

[148] Herbert 1638, II, 146.

[149] Herbert 1638, II, 146.

[150] Herbert 1638, II, 146.

the Duke of Holstein-Gottorp; he was 22 years old. In the ambassadorial party was also the German geographer, mathematician and personal librarian of the Duke of Holstein, Adam Olearius (1616-1644), who published Mandelso's travels posthumously.[151] The party reached Esfahān coming down to Persia from the north through Tartary (Central Eurasia), following an entirely different route from the maritime one taken by Gouveia, della Valle and Herbert. Mandelslo decided to leave the Duke of Holstein's ambassadors after meeting a team of English merchants who, venting the wonders of India, excited his curiosity. He is described as "proudly" dismissing the generous allowance offered to him by the king of Persia for his journey, setting off on his horse "like a hero in a novel" with only a local Persian guide for companion, valiantly making his way down to the port of Hormozd despite a violent attack of dysentery and fever.[152] This dramatic prologue sets the tone for the rest of Mandelslo's travels, cast as an epic adventure – as those early travellers' journeys indeed were – contrasting starkly with de Gouveia's sober prose and cautious descriptions, and testifying to the emergence of the genre of travel literature: on his return trip to Europe his boat is caught in terrible storms and the young man escapes "miraculously"; again, he almost dies reaching the English coast. On his way down from Esfahān to the gulf, it would seem that Mandelslo took a slightly different route, and his account includes a description of Pasargadae, with a drawing of the tomb of "the mother of Solomon".[153] Passing through the Marvdašt plain, he explains feeling quite "obligated" to take a detour by the ruins, since "all those" who made the same journey have described them, and indeed in the passage dedicated to Persepolis we find many familiar motifs: the allusion to classical sources describing the site, the difficulty of determining whether the style of architecture is Doric, Ionic, Corinthian or mixed, the discussion concerning the identity of the figure above the tombs "adoring the sun" and fire, and the description of the "pyramidal" cuneiform characters resembling "neither Greek, nor Hebrew, nor Arabic" and yet not entirely "barbarous" in shape.[154] Mendelslo also remarks that the engraved characters are locally thought to have a "talismanic character" – echoing certain Arabo-Persian accounts that advocate the miraculous healing powers of the ruins, the stone of which, when ground to powder, is said to stop haemorrhages[155] – adding to the garb of mystery and fantasy that

[151] Mandelslo 1727.

[152] See the preface to the 1727 French edition of Mandelslo's travels by A. de Wicquefort.

[153] Mandelslo 1727, I, 8.

[154] Mandelslo 1727, I, 9-13.

[155] Mustawfī in Lestrange 1919, 119.

shrouded the ruins and their ancient writings. Like Herbert he expresses regret that the beauty of the plundered vestiges had not yet compelled an artist to come record them, estimating that the ruins would occupy a skilful painter at least six months. His concern for the conservation of the vestiges does not stop him from engraving his name on the site's stones however, beginning a long tradition of European travellers adding their name – sometimes with the date of their visit – next to that of their predecessors, evidently emulated by the trace of each other's presence, gradually transforming the site into an indelible visitor's book and contributing to its extraordinary epigraphic corpus.

Drafting Persepolis and its inscriptions: when the learned societies become involved.

The pointed *invitation au voyage* to come record the Persepolis ruins found in Herbert's and Mandelslo's accounts herald an important turning point in the history of the site and its inscriptions: European travellers began to travel to Persia to visit Čehelmenār specifically to draw the ruins and inscriptions of the site, against the backdrop of a race between European learned societies to be the first to publish complete engravings of the splendid vestiges. One such traveller was Samuel Flowers. This merchant and agent of the East India Company posted in Aleppo took it upon himself to go to Persia in November 1667, explicitly intending to etch Persepolis' "much-admired" ruins.[156] Significantly, Flower's decision was triggered by an "Enquiry for Persia" published in the *Philosophical Transactions* earlier that year. The periodical had been established in 1665 at the private initiative of the Royal Society's first secretary Henry Oldenburg, and most articles were "read before the Royal Society" before entering the printed volumes. It included a special section dedicated to "Enquiries" – presumably arising from meetings held at the Society – concerning a wide range of topics organised mainly according to geographic criteria **[Fig. 2.3]**. These took the form of more or less general questions about the geology, resources, and local practices of different peoples, evidently aimed both at furthering knowledge and gathering potentially lucrative information. Thus, that year, the editors printed such enquiries as "Whether it be true, that Diamonds and other Precious Stones, do grow again after three or four years, in the same places where they have been digged out?", clarifying that they had already received answers concerning India but

[156] See the second part of the article by see Wiesehöfer and Huyse (forthcoming), "Carsten Niebuhr and Antoine Isaac Silvestre de Sacy: How a keen observer and a gifted young scholar unravelled the secrets of Sasanian Naqš-e Rostam", in which Philip Huyse records some of the correspondence between Flower and the Royal Society.

wanted to receive further confirmation.[157] Preceding the general enquiries about Virginia and the Bermudas was a section dedicated to Persia. The questions, clearly geared to collecting useful information about Persian science and economy, betray a certain admiration for the country's savoir-faire and trade, as well as an obvious financial interest:[158] "What are chiefly the present studies of the Persians and what kind of learning they now excel in?"; "How they make that plaster wherewith in those parts and in India they line their Tanks or Cisterns, and which, when dry, shines like marble?"; "What other trades or practices, besides silk- and tapestry-making, they are skilled in?" The third enquiry concerns the ruins of Persepolis **[Fig. 2.4]**: "Whether, there being good descriptions in *words* of the excellent pictures and basse reliefs, that are about Persepolis at Chimilnar, yet none very particular; some may not be found sufficiently skilled in those parts, that might be engaged to make a draught of the place, and the stories there pictured and carved."

II. The first publication of Sasanian inscriptions in Europe.

The "very good friend" of Mr. Flower.

It is not clear whether answers to these enquiries were financially rewarded, but travellers' accounts deemed worthy were read in front of the members of the Society and printed in the periodical, bringing considerable prestige to their authors.[159] That the society was not eager to provide funding for hopeful travellers setting out to distant lands to answer the periodical's enquiries is evident from the letter-excerpt that accompanied Samuel Flower's copies of the Sasanian inscriptions of Persepolis. His drafts were sent to the Royal Society by an individual who only describes himself as "Mr. F. A. Esq." in a letter addressed directly to the publisher of the journal **[Fig. 2.5]**.[160] The latter explains in his missive that Flower's papers were put into his hands by a "very good" friend of his – again an unnamed individual – who retrieved them

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[157] *Philosophical Transactions* 1667, 420.

[158] *Philosophical Transactions* 1667, 420.

[159] It would appear that the Royal Society had originally offered to reimburse flower's expenses but then ordered him to stop his drawing work because of a lack of funding, see the second part of the article by see Wiesehöfer and Huyse (forthcoming), "Carsten Niebuhr and Antoine Isaac Silvestre de Sacy: How a keen observer and a gifted young scholar unravelled the secrets of Sasanian Naqš-e Rostam".

[160] Aston 1693, 775-777. It is likely to be Francis Aston, who was elected Fellow of the Royal Society in 1678 and served as Secretary of the Royal Society from 1681-1685. He was probably not himself an agent of the East India Company: his reference to "Our East-India Company" is most likely to be a turn of phrase.

after Flower's sudden death. He takes the opportunity to observe acidly that the Royal Society's enquiry had been formulated so as to casually suggest that a "summary delineation which might be performed by a man qualified in a few days" would suffice, thereby sparing them the expenses – "which you know they are never able to bear" – necessary to fund a prolonged stay: the truth is that Flower had spent much time and money at the site. Upon his death soon after his visit to Persepolis, the young man's drawings and notes were scattered, falling into different hands: the copies of inscriptions included with the missive were only a small part of his papers, while the rest, continues the author pointedly, was sure to be recovered in due time providing that John Chardin's forthcoming exhaustive publication of the ruins did not "put a period to all further curiosity". This extraordinary and almost ominous sentence closes the letter-excerpt and is immediately followed by Flower's copy of six inscriptions, which contained the first drawings of Sasanian inscriptions to reach Europe.

Flower's epigraphic samples: cuneiform as the writing of the Gaures and Parthian/Middle Persian as ancient Hebrew/Syriac.

The six epigraphic samples carefully drawn by Flower are neatly organised to fit onto a single page **[Fig. 2.6]**. The first two as well as the fourth are explicitly said to be copies of the inscriptions engraved on the bas-reliefs of Naqš-e Rostam, on the chests of the two horses mounted respectively by "Alexander and Rostam". The very first sample is evidently an approximate copy of the Parthian version of the label inscription on Ardašīr's horse, while the second reproduces with more precision the Greek version of the same text: these are the two first versions – from top to bottom – of the trilingual inscription, while the third, Middle Persian, version was either lost or not copied by the traveller. Concerning the Parthian lines, Flower remarks that the characters bear some resemblance to the ancient Hebrew but that the Persians consider it to be their own, despite the fact that they are not able to decipher a single letter of it. The fourth sample is actually bilingual, reproducing the Parthian and the Greek versions of the trilingual inscription engraved on the figure to the right of the same bas-relief: Flower's inclusion of both versions in a single sample may suggest that he had intuitively understood the different lines to be translations of the same text. He notes that it was engraved on "Rustam's horse", which indicates that the more senior figure of Ahura Mazda, with his archaising, Achaemenid-styled crown, was spontaneously associated with the epic hero while Alexander was identified in the 'earthlier' figure of Ardašīr. The identification of Alexander in the bas-relief is however surprising, and it is difficult to decide whether this is an interpretation

offered by the traveller himself, after Herbert's suggestion perhaps, or a local legend. In this respect, the influence of Herbert's hypothesis on local tradition may not be completely disregarded.[161] The third epigraphic sample is a piece of calligraphy, which Samuel Flower locates on the Persepolis platform and describes as being in "Arabick Persian" script. Although his approximate copy makes it difficult to determine which inscription exactly it is rendering, it is likely to be one of the Arabo-Persian inscriptions engraved on the ruins of the *tačara*. The traveller himself recognises that it is "little different" from the script used in Persia in his day and adds that the piece probably did not date back to more than 500 years, a generous but realistic estimation. Flower's fifth epigraphic sample was the most accurate draft of cuneiform characters to reach Europe following della Valle's earlier drawings, and although the Old Persian, Elamite and Babylonian characters are jumbled together, it is possible to read an Old Persian "a", "ra" and "sa" in the first three figures of his copy. The traveller describes this particular form of script as the being ancient writing of the "Gaures or Gabres", in other words the Zoroastrians, adding that it is only to be found at Persepolis and remains completely unintelligible to the local inhabitants. The attribution of the cuneiform script to Zoroastrians from times gone by is particularly noteworthy: whereas the otherworldly cuneiform writings are immediately linked to Persia's arcane Zoroastrian past, the Parthian and Middle Persian inscriptions are quickly dismissed as being "similar" to other already-known writing systems – or actually taken to be ancient Hebrew or ancient Syriac – and although local tradition firmly roots the Sasanian vestiges in Persian history, the special connection to Zoroastrianism is not emphasised. A short comment by the anonymous author of the cover letter follows. Possibly drawing on della Valle's careful analysis of the cuneiform script, he remarks that it is written from left to right and is composed of different pyramidal shapes. According to Herbert, he continues – thereby indicating that he was well acquainted with the most important accounts of the site's epigraphic vestiges – there were at least twenty lines of this script engraved on the ruins. He adds that Flower's papers included sheets with several lines of this type of writing, perhaps intimating that, should the Society be interested, he had more drawings to share with it. The last sample in Flower's copy reproduces an Arabic Kufic inscription and no doubt corresponds to one of the epigraphic texts commissioned by Buyid rulers at the *tačara*. Curiously, the traveller attributes it to the same period as the cuneiform inscriptions, perhaps

[161] Of course, Alexander certainly figures in the Persian national epic, and it is also possible that this tradition existed completely independently from the European travellers' interpretations, particularly as several of the bas-reliefs depict figures in foreign garb.

because of its angular style. We may also consider that the first Kufic inscription engraved on the doorjamb of the *tačara* is very deeply and symmetrically engraved, and its "official" aspect may have convinced Flower that it was commissioned at the time of the structure's erection. Nevertheless, the traveller also observes that the script bears "some affinity" with the Arabic and Syriac writing systems, thereby definitely setting it apart from the cuneiform writings. He also notes that "the padres pretend" to be able to read it: it may well be that to his informers at least the Kufic Buyid inscription was simply a difficultly legible Arabic text.

The curious manner in which Flower's copies reached the Royal Society, as well as the pointed allusion to Chardin's publication of the Persepolitan ruins in the letter, is linked to a contention concerning the authorship of the drafts. Indeed, Silvestre de Sacy, in his work on the Sasanian inscriptions of Naqš-e Rostam, highlights the exact conformity of the Greek and "oriental" inscriptions drawn by Flower and those later published in Chardin's travelogue – both samples present the exact same blanks and mistakes – and accuses Flower of copying the etchings commissioned by the French merchant.[162] The story of the first drafts of Sasanian inscriptions published in Europe is a remarkable and intricate one and several of its developments will be highlighted in the following pages.

Jean Chardin's first exhaustive publication of the ruins of Persepolis: contention over the authorship of Flower's epigraphic samples.

Jean Chardin (1643-1713) was from a wealthy Parisian Huguenot family who were jewellers by trade. He first set out for the East in 1664, at 22 years old, to conduct business in India on behalf of his father. On his return from India, he crossed Persia and remained there for six years, integrating the wealthy merchant community of Esfahān and even gaining access to the court, where he was officially named "Marchand du Roi de Perse" by Shah Abbas II. Returning to Paris in 1670, he soon became frustrated with his life in France, complaining that he was much restricted in his employments because of his religion, and he set off once again for the East a year later. Although the principal reasons he gives for travelling to Persia are his difficulties of conducting business freely in France – and his lucrative trading activities in the East – Chardin also expresses his intention to learn about all things Persian, professing to only record trustworthy information.[163] In his travelogue he often denounces the flaws and

[162] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 18-19.

[163] Chardin 1811, I, xxxviii; see also Emerson 1991. The history of the many editions (1686, 1711, 1771, etc.) of Chardin's *Voyages* is complex and fragmented; for convenience's sake, because of its accessibility, better

inaccuracies of previous accounts, namely concerning the site of Persepolis: he complains that the "extravagant" drawings by Struys do not represent the ruins at all and criticises the "famous" Figueroa for his description of certain bas-reliefs.[164] He also makes a point of learning Persian, which he claims to understand and to speak better than any of his predecessors. Chardin never returned to live in France; coming back to Europe in 1680, he spent the rest of his life in England. Days after his arrival in England, king Charles II knighted him, for reasons not entirely clear. Shortly afterwards Chardin was elected as fellow of the Royal Society in London and it was also in London that he published the account of his second travel to Persia, accompanied by an English translation. The Frenchman even became an agent of the British East India Company, representing it for some time in the Netherlands.

In the passage dedicated to the Persepolis ruins, Chardin clarifies that this was the third time he had come to the site, the first being in 1666, adding offhandedly that he had not been satisfied with his first painter's etchings of the ruins, and returned to the site with another draftsman in the following years.[165] The date that Chardin gives for his first journey to Persepolis of course corresponds exactly to the period when Flower himself spent some time at the site drawing the inscriptions, and it is possible that this observation made in passing is intended as an oblique allusion to the contention around the authorship of the copies published in the *Philosophical transactions*, clarifying that he was responsible for the identical drafts that were reprinted in his Atlas.

The "Syriac" characters engraved at Naqš-e Rostam.

Chardin like his peers expresses his wonder at the splendour of the ruins, although this admiration in his case takes the form of a certain denigration of the classical Mediterranean world. Thus, he acidly remarks that although the Greeks boasted inventing most of the arts and sciences, it is an honour that he would not give them so easily anymore, after travelling in the East; he similarly denounces the Greeks' mistake in calling the site "Persepolis", known locally

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readability, and the many useful (and historiographically interesting) annotations it contains by its editor Louis Langlès, I use the later 1811 edition here.

[164] Chardin 1811, VIII, 277. He namely points out that some of his predecessors – della Valle in particular – saw a "serpent" in the figure hovering above the fire altar and the king, whereas it represents a person in a winged disk. Remarkably, he tentatively suggests the relief may be a representation of the "soul", comparing it both to the way in which the hero's soul in Greek and Roman apotheosis is said to transported up into the sky by the smoke of the sacrifice, and to the metempsychosis of the Indians, Chardin 1811, VIII, 290-291.

[165] Chardin 1811, VIII, 242.

and by all only as Staxr.[166] Chardin is also particularly ready to record local legend as possible historical fact. He reports that some say the structure was built before the flood by the "giants" represented in the larger-than-life bas-reliefs on the ruins: he admits being surprised at the extraordinary scale of the ruins, considering that it is possible that some men may have been much larger in times past. He decides to investigate the problem scientifically however and has his servant – described as terrified – climb into the royal tombs of Naqš-e Rostam to measure the stone coffins: he is greatly relieved to see that these must have belonged to men that were not more than six feet tall.[167] Similarly, lured by the legends according to which the underground channels of the terrace hid extraordinary treasures, he resolves to explore these with his servants, leaving one man with a candle every fifty feet as they moved deeper into the labyrinth of passageways. According to Chardin, his servants eventually begin failing with fear and refuse to take a single step forward, despite his enticing promises of rich rewards – the traveller admits he is himself finally caught up by the horror of the place about which all manner of terrifying stories circulated and agrees to turn back, bitterly regretting not having gone as far into the channels as Pietro della Valle. Concerning the identity of the figures carved in the Sasanian bas-reliefs, which were variously said to represent the epic hero Rostam or Alexander the Great, Chardin proposes a new hypothesis, also no doubt derived from his Persian informants. Examining the bas-relief depicting Šābuhr's victory over the three Caesars, Chardin suggest the scene represents the victory of the Persians over the Indians: the Roman Caesars would be "humiliated Indians" at the mercy of the splendid Persian knight.[168] He adds that the relief is covered with characters that are entirely different from those engraved on the tomb façades, and resemble the Syriac script: this is the very first description of Kerdīr's great Middle Persian inscription on the relief.

The different alphabets of the Zoroastrians: comparing manuscripts and inscriptions.

Chardin is also the first to attempt a comparison between the "Zoroastrian" writings on the ruins and the manuscript "Zoroastrian alphabet" still in use by that community in 17th century Persia **[Fig. 2.7 and 2.8]**. The traveller notes that there are several different languages and

[166] Chardin 1811, VIII, 402.

[167] Chardin 1811, VIII, 351.

[168] This particular bas-relief attracted many interpretations. Jean Thévenot, a French traveller who visited the site only a decade earlier had proposed to see Rostam abducting a young woman, presumably in reference to the figure of Valerian depicting as being caught firmly by the arm by the Sasanian king, see Thévenot 1674, 287.

scripts to be seen on the ruins such as ancient Syriac, Greek and ancient Arabic.[169] These texts he suggests were commissioned by the various invaders of Persia: the ancient Syriac inscriptions he decides were carved by the Parthians and the Medes, the Greek texts by the Greeks and the ancient Arabic by the Arabs and the Tartars. The very idea that the Parthian and Middle Persian inscriptions, which he identifies like others before him as "ancient Syriac" probably based on the resemblance of Aramaic-derived scripts,[170] were commissioned by the Parthian rulers of Persia is remarkable.[171] This shrewd hypothesis may have played no small part in the Abbé Barthélémy's suggestion to date the Sasanian inscriptions to the Arsacid dynasty, later taken very seriously by Silvestre de Sacy in his work on deciphering these texts. By contrast, Chardin deems the cuneiform inscriptions to be the "original" writings of the structures: he argues like his predecessors that while the other later inscriptions are only etched and badly executed, the cuneiform characters are deeply engraved and present regular forms and proportions, testifying once again to the distinct aesthetic qualities of what we might call primary and secondary inscriptions.[172] He describes the cuneiform script as shaped by only two types of figures, one like a bracket and the other like a pyramid, drawn in different orientations – two for the first and six for the second – and combined in different ways: this, he warns, should not be an argument against considering the figures as being the characters of an alphabet, for our own letters he observes, are also based on two shapes only, the straight line and the curve; he further stresses that there is nothing confused or barbaric about this script. These observations suggest that objections to considering cuneiform as a writing system may have been in circulation in his time – they certainly were a century later – or that he was pre-empting criticism of his account. He further admits that it is impossible to understand whether this writing system contained vowels or not, a comment that suggests his familiarity with Semitic scripts.[173]

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[169] Chardin 1811, VIII, 319-320.

[170] Flower had proposed the characters were ancient Hebrew.

[171] Parthian history became widely explored and popularized in French theatre and music from the end of the 17th century onwards, in the works of playwrights such as Corneille and Racine for instance; this may partly explain that Chardin intuitively connected the unknown ancient writings to Parthian rather than Sasanian imperial history; I thank Albert de Jong for pointing this out to me.

[172] Chardin 1811, VIII, 320-324; on the articular of primary and secondary inscriptions in a given site, see Ramble (forthcoming, a), "Generations of writing: the secondary inscriptions of Persepolis".

[173] Remarkably, Chardin records noting some gilding in the grooves of the cuneiform characters, and as a professional jeweller is astonished to see how well the gold leaf survived, concluding that the quality of

Convinced that cuneiform was the script of the ancient Zoroastrians, Chardin is surprised that the Zoroastrians of his time, whom he considers as the "left-overs" of ancient Persia are unable to read the inscriptions. Even more astonishing he observes, is the fact that the characters used in the manuscripts of this community – an "old" alphabet belonging the "ancient Persians or Guèbres" – have nothing to do with those engraved on the Persepolitan ruins and resemble "our scripts" much more.[174] Chardin includes a copy of the alphabet in which the Zoroastrians' "Ritual" (texts) – which he records are called "Zend Pazend Avesta" – are redacted in, providing for each character the equivalent Persian-Arabic letter **[Fig. 2.7]**.[175] His table is overall a surprisingly accurate copy of the cursive Middle Persian alphabet, in terms of the letter-shapes as well as with respect to the New Persian correspondences given for each grapheme, and a testimony to Chardin's success in gathering indigenous material. If some of the characters belong to the Middle Persian alphabet rather than to the Avestan – the "š" and "f" for instance – Chardin's table includes letters specific to Avestan: the long "ā" spelled like a double *alef* is made to correspond to a Persian-Arabic *alef bā kolāh*, two different *mem* graphemes are provided (one with a cedilla) and the table includes an Avestan "e" drawn like a Greek epsilon described as equivalent to an *ain*. The traveller concludes that the cuneiform characters were either an ancient ceremonial script or were of unfathomable antiquity.

Magical inscriptions and royal treasures: large-scale tourism at Persepolis.

Noting like Mandelslo that local tradition attributed a talismanic quality to the ancient writings, he adds that according to "Persian scholars" the cuneiform inscription guarded the access to tombs in which countless treasures were kept: he records as proof that in the time of Shah Abbas, half a century earlier, there was a European traveller who could read the cuneiform inscriptions, and that after deciphering a few lines of the script in front of the local governor of Shirāz, the rocks were cleft apart, revealing a chamber full of gold and silver enough to load sixty camels.[176] This curious anecdote seems to combine old traditions about the awe-inspiring ruins, their hidden treasures and mysterious inscriptions, with the new European interest for

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craftsmanship in the period when the structure was built must have been significantly higher than in his time, Chardin 1811, VIII, 322.

[174] Chardin 1811, VIII, 324-325.

[175] Chardin 1811, VIII, 324-325, Chardin 1811, Atlas, pl. LXIX and LXX/pl. S and T.

[176] Chardin 1811, VIII, 408-409. The belief that ancient inscriptions and bas-reliefs contain treasures still holds true today and is the cause of much damage and destruction to ancient inscriptions by looters.

the Persian sites and antiquities. Initial European curiosity certainly amounted to large-scale tourism by Chardin's time: the traveller records that the custom in Persia in his time was to pay for the expenses of the foreign envoys that had business with the court, and that because all the Europeans wanted to see Persepolis, the local vizier soon began to find that this international enthusiasm for the site was costing him too much. Receiving one year the accounts for his province and seeing that the expenses of Staxr amounted to one thousand two hundred guineas, he became furious. Berating the "*farangui*"[177] and their pilgrimage to Čehelmenār he commissioned sixty men to destroy the sculptures, but this, Chardin comments deviously, was done rather slowly, because of the immense profit which the town and its environs gained from the attention the site attracted; the king is later said to have forbidden any destruction of the ruins, precisely because they brought in visitors from all parts of the world.

The Greek inscriptions of Naqš-e Rostam: Alexander king of kings of all Asiatic nations.

Chardin's account is also the first one to provide a tentative translation for the Greek versions of the Naqš-e Rostam label inscriptions, identical copies of which had been published in the *Philosophical Transactions* under Flower's name some years earlier **[Fig. 2.9]**. The French merchant estimates that the Greek texts, based on their style, are "modern" and probably belong to the Late Roman Empire – in other words the 3rd to the 5th centuries – making once again an impressively accurate guess. He adds that certain "very learned men" claimed they deciphered the legends "this is the face of the divine Alexander, king of kings of all Asiatic nations, son of the divine Philip king" and "see the face of god the father/Jupiter god".[178] Chardin dismisses these readings, namely because he does not believe the figure to be a representation of Alexander, but it is important to highlight that the theories concerning the identity of the figures in the bas-relief heavily influenced the decipherment of the inscriptions: many scholars, well into the eighteenth century, were determined to read the name of the Macedonian conqueror into that of "Ardašīr", spurred on by the fact that the first letter of the Sasanian king's name encouraged their hypothesis. Beyond the name of the represented monarch however, the reading of the Greek inscriptions recorded by Chardin, instrumental to the decipherment of the Middle Persian versions, are surprisingly accurate.

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[177] A common Persian word for foreigner/European.

[178] Chardin 1811, VIII, 328.

Ambrosio Bembo or when Chardin's draftsman finds a new master.

Figueroa, della Valle, Flower and Chardin, with their riveting accounts and awe-inspiring descriptions of monuments and strange peoples, paved the way for many young travellers eager to discover the wonders of the Near East and live adventures of their own. Many of these evoke as their sole reason for leaving an ardent wish to travel. All cite their predecessors, sometimes admiringly but often critically, intent on outdoing them in the precision of their accounts and in the beauty and accuracy of their etchings; when they did not record new inscriptions, they heavily improved the legibility of already drafted samples. Thus, the young Venetian aristocrat Ambrosio Bembo, who was to be the first to copy the Middle Persian inscriptions of the Sasanian site of Tāq-e Bostān mentions "the desire to know" as the sole justification for his epic four-year journey, describing the world as a "great book" waiting to be read.[179] Taking advantage of his uncle Marco Bembo's appointment as the Venetian Consul in Aleppo he set off in 1671, nineteen years old. Leaving his uncle in Aleppo he made his way to Persia and then India, conscientiously following the route of Pietro della Valle whose *Viaggi* had been published two decades earlier: Ambrosio Bembo systematically refers to his Italian predecessor's work, citing his comments concerning landmarks and other sites as he passed them and even arranging to meet his Armenian wife's sister in Shiraz. The young man's account is also closely intricated with that of Jean Chardin, whom he met in Esfahān on his return journey, right after visiting the ruins of Persepolis and Naqš-e Rostam. He is extremely critical of the French merchant, describing him as a shrewd and harsh businessman, who tried to cheat him on some merchandise; this and other squabbles eventually led to a rift between the two travellers, culminating in Bembo telling Chardin that his very presence "disgusted" him.[180] More importantly, Bembo noted that Chardin had a draftsman, G. Grélot, whom he had taken to Persepolis and who seemed very unhappy in the merchant's service: Chardin apparently refused to pay him for his drawings until their return to Europe, threatening to not pay him at all should he make a single etching for anybody else, a treatment which only illustrates the extreme jealousy with which European travellers guarded their discoveries. Grélot and Bembo took an immediate liking to each other, with Bembo seeing that this would be a fine opportunity to have etchings made to illustrate his account. They eventually decided that Grélot would leave Chardin and make drafts for Bembo instead. They immediately set to work, drawing the ruins of Persepolis from memory with the help of sketches that Grélot had made on site for

[179] Welch 2007, 33; for another recent edition of Bembo's *Viaggi* (in Italian), see Invernizzi 2005.

[180] Welch 2007, 346.

Chardin:[181] the young Venetian's account comprises 51 line-drawings made by Grélot, including several originally drawn for the French merchant.

Untangling the contention over the authorship of Flower's drafts.

Now, the twenty-first plate in Bembo's account, dedicated to the Persepolitan inscriptions, is particularly interesting for it merges epigraphic samples found in two separate publications. The three lines of cuneiform characters in this plate correspond exactly, character for character, to the sample of cuneiform writing given in plate S of Chardin's account, despite the slightly jumbled orientation of the third line **[Fig. 2.8 and 2.10]**.[182] This is not surprising since Grélot explicitly based himself on older drawings made while in the French merchant's service to produce illustrations for his new young patron. On the other hand, it is much more surprising to also find in Bembo's plate an identical copy of the Arabo-Persian inscriptions – Kufic and Nastaliq – included in Samuel Flower's drafts and sent to the Royal Society by his "very good friend"[183]. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that this specific sample is not found in any of Chardin's plates. Indeed, if Chardin also offers a drawing of Arabic Kufic writing and does not make Flower's mistake in attributing this script to the same period as the cuneiform inscriptions – he understands it as being "ancient Arabic" – his samples copy verses from the Qur'an rather than inscriptions engraved on the Persepolitan ruins.[184] The flawless rendering of the script in Plates LXXI and LXXII even suggests that Chardin had recourse to a professional calligrapher.

From this, it emerges that Grélot was the draftsman that Chardin himself reports firing right after his first trip to Persepolis – which he says he made in 1666, in other words one year before Flower's own – because he was displeased with the quality of his drawings. Bembo's account shows however that Grélot was still in Chardin's service in 1674, throwing some doubt onto the French merchant's chronology, as well as on his reasons for dismissing Grélot: this in reality seems to be closely linked to Chardin's dispute with Bembo, which resulted in the draftsman leaving the French merchant's service and entering Bembo's. In particular, Chardin's claim – later followed by de Sacy – that he had the copies of the Persepolis inscriptions re-done by

[181] Welch 2007, 361.

[182] Compare Welch 2007, 361 and Chardin, 1811, Atlas, Pl. LXIX.

[183] Probably Francis Aston, see above.

[184] These samples are correctly indicated as reproducing verses of the Qur'an in the legends of the plates, but in the passage of the travelogue which discusses these plates, the Kufic samples of Plate LXIX are described as copying an "inscription", adding further confusion to Chardin's drafts of the Persepolis inscriptions, Chardin 1811, VIII, 326.

another draftsman during a later trip is only half-true, since the cuneiform characters in his plate correspond exactly to Bembo's copy: the copies of the Qur'an in Chardin's publication suggest that the French merchant only hired someone else to replace the sample of Kufic writing because Grélot left with the papers on which this was drawn. These elements lend weight to the hint made by the author of the letter that accompanied the drafts published in the *Philosophical Transactions* that Chardin had Grélot "recycle" Flower's papers for his own publication when the Englishman's papers were dispersed after his death and made their way into the French merchant's hands. It would then seem that after leaving Chardin's service Grélot took part of Flower's papers with him, contributing what he took with him to Bembo's account and leaving the rest with Chardin. This scenario is also supported by the fact that Flower's much more muddled cuneiform inscriptions do not figure in either of Chardin or Bembo's accounts: it is likely that Grélot's only real contribution was drawing the longer and more precise lines of cuneiform published in their travelogues. It is also worth noting that Silvestre de Sacy, who lent a marked support for Chardin, is apparently not aware of Bembo's publication – in particular, he does not discuss the Middle Persian inscriptions of Tāq-e Bostān published by the Venetian traveller (see below) – and therefore did not see how Flower's drafts were 'split over' the two publications, making it very unlikely that the Englishman had copied Chardin's drawings. Be this as it may, the circulation and republication of these drafts of inscriptions indicate just how prised this new material – inscriptional in particular – was and illustrates once more the race for prestige which the early travellers embarked on, intent on winning the esteem and patronage of the learned societies of Europe.

Copying the "Coptic" inscriptions of Tāq-e Bostān.

If Grélot was likely not the author of the copies of Sasanian inscriptions included in Chardin's travelogue, he certainly was the first to draw the Middle Persian inscriptions of Tāq-e Bostān.[185] Bembo and Grélot passed through Hamadān, Bīsotūn and Tāq-e Bostān on their way back to Aleppo from Esfahān and the young Venetian remarks with surprise that his hero della Valle did not describe these sites, although he travelled along the same route, concluding that he must have passed them by night.[186] Concerning Bīsotūn, Bembo remarks that the style of the

[185] Although it was not the first to be published. For a detailed overview and study of the different European travellers' accounts and drawings of the monuments – including the Middle Persian inscriptions – of the site of Tāq-e Bostān, see Potts 2022.

[186] Welch 2007, 373.

sculptures was very similar to the Persepolis vestiges. He also records seeing Greek inscriptions engraved above the figures: thanks to Grélot's illustration of the mountain cliff, which illustrates the Bīsotūn relief as well as a lower relief closer towards ground level, it becomes clear that he is referring to the weathered Greek inscription of the Parthian King Mithridates; Grélot's drawings are the only evidence that remains of this inscription, for it was later destroyed by an Arabic inscription commissioned by a local Sheikh **[Fig. 2.11]**.[187] On the other hand, the cuneiform inscriptions go unmentioned. The party then halts four nights in a caravanserai close to the site of Tāq-e Bostān, giving Grélot ample time to sketch the Sasanian remains, to which he dedicates five plates. Finding no references concerning these magnificent vestiges in any of the literature at his disposal, he resorts to calling them the *Antiquities of Kermanshah*. Although he dismisses them as absurd, he does record popular legends concerning the sculptures however: thus, the knight on horseback is said to be the epic hero Rostam, while the figure of Anāhitā and the Sasanian king would respectively represent Khosrow and Shirin; a tradition already found in the Arabo-Persian chronicles and immortalised in Nezāmi's famous twelfth-century poem.[188] Noticing the inscriptions engraved on either side of the central grotto, Bembo goes to great pains to have them copied, sending to the town for a ladder and having the texts cleaned from the dust and cobwebs that covered them **[Fig. 2.12]**. Curiously, the young Venetian is convinced that the inscriptions are in Coptic and harbours great hope that Grélot's careful drawings will be enough to have them translated, elucidating the entire history behind the site and its vestiges.[189] It would seem that Bembo did encounter manuscript Middle Persian, since in his description of the cuneiform inscriptions of Persepolis he observes that the epigraphic texts on the ruins did not resemble in any way the ancient Persian writing of manuscripts – said to be "used in the time of Darius" – concluding, like Chardin had before him, that cuneiform must date from times immemorial. Bembo's determination like his predecessors to only consider cuneiform as a candidate for ancient Persian epigraphy illustrates once again just how hermetic the sphere of manuscript cursive and inscriptional Middle Persian were to remain.

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[187] See Fowler 2005; on the Greek inscriptions of Bīsotūn, see further Huyse (forthcoming), "Epigraphic and archival sources for Arsacid history", 12, 15-16.

[188] On Nezāmi's *Khosrow o Shirin*, see Orsatti 2006.

[189] Welch 2007, 379-380.

Kaempfer and the iconic status of Flower's copies of Sasanian inscriptions.

The saga of Flower's copies of Sasanian inscriptions at Naqš-e Rostam meets another development with the account of the German traveller Engelbert Kaempfer.[190] Enrolled at the University of Uppsala as a teenager, he was appointed in 1683 as secretary of the delegation sent by Sweden to Russia and Persia, primarily to secure the country's commercial interests in these two countries by establishing a shorter land-route. The young man took with him Olearius' account of Mandelslo's travels which traced a similar route. Upon reaching Persia, he stays with the delegation in Esfahān for almost two years producing a detailed description of the town and the Safavid court. Choosing not to return to Europe with the Swedish delegation however, he continues his travels in Persia and Asia as an employee of the Dutch East Indies Company, eventually reaching Jakarta and then Japan. On his way down to Bandar Abbas, Kaempfer follows the familiar North-South route passing through Yazd, Naqš-e Rostam and Persepolis, Shirāz and Lār. He stays three full days at Čehelmenār, drafting the most detailed copies yet of cuneiform characters, filling an entire plate with these.[191] His etchings of the architectural remains of Persepolis, the Gate of All Nations, as well as the panoramic view of the site of Naqš-e Rostam are much more realistic than any of his predecessors' and display a keen eye for proportions and perspective.[192] He is also the first to attempt a copy of (a few characters of) Kerdīr's inscription, engraved behind the bas-relief of Šābuhr I's triumph **[Fig. 2.14]** and only mentioned in passing by Chardin: keen to underline the novelty of his account, he notes that Flower had not provided any drawing of this big *tabula rupi insculpta*.[193] His etchings have the advantage of showing the exact location of inscriptions: Kerdīr's text is depicted *in situ* behind the king's horse both on the panoramic view of the site and on the detail of the bas-relief. It is all the more surprising therefore that we find the copy of the Greek version of the Sasanian label inscriptions published by both Flower and Chardin-Grélot – identical to the character, complete with blanks and mistakes – carefully copied in the cartouche that dominates the panoramic view of Naqš-e Rostam, introducing his description of the site's

[190] Kaempfer, 1712, II.

[191] Kaempfer, 1712, II, 333.

[192] His copies of the Sasanian bas-reliefs are much perhaps less successful however, see for instance Kaempfer, 1712, V, 319-321.

[193] Kaempfer, 1712, II, 319.

vestiges.[194] Indeed, after his description of Kerdīr's inscription, Kaempfer assures his reader that there are no other epigraphic vestiges on the site of Naqš-e Rostam, apparently entirely missing both the Sasanian trilingual label inscriptions and the cuneiform characters on Darius' tomb. It would appear that he was confused about the location of Sasanian inscriptions published by Flower/Chardin-Grélot but absolutely determined to include them nevertheless and finally resorted to adding them as a decorative piece, copying them from the publications he had seen them in **[Fig. 2.13]**. The fact that the German traveller decided to prominently include the Greek inscriptions at all costs in the introductory plate before his description of the Persepolis ruins, points to the near iconic character that these copies had gained and the importance they played both in the traveller's narrative program and travel plan.

Drawing Persepolis.

In the wake of Chardin, Bembo and Kaempfer's publications, travellers began to give an increasingly prominent space to engravings – many soon becoming true works of art – moving away from the dramatic and sensational tone of the descriptions of their predecessors and favouring professionally executed etchings to document their accounts, a tendency particularly discernible in the descriptions of the ruins and inscriptions of Persepolis. One of the most richly illustrated travel accounts dedicated to the Near East and Persia was published by the Dutchman Cornelis de Bruijn (1652-1727).[195] An engraver and painter by profession, he produced a magnificent series of etchings of the archaeological site over a lengthy three-month stay *in situ*. De Bruijn reached Persia at the turn of the 18th century by following the land route taken by Mandelslo and Kaempfer through Russia. His expedition was funded by the burgomaster of Amsterdam, himself a great travel enthusiast and who had trading interests with Russia as well as contacts in the Dutch East Indies Company. De Bruijn himself however only ever evokes his desire to document his observations as truthfully as possible as the main motivation for his travels. His publication contains 320 engravings of which 51 are dedicated to Persepolis and Naqš-e Rostam. He explicitly gives himself a rule never to embellish his descriptions with fantastical details to add "lustre" to his work, drawing his subjects "de ma propre main et d'après nature" and personally vouching for everything his readers could admire

[194] Kaempfer, 1712, II, 307.

[195] de Bruijn, 1718, II. For a study of the descriptions and drawings of the ruins of Persepolis more generally by Early Modern and Modern European travellers, see Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1989.

in his travelogue.[196] This manifesto is an explicit criticism of his predecessors' highly literary accounts, and de Bruijn includes a lengthy addendum dedicated to Chardin and Kaempfer's descriptions of the Persepolis ruins in which he corrects their errors – proceeding etching by etching in order of their appearance in the travelogues – commenting each problematic figure and any lack of proportion.[197] This marked wish to produce a solidly documented account rather than an enticing narrative may explain why de Bruijn mentions nothing concerning the Sasanian inscriptions of Naqš-e Rostam: as we saw, Kaempfer himself seems to have had difficulty in locating these, transforming them into an ornament instead. Similarly, de Bruijn only includes the Arabo-Persian inscriptions which he was able to have read for him and includes on the plate the translation for each underneath the corresponding samples. He accordingly expresses some doubt concerning the Kufic texts included by Chardin in his plates, which are as we saw copies of a manuscript Arabic text rather than inscriptions.[198] De Bruijn's etchings of the ruins are no doubt a real improvement on what had been published in Europe in his time. His magnificent drawing of the Gate of All Nations, beyond its increased realism and better proportions is also the first to indicate the location of the trilingual cuneiform inscriptions engraved on them **[Fig. 2.15]**. In his careful copies of the cuneiform characters, de Bruijn is cautious to keep the distinction between the different versions of a single inscription, presented in neatly delineated cartouches, although nothing indicates that he recognises that they are composed of different type of characters. De Bruijn follows his predecessors in assuming that the cuneiform inscriptions were specifically Zoroastrian ancient writings: he explains copying the inscriptions with the utmost care – and does not shy away from hacking out a piece of cuneiform writing from a window-pane – in the vain hope of finding a Zoroastrian priest that could decipher them. He incidentally remarks that the members of the Zoroastrian community use a specific script different from that of the Arabs in a long section dedicated to his "conversation with a Zoroastrian priest"[199] but does not engage in the comparison of the cuneiform inscriptions with what he is shown in the manuscripts.

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[196] de Bruijn, 1718, II, [preface p. 2].

[197] de Bruijn, 1718, II, 437-452.

[198] de Bruijn, 1718, II, 443.

[199] de Bruijn, 1718, II, 387.

Carsten Niebuhr and the epigraphic corpus of Naqš-e Rostam – Persepolis.

The travelogue that was decisive in the decipherment of the Old Persian and Middle Persian inscriptional alphabets however was that by Carsten Niebuhr (1733-1815).[200] Niebuhr was invited, while he was still a student at the University of Göttingen, to join an expedition to Arabia and the Near East funded by the King of Denmark Frederick V (r. 1746-1766). The mission was to record the various "curiosities" of the East, but especially those of Egypt and Arabia with an eye to collecting material concerning the Old Testament. The party was composed of five Danish scholars, picked especially for the mission, including a linguist specialised in Oriental languages, a natural historian, a doctor and an artist; Niebuhr, who received training in cartography and navigational astronomy for this appointment, was put in charge of geography, authoring some of the most extensive and accurate maps of the Near East and Asia of his time. Niebuhr was to be the sole survivor of the expedition, all four of his companions succumbing to disease during the journey:[201] he reached Persepolis only in 1765, on his way back from India, and alone, his last travelling companion having died in Surat. Taking a ship from Bombay to Muscat and then Bushehr, the young man makes his way up north inland to Shirāz and then Persepolis only as a detour, specifically to see the famous ruins, returning to the Persian Gulf to sail from Basra along the Euphrates to reach Bagdad. In his preface, Niebuhr assures his reader that although there are already many descriptions of Persepolis – he namely cites those of Chardin and de Bruijn – he will find new inscriptions never copied before as well as better copies of already known ones.[202] His detailed account of the ruins is accompanied by two double folio drafts of cuneiform inscriptions carefully separated into different sections to distinguish the three different cuneiform alphabets. This time, his keen eye was able to differentiate the Old Persian, Elamite and Babylonian versions, offering his reader coherent lines of three sets of characters:[203] it was based on his meticulous drafts that Münter was half a century later able to identify the single diagonal wedge as a word divider and recognize the title "King of kings", leading the way to Grotefend's decipherment of Old Persian cuneiform. Like his predecessors, Niebuhr also copied several Arabo-Persian

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[200] For a study of Carsten Niebuhr's work, see Wiesehöfer and Conermann 2002; on the importance of Niebuhr's travel account for ancient Iranian studies more generally and Silvestre de Sacy's work on Middle Persian specifically, see Wiesehöfer and Huyse (forthcoming), "Carsten Niebuhr and Antoine Isaac Silvestre de Sacy: How a keen observer and a gifted young scholar unravelled the secrets of Sasanian Naqš-e Rostam".

[201] Niebuhr 1780, II, v.

[202] Niebuhr 1780, II, vi.

[203] Niebuhr 1780, II, 129-130.

inscriptions, but his account again outdoes those of earlier travellers in that he conscientiously has each of his epigraphic samples fully translated by the French Persian-born agent in Basra, Jean François Rousseau.[204] On the same plate (pl. XXVII) **[Fig. 2.16]**, Niebuhr also includes a much better example of the trilingual Sasanian inscriptions of Naqš-e Rostam, including an often-ignored Hebrew inscription engraved on Ardašīr I's triumph relief, as well as a much-improved draft of Kerdīr's inscription on Šābuhr I's bas-relief, despite its lacunary state; he also copies the Sasanian trilingual inscriptions of Naqš-e Rajab. Niebuhr finishes his passage on the inscriptions of Persepolis by marvelling at the sheer quantity and variety of epigraphic texts engraved on the ruins, declaring that there must be no other place in the world that brought together so many different types of characters, beginning with the cuneiform texts and ranging all the way to the modern graffiti left on the ruins by his fellow travellers:[205] in this sense, Niebuhr is the very first scholar to put forward a reflexion of the inscriptions of Persepolis as an epigraphic whole. Like his predecessors, Niebuhr observes that the cuneiform inscriptions must be original to the buildings because a space has been made in the architectural and iconographic program of the site to receive them. Next in antiquity he places Kerdīr's inscription engraved behind Šābuhr I's triumph. Interestingly, despite his sharp sense of observation, Niebuhr does not recognise its characters to be the same as those in the Middle Persian version of the Sasanian label inscriptions; these make up the next strata of inscriptions in Niebuhr's all-encompassing study. Then come the Parthian legends, making him the first to differentiate the Parthian versions from their Middle Persian counterparts. After the writings of the ancient Persians he continues, the Greeks also recorded their passage on the site with some inscriptions, although he is very critical of their poor draftsman ship. After them he places the Kufic, Arabic and Persian texts engraved in a more recent past, as well as the Hebrew inscriptions. The last stratum in his epigraphic overview are the names of the travellers and he notes – perhaps with a note of disapproval – that the name of Cornelis de Bruijn is drawn in red chalk in several locations. Niebuhr is somewhat uncomfortable with his global description of the inscriptions of Persepolis, conceding that the lightly etched Hebrew words and the names of his contemporaries should probably not be ranked among the other inscriptions of the site:[206] his hesitation illustrates the characteristic difficulty of reconciling an instinctive distinction between 'official' as well as more ornamental epigraphic commissions and private mementos,

[204] Niebuhr 1780, II, 113.

[205] Niebuhr 1780, II, 129-130.

[206] Niebuhr 1780, II, 130.

with an appreciation for the fact that the texts, despite their very different nature, were articulated around one another to form a more or less coherent whole.[207]

The two alphabets of the Parsi priests according to Carsten Niebuhr.

Like his predecessors, Niebuhr spontaneously compares the cursive Middle Persian and Avestan scripts he obtained from members of the Zoroastrian community during his travels with the cuneiform characters he observes at Persepolis, expressing his surprise at not finding any of these ancient Persian letters engraved on the ruins.[208] During his stay in Surat, Niebuhr had obtained a copy of two ancient alphabets used by the Parsis from a Capuchin monk who was a close friend of Anquetil Duperron; the characters had been drawn for the latter by one of the Zoroastrian priests who helped him with his study of the Avesta (see below). Niebuhr respectively calls these two alphabets the Pehlevi, said to be used for the Zoroastrian sacred texts, and the "Dsjan-chân", perhaps a deformation of the term "Zend" and much more vaguely recorded as being used "for other books".[209] From his table, the two scripts roughly correspond to the Middle Persian cursive alphabet – augmented with some diacritics and a few Avestan letters – and the Avestan script; the Danish traveller also provides the phonetic value of each character in Latin letters. In this respect, Niebuhr's table is a significant improvement on Chardin's own, clearly distinguishing for the first time – after Anquetil Duperron's pioneering work – the use of two alphabets by the Zoroastrian community.

Documenting Middle Persian glyptic and numismatics.

Niebuhr's examination of the ruins also stands because he has the idea of comparing the ruins with other ancient near eastern artefacts: seals. In his description of the great entrance gate on the Persepolis platform and the fantastical composite creatures carved on the two monumental antae – which Niebuhr calls Persian sphinxes – he observes that a very similar creature is depicted in one of the two agate sealing stones given to him during his stay in Aleppo and Basra.[210] The first seal indeed portrays a similar composite creature, winged, with an animal – equine? – body but with a crowned human head; it does not bear an inscription. The second seal however depicts a feline creature and includes an inscription engraved along the edge,

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[207] See Ramble (forthcoming, a), "Generations of writing: the secondary inscriptions of Persepolis".

[208] Niebuhr 1780, II, 130.

[209] Niebuhr 1780, II, 40.

[210] Niebuhr, 1780, II, 102, pl. XX.

encircling the image in the centre. It is difficult to determine from Niebuhr's sketch exactly what language the inscription is engraved in but he certainly seems confident that the characters are identical to that engraved on the series of coins published in his *Description of Arabia*:[211] now, the five coins illustrated in plate XI (figures 17 to 21) of this volume are Sasanian coins with legends in Middle Persian engraved all around the central image of a Sasanian king, immediately recognisable by his korymbos-surmounted crown; the obverse of the coins depicts the familiar motif of two figures standing on either side of a fire altar. Although Niebuhr describes them as bearing ancient Persian or Parthian writings – the terms Persian and Parthian are also used interchangeably in Late Antique historiography[212] – he does not seem to draw a link between the characters engraved on the Sasanian bas-reliefs and those in his numismatic and glyptic samples: the association between Sasanian coins and Sasanian monumental inscriptions had to await Silvestre de Sacy's work a few decades later.

III. Bringing back the first Middle Persian manuscripts to Europe.

Anquetil Duperron and the Parsi manuscripts of Surat.

Niebuhr's reference to Anquetil Duperron's study of the Avesta with the Parsi priests of Surat is particularly noteworthy. This not the only allusion by the Danish traveller to Anquetil Duperron's work, indicating that the latter was already considered to be a reference for all those exploring the antiquities of Iran.[213] Anquetil Duperron's return from India with 18 Zoroastrian manuscripts obtained in Surat and which he deposited at the Bibliothèque du Roi in 1762, as well as his pioneering work on cursive Middle Persian and Avestan, suddenly brought the study of Zoroastrianism into sharp focus for European scholars and excited academic interest for pre-Islamic Iran and its languages. Although Anquetil Duperron exclusively dedicated himself to manuscript Middle Persian (and Avestan), the lexicon of Middle Persian terms he derived from his translations of the Zoroastrian texts were instrumental to Silvestre de Sacy's decipherment of inscriptional Middle Persian. As we shall see in the following chapter, manuscript and inscriptional Middle Persian were not immediately recognised as being the same language rendered by two variant alphabets and in many ways the close friendship between Anquetil Duperron and Silvestre de Sacy – the latter was even made "légataire universel" by Anquetil

[211] Niebuhr, 1774.

[212] In Ammianus Marcellinus's *Res Gestae* for example.

[213] Niebuhr, 1780, II, 33-34, 40.

Duperron, inheriting all his travel notes and papers at his death – can be seen as embodying the articulation between the decipherment and study of manuscript and inscriptional Middle Persian in the second half of the 18th century. Although Anquetil Duperron's motivations for going to India were academic and focused on translating the Zoroastrian manuscript texts, he was also a traveller and adventurer in his own right and in this respect his audacious journey has its place in this chapter.

Anquetil Duperron (1731-1805) was the son of a spice merchant and his interest for the East seems to have begun very early on, for he chose as a young student to learn oriental languages – namely Arabic but also Hebrew – while studying with the Jansenists in Holland, at the Amersfoot seminary. In the introduction to his travelogue, Anquetil Duperron repeatedly mentions his desire to learn about the antiquity of the East from eastern sources directly: he is exasperated by the "assoupissement général" concerning the study of ancient oriental languages and strongly critical towards scholars – namely Hyde – who expect to be enlightened on all matters eastern by reading Latin and Greek texts "in vain".[214] When in 1754 he is shown in Paris the copy of an Avestan manuscript brought back from India and kept at the Bodleian Library in Oxford, he decides to go learn "ancient Persian" in "either Gujarat or Kirman".[215] He sets sail barely a year later for Surat with the explicit intention of bringing back a copy of the sacred scriptures of the Zoroastrians from the Parsi community established there and, even more importantly, intent on succeeding where the British had failed, which is to say to convince Parsi priests to teach him the "Zend" language. Indeed, although in the *discours préliminaire* to his travelogue Anquetil Duperron sums up rather dismissingly British scholars' knowledge of Zoroastrianism and its scriptures, he is forced to recognise that they were pioneers both in the study of this ancient religion and in the collection of Avestan manuscripts.[216] The British East India Company was firmly implanted in India in the 18th century and through its exceptional relationship with the Parsi community, British agents and travellers encountered and bought Zoroastrian manuscripts. The first specimen, a copy of the *Vendidad Sāde*, to be sent back to Europe was procured by George Bourchier and brought from Bombay to England by the Reverend Richard Cobbe and placed in the Bodleian Library Oxford in 1723. An impressive collection of Zoroastrian as well as Sanskrit and Persian manuscripts were then bought by James Fraser (1713-1754), a member of the Royal Society and a servant of the East

[214] Anquetil Duperron 1771, I, vi.

[215] Anquetil Duperron 1771, I, vi.

[216] Anquetil Duperron 1771, I, v.

India Company posted at the British council in Surat in the early 1740s; the list of the hundreds of oriental manuscripts his collection comprised is included at the end of the latter's account of the life of Nadir Shah (1742).[217] His premature death put a sudden stop to his work on the Zoroastrian manuscripts he had obtained however, leaving the field open for Anquetil Duperron.

In France, Anquetil Duperron's project was backed by eminent members of the *Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres* such as the Comte de Caylus and the Abbé Barthélémy who promised to obtain funding for him, with the implication that, should his brazen enterprise succeed, it would be crowned with a fellowship at the Academy. Seeing that the funding was taking time to materialise, and also keen not to have to owe anyone anything should his ambitious undertaking fail, the young and bold Anquetil Duperron decided to leave by his own means, enrolling in the army of the Compagnie des Indes as a foot soldier, taking with him only two shirts, two handkerchiefs and a pair of tights.[218] Upon his arrival at the port of Lorient however, he is told by the Compagnie bureau that the king had awarded him a pension of 500 pounds towards his mission in India: this had been obtained for him by his contacts at the Académie along with free crossing aboard a ship of the Compagnie des Indes bound for Pondicherry. Reaching India, his different letters of recommendation introduced him to the French society established there, and namely M. de Leyrit, Governor general of French establishments in India. Anquetil Duperron was able to obtain from the latter a rudimentary salary of 75 rupees a month to sustain him while he learned Persian and made contact with the Parsi community, although the young man pointedly refused an official job as interpreter for the Compagnie, judging that the "mercenary and instrumental role" of interpreters was ill-adapted to his independent character.[219] Anquetil Duperron was highly critical of the expatriate community in Pondicherry. The young man's arrival and the object of his mission raised many eyebrows, and he describes himself as standing out sharply from the rest of his compatriots: he viewed their attraction for India as motivated only by greed, the need to make up the family fortunes which they had squandered or to exile themselves while the scandals they had caused back in France died down. Similarly, the preface to his travelogue, jointly addressed to the French and British people, is an unambiguous plea to cease plundering India for its material riches and begin instead to nurture interest for the staggering wealth of its ancient culture, to

[217] Fraser 1742, A Catalogue of Oriental Manuscripts in the Persic, Arabic and Sanskerrit languages, 1-40.

[218] Anquetil Duperron 1771, I, vii.

[219] Anquetil Duperron 1771, I, xxv.

enrich Europe with goods that "do not cost tears" and "do not expel" from their homes those from whom they are received.

The terms of Anquetil Duperron's departure for and stay in India once again highlight the instrumental role both of European learned societies as well as national trading companies in enabling both financially and logistically the endeavours of early travellers—the young man's spirited account also shows that this support was strongly self-interested. Thus, his sudden departure hastens the Académie des Inscriptions' decision to find him funding and safe crossing to India; although it was not to be immediate, Anquetil Duperron is also rewarded upon his return with an official role as "interpreter of oriental languages" at the Bibliothèque du Roi and a membership at the Académie. Furthermore, the rivalry of the different European powers concerning trading interests in the East, which periodically translated into violent military confrontations,[220] was mirrored by a rivalry between European learned societies and the race for – in the case of the nascent field of Zoroastrian studies – the collection and decipherment of Zoroastrian manuscripts. It would seem that the Zoroastrian priests were quick to pick up on this competition, pointedly remarking in front of their French student on the great sums of money that Fraser had been willing to pay for manuscripts as well as on the great recompense that was offered back in England to who would translate the sacred books of the Zoroastrians.[221] Anquetil Duperron himself exploited the differences between Parsi religious leaders to obtain manuscripts, however.[222] Collecting documents from different religious experts, the young man also for the first time experiences the existence of variant manuscripts and is evidently unsettled by – and very suspicious of – the often-substantial divergences between the texts he is given, not recognising that these were not the result of the dishonesty of the Parsi priests.[223]

The French hold on Pondicherry was finally lost in 1761 and the Compagnie des Indes went bankrupt, forcing Anquetil Duperron to return to Europe on a British ship as a prisoner of war. He is detained in Portsmouth on parole for three months, although the young man was clearly much more anxious about the fate of his manuscripts, kept in a humid outlet at customs than of his own.[224] When he is finally released from prison in England he refuses to go back to

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[220] Thus, Anquetil Duperron has to wait three years in Pondicherry before reaching Surat because of the war between England and France for the control of trading posts.

[221] Anquetil Duperron 1771, I, cccxiv. This unflattering portrayal of the Parsi religious leaders was criticised by J. J. Modi, see Deloche, Filliozat and Filliozat 1997, 24-26.

[222] Anquetil Duperron 1771, I, cccxv-cccxviii.

[223] See Deloche, Filliozat and Filliozat 1997, 25-26.

[224] Anquetil Duperron 1771, cccclii-ccccliv.

France insisting that since he had been brought to this country against his will he would at least go visit Oxford first. Obtaining a three-day passport for Oxford, he is invited to examine the copy of the *Vendidad Sāde* deposited there, and is able to confirm that the manuscript, the trigger for his entire enterprise in India, indeed corresponded to the most beautiful of the manuscripts that he had obtained in Surat. He is also shown Fraser's impressive collection of manuscripts, noting with some satisfaction that it does not contain any Middle Persian texts. Anquetil Duperron finally made his way back to Paris, arriving on the stormy night of the 14th of March 1762, suffering from a terrible attack of gout; the very next day he presented himself at the Bibliothèque du Roi to deposit the precious manuscripts he had brought back from India; he was not thirty years old.[225]

Work on cursive Middle Persian begins.

Anquetil Duperron published a series of dissertations on the "Ancient languages of Persia" in the journal of the *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* which for the first time clearly distinguished between the Avestan and Middle Persian languages and scripts.[226] Anquetil Duperron also offered concrete examples of the way in which the Avestan, Middle Persian and Persian strata of text and commentary were articulated in a given manuscript, providing a Latin and French translation of the Avestan and a French one of the Middle Persian to illustrate his demonstration. A few years later in 1771 the account of his travels and his translation of the Avesta were printed, propelling Zoroastrian studies forward. With Anquetil Duperron's first extensive work on the Middle Persian language and script also came the first serious challenges that this writing system posed to scholarship. Thus, we find for the first time the notion that Middle Persian was riddled with Arabic and Syriac loanwords as a result of its prolonged contact with Arabic-speaking populations: if Anquetil Duperron does record the term "azvaresch/huzvaresh", he considers it to be a mere synonym for "Middle Persian".[227] Similarly, although they are correctly translated, all the arameographic forms of words are rendered phonetically. No link is yet established either between the languages of the Zoroastrian scriptures and that engraved on the ruins of Persepolis, and Anquetil Duperron dismisses as fabrications the drafts recorded by early European travellers, although he does introduce an important temporal landmark when he argues that Middle Persian was probably

[225] Anquetil Duperron 1771, cccclxxvii-cccclxxviii.

[226] Anquetil Duperron 1768.

[227] Anquetil Duperron 1768, 408-409.

spoken up to the Sasanian period.[228] As work on Middle Persian epigraphy moved away from the field and its adventures and into the carpeted cabinets of library orientalists, many of whom had never left their country let alone Europe, these issues became the tropes of scholarly debate – taking until the nineteenth century to untangle – and will be the focus of the following chapter.

[228] Anquetil Duperron 1768, 416.

Chapter 3

The decipherment of inscriptional Middle Persian

I. The earliest studies of the Middle Persian language, script and textual tradition.

Thomas Hyde's Historia Religionis Veterum Persarum.

In the entry dedicated to "Zoroaster" in his *Dictionnaire philosophique*, Voltaire observed with characteristic wit that "Les voyageurs français Chardin et Tavernier nous ont appris quelque chose de ce grand prophète [Zoroaster], par le moyen des Guèbres ou Parsis, qui sont encore répandus dans l'Inde et dans la Perse, et qui sont excessivement ignorants. Le docteur Hyde, professeur en arabe dans Oxford, nous en a appris cent fois d'avantage sans sortir de chez lui."[229] The rest of the passage, however, shows just how limited Hyde's sources were: "C'est à lui surtout que nous devons ces *Cent Portes du Sadder*, qui contiennent tous les principaux préceptes des pieux ignicoles." Indeed, the English scholar's landmark study of the religion of the ancient Persians, published at the turn of the eighteenth century, relied almost entirely on the New Persian *Saddar*, a treatise on Zoroastrian religion cited by the Parsi compilers of the Persian Rivayats and which Hyde believed to be directly extracted *ex Zoroastris libris theologicis*.[230]

Thomas Hyde (1636-1703) was a Professor of Arabic and Hebrew at Oxford, interpreter of Oriental languages at the royal court under three kings and was appointed head librarian of the Bodleian. A devout Christian and an apologist for his faith, his work betrays a strong Christian reading of all the material at his disposal: the term *Brahama* designating Hindu priests for instance is explained as deriving from nothing other than the name of *Abraham*.[231] Nevertheless, his *Historia Religionis Veterum Persarum eorumque Magorum*, the first scholarly work on Zoroastrianism to be published in Europe, presents the ancient Persians and

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[229] Voltaire 1878, 616.

[230] *Liber Sad-der est breviarium seu compendium ex Zoroastris libris theologicis*, Hyde 1700, *Monitio ad lectorem*, i. and 27. This was much mocked by Anquetil Duperron, 1768, 348-353, 395-396 and 1771, iv. Other (New Persian) works referenced by Hyde include the *Zartošt Nāmeh* and dictionaries, sent to him by contacts living in India.

[231] Bayle 1738, 343, n. D.

their religion in a remarkably positive light.[232] His first chapter separates the Persians into *Veteres* and *Moderniores*, observing that the ancient Persians had a "religion entirely different from that of the modern" still preserved among their descendants in Persia and India.[233] He further distinguishes three states (*status triplex*) of Zoroastrianism: from an initial state of purity, with its followers worshipping the only true god "of whom they had very just notions" (*veri Dei notitiam*), Zoroastrianism became corrupted by Sabaism, which encouraged them to revere the stars excessively.[234] Zoroaster is presented as *reformator* and *legislator*, a man considered most learned by all (*viri omnium consensu doctissimi*), with some knowledge of the Old Testament (*non fuit ignarus Veteris Testamenti*), and who was even thought by some to have been born in Palestine.[235] Hyde also refutes the reports by Greek and Roman authors according to which the ancient Persians were "Fire idolaters", declaring that these historians were themselves nothing more than idolaters, thereby marking a sharp break with the faith that scholars had traditionally placed in classical historiography. Based on the authority of a friend, Nicolas Sanson – cartographer to the French king – as well as reports from "others living among the Persians", he distinguishes the Persians' service to the Fire, described as *Pyrodulia*, from *Pyrolatria* or "Fire idolatry" proper.[236] Indeed, when asked whether they worshipped the sun, stars and fire, the Zoroastrian priests are said to have replied that they only saw God in the element of Fire: they were careful to clarify that the element of Fire and its related luminaries were not the object of their prayers. Here again Hyde turns to technical terminology to defend the ancient Persian religion, calling scholars to distinguish a divine cult from a civil one (*distinguere inter adorationem divinam et civilem*): the ancient Persians dedicated a *cultus divinus* to God alone (*soli Deo*), whereas they observed a *cultus civilis* to Fire and Mithra, considered very sacred but never divine as such (*non autem ut Deum habuerunt*).[237]

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[232] See Williams 2004 and Stroumsa 2010, 102-113.

[233] Hyde 1700, 1 and Bayle 1738, 342, n. D.

[234] Hyde 1700, 2-3.

[235] Hyde 1700, 16, 27.

[236] Hyde 1700, 4-5.

[237] Hyde 1700, 6. Hyde's appeal to the 'category' of 'civil religion' was part of a lively debate among theologians of his time: on the intellectual context behind the concept of *cultus civilis*, see Stroumsa 2010, 24-38, 107. For a critical analysis of Hyde's study of Zoroastrianism within the intellectual context of his time, see Stroumsa 2010, 102-113.

The alphabets of the Zoroastrians according to Hyde.

Hyde turns to the Arabo-Persian chronicles for information concerning the Zoroastrian religious texts. His twenty-sixth chapter, dedicated to the language and alphabet of the Books of Zoroaster, echoes several of the motifs highlighted above:[238] Zoroaster's gospel was called the Zend-Avesta, was organized in twenty-one parts and originally written on twelve thousand hides, in a language and – here Hyde adds – a script that was most ancient and unintelligible to his followers. In this original copy according to Hyde, there were no foreign words (*voces exoticae*) and the idiom – which he records as being called Pehlevi (*Péhlavi*, *vulgus Pehéllavi*) – remained in its purest state.[239] The Zoroastrian priests finally translated the gospel into a language intelligible to all and for Hyde it is in this idiom that works such as the *Saddar* and the *Zartošt Nāmeh* are redacted. In line, once more, with the Arabo-Persian tradition, he records a further stratum of Zoroastrian canonical exegesis: the Zend-Avesta includes a special layer of commentary consisting in the "thoughts of Zoroaster", the *Liber Pāzend*.

As Anquetil Duperron observed, the definition of *pāzend* as the commentary to the oldest stratum of Zoroastrian liturgical material and that of Pehlevi as the name of the language of the ancient Persians is found in a New Persian dictionary called the *Frahang Djehangiri*.[240] The reference to *voces exoticae* and their absence from the older stratum of "Zend" is probably derived from the observation made in the Arabo-Persian chronicles that the *dīn dabīrah* contained no arameograms/Nabatean words: Hyde, like Anquetil Duperron, misses the chronicles' explanation of Nabatean/Syriac words as a form of spelling however and evidently considered these Semitic forms to be loanwords. He describes the letters in which Zoroaster's Zend-Avesta is written as those of the 'most ancient Persians' (*Literae vetustissimorum Persarum*), differing somewhat from the *Character Pazendicus*: he seems to consider the distinction between Zend and *pāzend* characters as a typographical one, comparing it to the way in which letters used by all differs from Royal typography, which introduces the notion that *pāzend* was an alternate writing-system, as well as an exegetical tool.[241] By contrast, Anquetil Duperron was adamant that *pāzend* was a "dialect or an alteration" stemming from the Zoroastrian priests' corruption of their lawgiver's incomprehensible idiom: the French

[238] See Chapter 1.

[239] Hyde 1700, 338; 1760, 342.

[240] Anquetil Duperron 1768, 348-349.

[241] Hyde 1760, 342.

scholar betrays some uneasiness with this explanation however, for he concludes abruptly that *pāzend* is not worth spending any more time on since it was no longer used.[242] Hyde includes several lexicons of "Zend" terms and phrases carefully – albeit approximately – written out in Avestan characters, such as a catalogue of names and attributes of deities and "angels", *devs* (*diaboli*),[243] or again the names of the months, but these terms as Anquetil Duperron was quick to point out are mostly "du Persan moderne, revêtu de caractères Zends".[244]

Contention over the decipherment of Middle Persian: Hyde against Anquetil Duperron.

It is also worth noting that the second edition of Hyde's work, published in 1760, includes an alphabet of "Zend and Pāzend" characters which his original edition of 1700 did not: this edition is likely linked to Anquetil Duperron's work on the Zoroastrian texts, as was the publication in 1767 of the *Syntagma Dissertationum quas olim auctor Doctissimus Thomas Hyde,* a posthumous collection of letters accompanied by a catalogue of unpublished manuscripts by the Oxonian.[245] Indeed, Anquetil Duperron seems to have had to defend his pioneering translation of the Zoroastrian religious manuscripts:[246] after demonstrating that Hyde had in fact no knowledge of either the Avestan or Middle Persian languages, he cites letters by the English scholar dating to the very end of his life to prove that the latter had intended to but never did embark on a translation of the books of Zoroaster.[247] Anquetil Duperron points out that the manuscript XIX, called *Zoroastris Perso-Medi opera omnia Mathematico-Medico-Physico Theologica, Persice et Latine* was so entitled to suggest that Hyde had actually translated Avestan and Pehlevi texts in an unedited manuscript: "en l'annonçant ainsi dans un catalogue, les Anglois ont voulu donner à entendre que M. Hyde, leur compatriote, avait traduit les Ouvrages Originaux de Zoroastre […] je les sommes de produire ce Manuscrit, ou du moins de dire nettement et en détail ce qu'il contient".[248] Hyde was not the only scholar that Anquetil Duperron was to contend with to earn recognition from the scientific community. In the updated edition of the *Dictionnaire Historique Portatif*, the

[242] Anquetil Duperron 1768, 394-398.

[243] Hyde 1760, 175-180.

[244] Anquetil Duperron 1771, I, 489.

[245] Sharpe 1767.

[246] Anquetil Duperron 1771, I, 488-502.

[247] Anquetil Duperron 1771, I, 496.

[248] Anquetil Duperron 1771, I, 497.

entry dedicated to "Zoroaster" included an addendum recording that a certain Jonas Otter, a Swedish traveller and scholar of Oriental languages, had begun a translation of the Books of Zoroaster: Anquetil Duperron showed that the paragraph was in fact added a few months after he had sent a letter from Surat to the Comte de Caylus detailing the progress of his work on the Zoroastrian manuscripts.[249]

Hyde and the copies of inscriptions by Samuel Flower: cuneiform as decorative ornaments. Unlike Anquetil Duperron who focused entirely on the manuscripts he obtained from the Parsis, Hyde had to use all the material at his disposal, and especially the travelogues of the early European travellers to Persia. He cites for instance Herbert and Mandelslo's accounts of the Parsi burial customs in his penultimate chapter, dedicated to Zoroastrian marriage and funerary practices.[250] More particularly, he devotes a lengthy annex to Samuel Flower's draughts of Sasanian inscriptions published in the *Philosophical Transactions*. His republication of Flower's copies greatly contributed to their circulation: Kaempfer for example cites the draughts printed by *Clarissimo Hydeo*.[251] Hyde begins his discussion of Flower's samples by declaring unequivocally that none of these could possibly represent ancient Persian writings: they must be the etchings of idle foreigners (*Alienigenarium ibi divertentium*).[252] Concerning the intriguing "Pyramidal" characters, which Flower had identified as the writing of the 'Gaures' or possibly sacred symbols, Hyde goes even further: he considers the figures to be decorative elements (*solius ornatus causa*), nothing but the playful etchings of the sculptor (*merus lusus primi architecti*) who was trying to see how many combinations he could produce with a single figure (*diversa eorundem positione et compositione, oriri possent*)[253]– an interpretation that would later be much mocked by Silvestre de Sacy. Hyde's confident assertion that the cuneiform figures were not a writing system contrasts starkly with the spontaneous assumptions to the contrary by all early travellers to Persepolis. It probably stems from a combination of factors. First, the very same travellers' identification of cuneiform as the writing of the ancient Zoroastrians probably prompted Hyde to compare the figures with the Avestan characters of the texts in his possession, and to conclude that they bore no relation

[249] Anquetil Duperron 1771, I, 498-502.

[250] Hyde 1760, 416-417.

[251] Kaempfer 1712, 319.

[252] Hyde 1700, 517 and 1760, 546.

[253] Hyde 1760, 557.

to each other whatsoever. Far away from the field, the scholar was also unable to appreciate just how carefully and extensively cuneiform characters were engraved on the stone ruins.

Alexander king of kings of the Asians.

Hyde sets out to decipher with more confidence the two Greek legends described by Flower as being engraved on the horses of Rostam and Alexander.[254] He is careful to emphasise at several points how ill-assured the hand of the engraver is (*Persepolitanae Inscriptiones sunt pessime exaratae*): [255] this is in fact crucial for it supports his heavy emendation of the legends. Indeed, in the first legend Hyde is confident that he can read the name ΑΡΖΑΝΔΡΟΥ/ ΑΛΖΑΝΔΡΟΥ based on the first four letters copied by Flowers, ΑΡΖΑ, deciding it must be a corrupted pronunciation of "Alexander".[256] He reconstitutes the legend as reading "This is the face/likeness of the divine Alexander the Great, king of kings of the Asians": ΑΡΙΑΝΩΝ is emended to ΑΣΙΑΝΩΝ. The second text, "This is the face of the divine Jupiter", poses less difficulty.[257] Because this legend does not present any trace of the name Rostam, Hyde decides that the phrase ΔΙΟΣ ΘΕΟΥ is an honorary epithet attributed to the figure of Alexander (*adulando Alexandrum sub nomine Jovis*). His determination to read the name of the Macedonian conqueror in the broken lines of Greek text, as well as his attribution of both legends to the same figure because he cannot find the name he expected in the second, illustrates the strong impact of traditions – in this case probably even introduced by European travellers – on the reading of inscriptions.

Hyde's Palmyrene inscriptions.

Hyde finally ventures a hypothesis concerning the nature of the "exotic" inscriptions (*alias exoticas*) accompanying the Greek legends and that he had forcefully argued could not be Persian writings. He decides that they cannot be the work of Barbarian invaders, such as the Huns, Goths or Vandals, for these tribes according to classical historians had no writing system

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[254] On Hyde's decipherment of the inscriptions in Flower's drawings, see also see Wiesehöfer and Huyse (forthcoming), "Carsten Niebuhr and Antoine Isaac Silvestre de Sacy: How a keen observer and a gifted young scholar unravelled the secrets of Sasanian Naqš-e Rostam", 206-207.

[255] Hyde 1760, 550.

[256] Hyde 1760, 549-550.

[257] These exact readings were as we saw recorded – and dismissed – by Chardin who attributed them to anonymous "learned scholars", suggesting that the French traveller was acquainted with Hyde's opus, see above Chapter 2.

of their own (*nullas habuisse Literas*).[258] He then compares the unknown characters to the alphabets used by neighbouring peoples, such as the "Tartars", Armenians or again Georgians (plates XV-XVIII), concluding they are too different. In any case, this would not explain the Greek versions, for what Tartar could possibly have written Greek? It is worth noting in this respect that Anquetil Duperron also made a careful comparison of the Georgian, Armenian and Avestan alphabets. His comparative table of the three scripts even includes two columns each for the Georgian and Armenian alphabets, offering alternative orientations of the characters – Géorgien/Arménien naturel et Géorgien/Arménien renversé – to highlight their resemblance to the Avestan graphemes: he justifies his inversion of the letters in his table by remarking that Avestan was written from right to left, unlike Armenian and Georgian, which would have – naturally – modified the graphemes' shape.[259] Based on this comparative study Anquetil Duperron concludes that Avestan was directly affiliated to Georgian and to a lesser extent to Armenian also – l'arménien me donnera quelques ressemblances, et le géorgien le génie – while the substantial differences between the alphabets are attributed to the "reforms" carried out on the Armenian writing system in the fifth century:[260] he declares that Avestan was originally used in Armenia and Georgia at least up until the fifth century.

After much consideration, Hyde decides that the Palmyrene script is the only possible candidate for the mysterious alphabet in Flower's samples.[261] The main argument seems to be the scripts' aesthetic resemblance: the scholar even identifies several Palmyrene characters in Flower's draughts, although he does not clarify which ones, while the more divergent letters are attributed to the scribe's distinctive hand. Another consideration which seems to prompt Hyde's hypothesis is the very fact that the legends include a Greek version: multilingual epigraphic texts and in particular the inclusion of a Greek version is described as a Palmyrene tradition (*Palmyrenorum more, Punice scripsit et Graece explicavit*).[262] Furthermore, the style of the Greek legends copied by Flower, in which the characters omega and epsilon are engraved in lower-case rather than in capitals like the rest, is thought to reproduce Palmyrene epigraphic conventions. The ill-assured hand of the Greek versions, Hyde continues, indicates that these inscriptions could not possibly have been commissioned by Alexander the Great himself –

[258] Hyde 1760, 550.

[259] Anquetil Duperron 1768, Pl. II, 358-361.

[260] The invention of the Armenian script is described by Movses Khorenatsi, see Chapter 1 above.

[261] Note that Hyde is unable to distinguish the Parthian from the Middle Persian script in Flower's drawings, discussing the non-Greek characters in general.

[262] Hyde 1760, 555.

whom the legends are supposed to be identifying – but the much later work of bored Palmyrene mercenaries.[263]

Hyde's identification of Palmyrene in the legends of Naqš-e Rostam – accepted by scholars for almost a century – was probably encouraged by the very recent publication of a set of bilingual Greek-Palmyrene inscriptions copied in Palmyra by a team of East India Company merchants posted in Aleppo.[264] In 1753 an exhaustive study of the ruins of Palmyra was published in London, including better copies of thirteen Palmyrene inscriptions, eight of which were accompanied by Greek counterparts.[265] The decipherment of Palmyrene "the language of the ancient Syrians", based on the Greek versions, was successfully accomplished by the Abbé Jean-Jacques Barthélémy, curator of the Cabinet des Médailles.[266] Key points of his methodology are worth highlighting here, as they were later followed by Silvestre de Sacy in his work on the Sasanian inscriptions. The Abbé Barthélémy begins by warning against comparing the alphabet of an unknown script with that of a neighbouring people, which is what Anquetil Duperron effectively did in his comparative table of Avestan, Georgian and Armenian. When a translation of the inscription in a familiar language is provided, the word-by-word comparison of the versions, with particular attention to the names – likely to be transcribed phonetically – is a much safer way of proceeding. Having established the Palmyrene alphabet according to this procedure the Abbé Barthélémy then noted the script's similarity with Hebrew, and in his transcriptions of the Palmyrene versions he uses the better-known Hebrew script, a convention that Silvestre de Sacy also observed.

The first suggestion of a Sasanian date for the unknown inscriptions in Flower's copies.

The Abbé Barthélémy follows Hyde in labelling the 'oriental' versions in Flower's copies as Palmyrene, despite his extensive work on that alphabet, although he does not venture a transcription of them. He cites as further support for this identification the passage in Epiphanius' *Panarion*, discussed above, according to which the Persians used the Palmyrene language and letters.[267] On the other hand, he disagrees with Hyde's reading of the name "Alexander" and makes crucial remarks concerning the date of the inscriptions. After Gijsbert

[263] Hyde 1760, 554-555.

[264] Halifax 1695.

[265] Wood 1753.

[266] Barthélémy 1759.

[267] Barthélémy 1759, 596.

Kuiper, a Dutch philologist and antiquarian, who in a letter to a colleague judged Hyde's reconstruction of the name Alexander based on the four letters APZA "too violent and too bold", the Abbé Barthélémy proposed instead to restore the name APZAKOY, Arsaces.[268] He further remarks that the phrase "king of kings", as well as the title "god", occurs on the Greek legends of Parthian coins, strongly pointing to a Parthian date for the inscriptions. Nevertheless, he suggests an alternate possibility, one that was to orient Silvestre de Sacy in his study of the samples. According to classical historiography – namely Strabo, book XV, chap 3 – the central province of Persis was under the rule of its own kings, subordinate to the Parthian overlords. In searching for another, more local candidate for a dynasty, the Abbé Barthélémy settles on the Sasanian kings.[269] He even observes astutely that some Sasanians were named Artaxerxes venturing that it may be this very name that the unaccomplished engraver sought to reproduce, correctly identifying the monarch labeled in the legend: Ardašīr is indeed derived from Old Persian Artaxerxes, although of course the name's deformation has nothing to do with the engraver's purported misspelling of it.

II. Early breakthroughs in the decipherment of inscriptional Middle Persian.

Silvestre de Sacy and his Mémoires sur diverses antiquités de la Perse.

The tentative but significant headway achieved by scholars like the Abbé Barthélémy after Hyde's initial study of Flower's drawings, as well as the publication by Niebuhr of much improved copies of the texts – in which he carefully distinguished the Middle Persian from the Parthian versions – provided Silvestre de Sacy with the necessary tools to undertake the decipherment of inscriptional Middle Persian. His *Mémoires sur diverses antiquités de la Perse*, published in 1793, is organised in five parts. The first is dedicated to the Greek versions of the Sasanian label inscriptions while the second is a study of the Arabo-Persian inscriptions of Persepolis: Silvestre de Sacy concedes that the relationship between these two sets of texts is spatial rather than either historic, linguistic or epigraphic, and in this respect, he closely followed the initial selection of inscriptions copied by European travellers, beginning with Flower. The third part tackles the Middle Persian and Parthian versions of the legends while

[268] Cuper 1755, 29-30; Barthélémy 1759, 595. See also Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 17, 27-29. For more detail on Cuper's work on the Greek versions of the Sasanian inscriptions as well as his active correspondence with the other scholars of his day on this subject, see see Wiesehöfer and Huyse (forthcoming), 207-210.

[269] Barthélémy 1759, 595.

the fourth focuses on the decipherment of the Sasanian coins kept in the Cabinet du Roi: after his pioneering work on the inscriptional Middle Persian script, Silvestre de Sacy was given full access to the objects – he was even allowed to take them home to examine them at his leisure – by the Abbé Barthélémy himself.[270] Because the Sasanians were little known in Western scholarship, the French scholar annexes to his work a translation of the section dedicated to this dynasty in the Universal history of Mīrkhwānd, a Bukhara-born historian and geographer from the fifteenth century. Silvestre de Sacy's four studies were published several years after they were read before the Académie: he insisted that the Imprimerie du Louvre fashion Arabic characters for the impression, inaugurating a new era for the (secular) publication of Arabic and Persian works in France.

Antoine Isaac Silvestre de Sacy (1758-1838) was from a family of notaries, and it seems that it was his chance meeting with a Benedictine monk that opened the doors of Oriental Studies for him.[271] With his mentor, he learned first Hebrew and then Arabic, Persian and Turkish, while earning a living by working at the Court of Auditors. It was only in 1795, several years after his breakthrough with the decipherment of Middle Persian, that he became professor of Arabic at the newly created school for Oriental languages of the Bibliothèque nationale; a decade later the new Chair of Persian and Turkish at the Collège de France (then, the Collège imperial) was conferred upon him.[272] He was named interpreter of Oriental languages at the Ministry of Foreign affairs – but he never left France.

Silvestre de Sacy begins his landmark study by addressing the famous cuneiform inscriptions – l' "écriture à clous" – the focus of Western scholarly interest in his day. Without directly contributing to its decipherment, he nevertheless firmly refutes Hyde's assertion that the characters were only decorative and uses the better and more extensive copies recently published by Niebuhr to show that the repetition of certain combinations of cuneiform figures confirmed that these formed a writing system.[273] Silvestre de Sacy also berates other scholars such as the German Orientalist Samuel Friedrich Wahl, who claimed that the characters were ideograms, engraved in boustrophedon and belonged to a single writing system rather than

[270] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 170.

[271] For more detail on Silvestre de Sacy's carrier and scientific contributions in a number of fields in Oriental studies, see see Wiesehöfer and Huyse (forthcoming), 196-197, 215-216.

[272] Dehérain 1936, 265-269.

[273] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 3-7.

three separate ones: for Silvestre de Sacy, these assertions were clearly contradicted by the accounts of de Bruijn and Niebuhr.

Alexander becomes Ardašīr.

But the focus of the French scholar's work was not to be these inscriptions. He begins by addressing the Greek versions of the short legends copied by Niebuhr.[274] The German traveller had drawn the label inscriptions of the site of Naqš-e Rajab as well as the two others already known from Flower's draughts: Silvestre de Sacy concedes that the simple addition of this third legend, because it presents the same formulaic phraseology as the other two, was fundamental for his reconstruction of the blanks and, ultimately, enabled his decipherment of the script.[275] Thanks to the careful comparison of all three inscriptions, Silvestre de Sacy offers a perfect reconstruction of the Greek legends: Niebuhr's better examples allowed him to correct Flower's APZA into APT, encouraging the reading of the name Artaxerxes as supposed by his predecessors, while this king's patronymic – he is "son of Papak" – confirms his identity as Ardašīr I.[276] Concerning the legend's surprising description of the Sasanian king as a "god" (ΘΕΟΥ), Silvestre de Sacy decides that it must be an honorary epithet, observing that it occurs on Parthian coinage; he further compares the epithet ΕΚ ΓΕΝΟΥΣ ΘΕΩΝ to the qualification of Parthian kings as ΘΕΟΠΑΤΩΡ.[277]

Tackling Middle Persian words through the lens of the Greek legends.

The terms directly transliterated from Middle Persian give him more trouble, and this is where Anquetil Duperron's pioneering work on the Zoroastrian manuscripts was salutary. Silvestre de Sacy first tackles the technical term ΜΑΣΔΑΣΝΟΥ. He argues that although it directly precedes the word "god", it is not the name of a divinity but an epithet: the Greek rendering of the ubiquitous Middle Persian *māzdēsn* ("les *mazdiesnans*") which describes the followers of Zoroaster's doctrine in the manuscripts.[278] After Anquetil Duperron he is able to correctly explain the term as being formed on the verb "to worship" (MP *yaz*-) and cites as further

[274] For a study on Silvestre de Sacy's decipherment of the Sasanian inscriptions based on Niebuhr's drawings, see also Wiesehöfer and Huyse (forthcoming), 197-199, 213-216.

[275] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 30-31.

[276] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 32-33.

[277] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 38.

[278] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 39, n. 64.

justification for his interpretation the term's negative counterpart, "les *dewïesnans*" (Middle Persian *dēwēsn*-), '*dēw*-worshipping'.[279] Silvestre de Sacy then turns to the Graecized Persian term APIANΩN, rejecting his predecessors' reconstruction AΣIANΩN by showing that the letters did not support it. He first considers that it may designate the province of Arran, located according to Arabo-Persian chronicles between Georgia and Azerbaijan and transcribed in Late Antique sources as Ἀριάνια. Judging this small province an unlikely candidate for the homeland of the Sasanian kings however, and after much hesitation, he decides that the letters most likely transcribe the name "Iran". In the Arabo-Persian chronicles the term describes the great geographical area between the Euphrates, the Persian Gulf and the Indus and is linked to a core foundation myth of Persian epic, according to which the mythical king Feridun split his kingdom between his three sons, allocating the best and central part to his most beloved youngest son Iraj, after whom Irān was named: it was from then on that the world was divided between Rūm, Irān and Tūrān.[280] Silvestre de Sacy concludes that "king of kings of Iran" was a suitable titulature for the Sasanian monarch. It is nevertheless worth noting that the toponym Iran was not an obvious choice to Silvestre de Sacy, in the same way that it did not occur to his predecessors who heavily emended the word in the inscriptions to read "Asia": both the ancient empire and the modern country were only known as Persia to western scholarship until the French decipherment of the Sasanian inscriptions. The term ANAPIANΩN is more problematic, as he cannot find its equivalent in the Zoroastrian scriptures; in the Arabo-Persian chronicles, the term usually associated with "Iran" when designating universal kingship is that of Tūrān. Nevertheless, in line with the idea of universal kingship, the French scholar ventures the hypothesis that ANAPIAN must simply be the opposite of APIAN: the a- prefix would have a privative meaning, as in Greek. His conjecture is once again supported by the corpus of Zoroastrian texts with the examples of such pairs as *marg* and *amarg* ('death' and 'immortal').[281] This prompts him to underline the great conformity of the language in the manuscripts with that of the inscriptions: it was evident even through the lens of the Greek transcription. His observation is the first explicit comparison between inscriptional and manuscript Middle Persian, although they are not yet fully identified as being the same idiom. Nevertheless, although Silvestre de Sacy correctly explained the notion of an-Iran, he was

[279] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 39-40; Anquetil Duperron 1771, I/2, 88, n. 2.

[280] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 47-48.

[281] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 60-61.

evidently not comfortable with it, preferring instead in his translation to keep the title "king of kings of Iran and Turan".

Concerning the Greek label identifying Jupiter in the bas-reliefs, Silvestre de Sacy correctly surmises that it is the engraver's direct translation of the name "Ohrmazd", noting that the Greeks habitually gave familiar names to the divinities they encountered in foreign lands. He then adds however that the translator was probably wrong in assuming that the name referred to the Zoroastrian supreme God: several kings of the Sasanian dynasty were called "Hormizd", and he suggests that the figure represents one of the monarchs so named.[282]

Deciphering inscriptional Middle Persian.

Silvestre de Sacy proceeds to compare the Greek legends he has just explained with – what we now know to be – their Middle Persian counterparts, focusing on the names as well as the terms derived from Middle Persian such as ΜΑΣΔΑΣΝΟΥ; after the Abbé Barthélémy, he gives the transliteration of the Middle Persian versions in Hebrew characters. Noticing that ΜΑΣΔΑΣΝΟΥ occurs twice in the Naqš-e Rajab inscription, he singles out the set of letters repeated as many times in the Middle Persian version.[283] This allows him to confirm the value of the first letter as a *mem*: he observes that the very shape of this letter, which resembles the 'm' of other Semitic alphabets, further encouraged this deduction. Following the same procedure, he recognizes the name Papak, easily identifiable by the repetition of two letters; the next term to focus his attention is *arian*, again because of its likely close correspondence to the Greek ΑΡΙΑΝΩΝ. Having thus secured an alphabet of eight characters Silvestre de Sacy now turns to words translated in Greek rather than phonetically rendered. He can safely assume, based on the Greek versions, that the two closely related terms following the name of the king corresponded to the syntagm 'king of kings' and is able with his small alphabet to transcribe the phrase "*malca malcan*" (MLKA MLKAn). Here he has recourse to Anquetil Duperron's *Vocabulaire Pehlevi, Persan et François* – a lexicon of phonetically transcribed arameograms – to verify that the phrase is given as New Persian "Shahinschah" (*Šāhānšāh*) **[Fig. 3.1]**.[284] It is interesting to note that Silvestre de Sacy correctly analyses the name Šābuhr as being formed on the word for 'king' followed by that for 'son' but does not express any surprise at the fact that the same term 'king' takes the form "*malca*" in the inscription. He only makes a general

[282] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 71.

[283] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 73-74.

[284] Anquetil Duperron 1771, II, 476-526, esp. 516; Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 88.

association between the inscriptional form and the Semitic root MLK, remarking that "le sens ne peut en paraître douteux à ceux qui ont quelques connaissances des langues de l'Orient".[285]

The corpus which Silvestre de Sacy was working from was so limited that he did have difficulty determining the value of the letters occurring only once in a single term: for instance, he does not recognize the 'g' at the end of the word "*bag*" (MP lord/God) which causes him to misunderstand the term completely. Based on the Greek version he could see that "*bag*" repeatedly translated the Greek ΘEOY and thanks to Anquetil Duperron's alphabets, as well as to his own knowledge of Hebrew, he was able to read the first letter confidently as *bet*. In this instance, Anquetil Duperron's *Vocabulaire* could be of no assistance, since the Middle Persian term is spelled phonetically *bgy*.[286] After some hesitation he decides that the final two lines form a single letter, settling on a *het*: he proposes to read the word "*beh*", linking it to New Persian "*beh*", 'best/excellent' (*behtar*).[287] He does admit that the Greek translation of "*beh*" as ΘEOY is surprising, observing that further down in the inscription the plural ΘEWN is definitely rendered by "*iezzed*" (*yazad*, 'god'); evidently nonplussed, he decides that "*beh*" encompassed a wide semantic field similar to that of *optimus*.

The other phrase which caused him difficulty is that corresponding to EK ΓENOYΣ ΘEΩN. Based on his growing Middle Persian inscriptional alphabet he was able to provide a solid transliteration of the phrase as *mino tchetri men ieztan*. The last two words were fairly easy to determine: MN featured in Anquetil Duperron's vocabulary as *men*, given as New Persian *az*, which Silvestre de Sacy himself remarked is in 'a great number of oriental languages' a preposition corresponding to *ex*;[288] *yztn*, corresponding directly to the Greek ΘEWN, he could compare to New Persian *iezdan*. Impressively, he is also able to read the word *čihr*, "*tchetri*", even though this is the first and only occurrence of the letter 'ch'.[289] He finds the Avestan *tchethré* in the *Vocabulaire Zend* provided by Anquetil Duperron[290] in which it is given as New Persian "*tokhmé*" (*tokhme*, 'family, seed'), a good fit for the corresponding Greek ΓENOY. On the other hand, he is completely misled by the heterogram that opens the phrase, MNW, the relative pronoun *kē*. He reads it phonetically *mino* and links it to Middle Persian *mēnōg*, a term which encapsulates the complex Zoroastrian notion of 'spiritual/immaterial'. To

[285] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 85-86.

[286] The (silent) final *yod* is a scribal convention particular to inscriptional Middle Persian, see Huyse 2003.

[287] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 76-84.

[288] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 97; Anquetil Duperron 1771, II, 518.

[289] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 90.

[290] Anquetil Duperron 1771, II, 433-475.

suit his purposes, Silvestre de Sacy settles for a more general meaning as 'celestial': *mino tchetri* would thus describe the 'celestial seed' of the kings.[291] In this interpretation, he was further encouraged – and misled – by the name of the mythical Persian king Manučihr, given as "*Minotchetr*" in Anquetil Duperron's translations. This reading of the heterogram MNW would persist until the end of the 19th century, giving rise to many serious and extraordinary misinterpretations.

For the arameogram BRE – Middle Persian *pus*, 'son' – Silvestre de Sacy is in fact misled in his decipherment by Anquetil Duperron's very *Vocabulaire*. In this lexicon, BRE is given as *boman*:[292] the problem of the phonetic transliteration of the arameogram is compounded by that of not recognizing the graphemes particular to heterograms; the final 'E', which in cursive – but not inscriptional – Middle Persian is graphically analogous to an 'm+n' ending was transcribed as *man*.[293] Silvestre de Sacy does recognize that the final grapheme does not look like an 'm' joined to an 'n' in his copies, but, based on the comparison with cursive Middle Persian he decides it must be a ligature or abbreviation of an 'm+n' pair.

Silvestre de Sacy also flatly admits defeat regarding the formula corresponding to the Greek phrase 'this is the image of', although he tentatively puts forward the transliteration, *petkeli zanatch*. Searching for a Persian word meaning 'image' that might correspond to this set of letters, he settles on New Persian '*put*' (*bot*, idol) and also proposes to emend the arameogram ZNE to *zakedj*, based on Anquetil Duperron's lexicon:[294] it is not clear what term Anquetil Duperron's entry is referring to, but is probably formed on the arameogram ZK, the demonstrative pronoun referring to what is far from the speaker. In an addendum to his study Silvestre de Sacy revisits this phrase, confirming his reading of the first word and linking it more convincingly to Armenian *patker*, 'image', and New Persian *pahikar*. He is not able to correct his reading of the demonstrative pronoun but does remark that one should not be surprised to find loanwords taken from Chaldean and Syriac, giving as examples the terms for king, MLKA, people, ANŠWTA or again TWRA for cow and BYTA for house, referring his reader to the lexicon in Anquetil Duperron's Zend-Avesta: Silvestre de Sacy is here directly

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[291] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 92-93. He is probably also encouraged in this by New Persian *minu*, 'paradise'.

[292] Anquetil Duperron 1771, II, 470, 485.

[293] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 99. To make matters worse, the 'r' and 'w' (and 'n') in Middle Persian are written with the same grapheme, explaining Anquetil Duperron's reading *bo-* for BR.

[294] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 108; Anquetil Duperron 1771, II, 440.

discussing the presence of arameograms in Middle Persian but presenting them as loanwords.[295]

Looking at the second 'unknown' alphabet of the trilingual Sasanian inscriptions.

Silvestre de Sacy's work on the Middle Persian inscriptions allows him to tackle the Parthian versions, although his decipherment of this script is much less successful. He judges the letters of this second unknown alphabet 'much cruder', but Niebuhr's copies are detailed enough for him to see that they are again translations of the same legends: he observes for instance that the same series of characters expresses the Greek ΤΟ ΠΡΟΣΟΠωΝ (sic) ΤΟΥΤΟ.[296] He also identifies the term *mazdasn*, corresponding to Middle Persian *mazdiesn* (*mazdēsn*). Concerning this similar but variant orthography he notes that the Middle Persian spelling is more conservative, keeping the trace of the word's etymology. He also astutely remarks that the Greek transliteration of the term is more directly calqued on the Parthian spelling, suggesting that this second unknown language was the model for the Greek translation. He is further able to make out the terms MLKA MLKAn, *ērān* and *anērān*, as well as the kings' names. He makes the easy mistake of confusing the Parthian inscriptional 'r' and 'k' graphemes and is therefore unable to recognize the arameogram BRE for son: reading instead "*kakou*", he attempts to link it to another term of filiation, New Persian "*kakouïa*" (probably *kakuyeh*, uncle ?).[297]

Silvestre de Sacy concludes his study by reminding his reader acidly that Hyde had refused to consider that the scripts in Flower's copies could represent Iranian languages, taking them to be the work of Palmyrene mercenaries. He nevertheless concedes that both sets of unknown characters in the Sasanian inscriptions present strong similarities with Palmyrene letters, joining his predecessors in recognizing that the Palmyrene, Hebrew, Syriac and these two new alphabets representing Persian languages are related. He further remarks that the very fact that most words in the inscriptions could be explained by the Zoroastrian scriptures encouraged the identification of the first unknown alphabet as Middle Persian or at least "a close dialect",[298] while the second type of characters would represent a related but different

[295] Silvestre de Sacy, 1794, 4.

[296] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 108-109. One would expect ΠΡΟΣΩΠΟΝ, but the omicron and omega were switched places in the Greek versions of the trilingual inscriptions; Silvestre de Sacy is therefore reproducing what is engraved on the stone through travellers' copies of the inscriptions).

[297] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 113-114.

[298] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 123.

idiom: in this regard, Silvestre de Sacy notes that several Arabo-Persian chronicles mention an idiom specific to the people of Deylam. He also decides that since neither of the alphabets transcribe (long) vowels, this set them safely apart from Avestan (Zend), which is specifically characterized by a great number of vowels.

The Middle Persian legends of the Cabinet du Roi.

Silvestre de Sacy applies his findings to the coins and medals kept at the Cabinet du Roi, successfully reattributing to the Sasanians objects that had previously been identified as Parthian thanks to the decipherment of the legends. In this respect his work on the trilingual label inscriptions was fundamental: the texts gave him a template of Sasanian royal titulature, which allowed him instantly to recognize the formulae of the numismatic corpus, even when certain objects presented a mixed form of script, part monumental and part cursive. He publishes a comparative table of the cursive and monumental characters (pl. VI, VII) which is the first attempt – after the Arabo-Persian chroniclers – made to examine the different forms of Middle Persian scripts.[299]

However, his work on the coins and medals does not help him to correct some of his erroneous readings, and we find here again the term *bag*, transcribed as *beh*, as well as the relative pronoun *kē*, MNW, given as *mēnōg*. Nevertheless, he does find the term *anērān* on the coins of Bahram, allowing him to confirm his earlier tentative decipherment; he adds in this respect that the *saddar* records the phrase Iran and an-Iran, describing the first as the realm inhabited by people wearing the sacred Zoroastrian girdle (the *kustīg*) and the latter as that where the *kustīg* is not worn.[300] Silvestre de Sacy notes that a series of coins he examined were engraved with legends presenting a script that was somewhat different from the alphabet used in the Sasanian legends. Now these were often accompanied by Greek legends or Greek letters, considered to be the initial letter of the town in which they were minted. He is unable to decipher the inscriptions in unknown characters but based on the Greek legends he is confident that the coins ought to be attributed to Parthian kings.[301] It is curious in this respect that Silvestre de Sacy never ventured the hypothesis that the second type of unknown character in the trilingual inscriptions he so carefully studied could be Parthian; perhaps the Arsacids were so widely regarded as using Greek that this was not a possibility that occurred to scholarship.

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[299] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 170.

[300] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 181-186.

[301] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 201-202.

Grélots draughts of Tāq-e Bostān are brought to Silvestre de Sacy's attention.

Silvestre de Sacy also applies his discoveries to the study of other Middle Persian inscriptions, such as those engraved at Tāq-e Bostān: the texts again record the titulatures of Sasanian kings and he was now well-armed to tackle these.[302] Silvestre de Sacy had no knowledge of Ambrosio Bembo's travelogue and for his study bases himself entirely on the unpublished journal and drawings provided to him by the Abbé Beauchamps. He is immediately able to recognize that the inscriptions are Middle Persian:[303] he therefore calls into question the attribution of the site to the Assyrian queen Semiramis by classical historiographers, as well as to Cyrus, confidently dating the structures to the Sasanians. He determines with little difficulty that the inscriptions record the titulatures of Šābuhr II, son of Narseh confirming the genealogy of this king with the Arabo-Persian chronicles;[304] on the other hand he mistakenly reads the name Bahram in the second text, misled in part by the faulty drawings of the Abbé.[305] Here again we find the misreading of *kē čihr* as "*minotchetr*", as well as *bag* as "*beh*". More problematic is his transcription of the phrase *mavan lou an* in the first line of each inscription which he makes to correspond to the Greek ΤΟ ΠΡΟΣΟΠωΝ (*sic*) ΤΟΥΤΟ: he links *lou* to the Persian term for face '*rū*' while *ān* is the far-deictic in the same language. The French scholar is encouraged to read '*row*' in the letters 'lu' of the Abbé's ill-assured draughts because the Middle Persian inscriptions from Tāq-e Bostān regularly interchange the grapheme 'l' for 'r', spelling for instance *ēlān* and *anēlān*: rather than recognizing this as a feature of Middle Persian more generally, Silvestre de Sacy decides that the 'dialect' locally spoken in Kermānšāh did not differentiate between the 'r' and 'l' phonemes.[306] This forced analysis probably shows how uncomfortable he was ultimately with his reconstruction of the phrase *patiker zakedj*. The Middle Persian inscriptions of Tāq-e Bostān also present a new difficulty for Silvestre de Sacy in that they spell *bag* in its arameographic form ORHYA. Cleary confused by this new term - which does not figure in Anquetil Duperron's lexicon – Silvestre de Sacy finally settles on the transcription *vohuia*: this erroneous reading was encouraged by the fact that the graphemes

[302] For a detailed overview and study of the different European travellers' accounts and drawings of the monuments – including the Middle Persian inscriptions – of the site of Tāq-e Bostān, see Potts 2022.

[303] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 242.

[304] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 254.

[305] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 263.

[306] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 244.

representing *ain*, *waw*, *reš* and *nun* are identical – a single, straight vertical line – in Middle Persian. He tentatively links *vohuia* to Avestan *vohū*, 'good', evidently trying to find a term that would render a meaning similar to the "*beh*" which he had read in the first set of inscriptions. He posits that the form *vohuia* was a local dialectal form,[307] a confusion which illustrates once again his heavy dependence on Anquetil Duperron's work on the Zoroastrian scriptures.

Silvestre de Sacy published an essay following up on this study, read before the *Académie* in 1809 but only published in 1815 – by the newly renamed Institut royal de France following the Restauration – in which he made some improvements to his initial readings. The drawings made by Grélot for Ambrosio Bembo were brought to his attention in the meantime by the publication of a compendium of travelogues by Jacopo Morelli.[308] Although Bembo's copies allowed Silvestre de Sacy to correct his earlier reading '*lou*' to *ptkly* and confirm the parallel formulation of these inscriptions with those of Naqš-e Rostam and Naqš-e Rajab, the heterogram ZNE – Middle Persian near deictic *ēn* – still causes him some difficulty: this time he transcribes the phrase *patkeli teman*, after the heterogram TME (*anōh*, 'there'), phonetically transcribed in Anquetil Duperron's lexicon as *tememan* and translated as "*ânou*", 'him', which apparently encouraged Silvestre de Sacy to take it as a near deictic.[309] This reading is nevertheless an improvement in the sense that it recognizes the arameographic 'E' grapheme as being the same as that which ends the word 'son' (arameogram 'BRE') – although Silvestre de Sacy still persists in transcribing 'E' as "*man*", following Anquetil Duperron's reading of its cursive counterpart (which looks exactly like an m+n in that script). Silvestre de Sacy is also able to correct his decipherment of the Sasanian king's name in the second inscription from Bahrām to Šābuhr (III).

The drawings in Bembo's travelogue also contain an etching of the Greek inscription featuring the name of the Arsacid king Gotarzes.[310] Although the lacunary state of the inscription prevented Silvestre de Sacy from any further reconstruction, he does venture the readings "Mithras" and "satrapes" based on the extant three letters MIΘPAZ (*sic*) and ΣAT (according to Bembo's drawing as reproduced in Morelli's compendium), deciding that the

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[307] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 245-246.

[308] Silvestre de Sacy 1815, 164, pl. I (inserted after page 172); see Morelli 1803.

[309] Silvestre de Sacy 1815, 176, 180; Anquetil Duperron 1771, II, 490.

[310] On the Greek inscriptions of Bīsotūn, see most recently Huyse (forthcoming), "Epigraphic and archival sources for Arsacid history", 12, 15-16.

inscription was commissioned by a local Parthian satrap rather than by an Arsacid king.[311] Silvestre de Sacy concluded this study by offering some corrections to the readings of the Middle Persian coin legends published at the turn of the century by the British traveller and scholar William Ouseley. Ouseley's decipherment of the inscriptions on 23 Sasanian silver medals in the private collection of William Hunter was entirely based on the inscriptional Middle Persian alphabet reconstituted by Silvestre de Sacy and the formulaic royal titulature he had identified.[312] Silvestre de Sacy namely rectifies Ouseley's errouneous reading *atoun* to *atour*, 'fire' (*ʾtwr*, *ādur*).[313] However, we still find, in his examination of these coin legends, the problematic reading "*minotchetr*", although he regards it in this case as rendering a first name rather than an epithet.[314]

III. Middle Persian studies within the broader research field of Iranian studies.

Middle Persian as an emblem of an 'alliance' between Semitic and Aryan peoples.

Silvestre de Sacy's breakthrough with the decipherment of inscriptional Middle Persian firmly associated the language of the inscriptions with that of the commentaries in the Zoroastrian manuscripts as well as that engraved on the coins dating to the reigns of the Sasanian kings, thereby anchoring the use of Middle Persian within that dynasty and bringing Iran's Sasanian history into the spotlight: Anquetil Duperron had estimated that "Pehlevi" was spoken up until the early Sasanian period, but he considered it to be a much older language. Yet, many difficulties remained. The Middle Persian heterographic writing system was still misunderstood, giving way to serious misreadings. Related to this problem was the fact that the Semitic-looking words in the inscriptions and manuscripts were taken to be loanwords rather than part of the language's writing system, sparking a major debate in scholarship concerning the nature of the Middle Persian idiom: was it an Indo-European language with Semitic loanwords or a Semitic language presenting important Indo-European syntactic features? Furthermore, although Silvestre de Sacy had highlighted the relationship between monumental and cursive Middle Persian, these were not yet considered identical, and the degree to which they were related was the subject of much disagreement. Thus, the German

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[311] Silvestre de Sacy 1815, 194-196.

[312] Ouseley 1801.

[313] Silvestre de Sacy 1815, 197, 200-201.

[314] Silvestre de Sacy 1815, 204.

Orientalist Marcus Joseph Müller (1809-1874) published his *Essai sur la langue Pehlevie* in 1839, declaring at the outset the author's aim to discuss the elements of the Pehlevi language and its relation to Aryan and Semitic languages respectively.[315] The essay is headed by a note announcing that characters were especially cut for the occasion, which allowed the author to print terms in the Middle Persian alphabet without having to resort to the transcription in Hebrew. It is worth noting, however, that Müller only had the *cursive* Middle Persian letters cut. The author discusses some features of Middle Persian syntax, such as the use of the particle '*rāy*' compared to that of New Persian '*rā*'[316] but the fundamental difficulty of dealing with heterograms persisted. He comments for instance that Anquetil Duperron omitted to add to his Middle Persian cursive alphabet the grapheme that we now know to be the 'l' of arameograms, only including it in his table of Avestan letters in which it has the value of 'o'.[317] He further notes that the letter occurs in certain words only, such as the Semitic-derived terms of negation '*ma*' but cannot go further, evidently disturbed – thanks to his knowledge of the Semitic root that the arameogram is formed on – by its transcription as an 'o' based on contemporary Parsi reading. This example also illustrates just how separate work on cursive and inscriptional Middle Persian remained: had Müller studied Silvestre de Sacy's newly determined alphabet, he would have seen that this grapheme was repeatedly transcribed as an 'l'.

Shortly after Müller's study of Middle Persian came that of Eugène Boré (1809-1874), a professor of Armenian at the Collège de France in 1833 and a Catholic missionary posted in Constantinople and Armenia. In contrast to Müller he concentrated on inscriptional Middle Persian, publishing some comments on Silvestre de Sacy's work on the inscriptions of Taq-e Bostan.[318] He paints the picture of a language at the crossroads of the Aryan and Semitic linguistic families, a 'zend chaldaïsé',[319] and marvels at Middle Persian's capacity to incorporate terms and structures belonging to different linguistic families, describing it as an emblem of peaceful coexistence between diverging ethnic groups:

"La doctrine du magisme […] rapprocha dans une même société spirituelle des nations [les Arméniens et les Chaldéens] que divisaient les antipathies de race, les superstitions du culte, la

[315] Müller 1839, 290.

[316] Müller 1839, 314.

[317] Müller 1839, 317-318.

[318] Boré 1841.

[319] Boré 1841, 654.

différence de langage et les intérêts politiques. Cette alliance fut exprimée par celle qui s'opéra entre les langues respectives de ces peuples, et de laquelle naquit le pehlvi. Il est curieux de voir l'idiome chaldéen, si absolu dans ses formes, si peu accessible […] transiger ici amicalement avec une langue sœur de celles des Grecs et des Romans, consentir à revêtir ses insignes et à être régi par ses lois."[320]

However problematic his idealized appreciation of the 'Semitic elements' in Middle Persian, Eugène Boré did make a significant observation concerning paleography: based on the parallel Palmyrene demonstrative pronoun *danah* he established that the Middle Persian counterpart to the Greek TOYTO was *zanah*, and that the final grapheme was consequently not an abbreviated ending but an 'h' with a corresponding Hebrew letter.[321]

Work on Avestan and manuscript Middle Persian takes over.

Still, work on Middle Persian epigraphy did not make significant progress until the second half of the nineteenth century. This may be due to several factors. Although Silvestre de Sacy's decipherment of inscriptional Middle Persian paved the way for the reading of Sasanian epigraphic texts, his work had been confined to formulaic Sasanian titulature and although scholars readily applied his findings to numismatics, less enthusiasm – or courage – was garnered for the longer and more complex inscriptions that were regularly being brought back by travellers (see below). Nevertheless, some reflections on the Middle Persian script were tentatively put forward by scholars working on Sasanian coins. In 1840, the French numismatist and archaeologist Adrien de Longpérier (1816-1882), curator of the Cabinet des Médailles, published an *Essai* dedicated to the legends of a series of coins kept in both private and national collections: in his introduction, the French scholar evokes for the first time the notion of an 'evolution' of the Middle Persian script in numismatics, from letters "resembling the Hebrew alphabet" in the third century to a cursive style similar to that in the Middle Persian manuscripts.[322] His *Essai* was awarded the *Prix annuel de numismatique* by the Académie that same year.[323] By contrast, his contemporary the German Orientalist and professor of theology Justus Olshausen – a former student of Silvestre de Sacy – distinguishes two separate scripts

[320] Boré 1841, 644-645.

[321] Boré 1841, 650.

[322] de Longpérier 1840, iv.

[323] *Journal des sçavans* 1840, 569-570.

in Sasanian numismatics (zwei verschiedene Arten persischer Schrift), rather than a gradual evolution from monumental to cursive.[324] Admitting frankly that he was somewhat 'put off' (etwas Abschreckendes für mich) by what he considered to be the "unsightly and difficult alphabet" (unschönen und undeutlichen Schrift) of the earlier coins deciphered by Silvestre de Sacy, he chose to concentrate on the corpus of the later coins – belonging to the end of the dynasty and even just after – which displayed the 'more graceful' (zierlicher und bequemer) connected writing style of the manuscripts that he was much more familiar with:[325] nevertheless, he recognizes that both writing systems transcribe an idiom that is 'essentially identical'.

It would indeed seem that inscriptional Middle Persian remained "etwas Abschreckendes" for most scholars. William Ouseley, an Orientalist and officer who joined his brother Gore Ouseley's embassy to the Qajar court in Tehran in the early nineteenth century, had the opportunity to draw the very first copy ever made of the over-looked Middle Persian inscriptions engraved on the *tačara* at Persepolis but, despite his earlier work on Middle Persian coin legends, offered no reading of them;[326] it is also surprising – and telling – that Silvestre de Sacy, in whose time these drawings were published never put forward a study of them. Similarly, Ker Porter's 1817 copies of the bilingual Parthian-Middle Persian inscriptions of Šābuhr I engraved at Hājjiābād were largely left unstudied for the next five decades. Apart from the daunting prospect which inscriptional Middle Persian represented, scholarly attention in ancient Iranian studies was also focused on different sources of interest. Thus, the Zoroastrian texts brought to light by Anquetil Duperron were reexamined and Avestan was studied through the lens of the nascent field of comparative linguistics. In 1826, Rasmus Kristian Rask (1787-1832), a Danish scholar and one of the founders of comparative grammar and linguistics, published *On the Age and Genuineness of the Zend Language and Zendavesta*, which aimed to show that although Avestan belonged to the same family as Latin, Greek and Sanskrit it did not derive from the latter.[327] This work was drafted in India, where Rask had been sent by the Danish Crown to collect Avestan and Middle Persian manuscripts: these formed the core of the famous *codices Hafnienses* deposited at the library of the University of Copenhagen. Just over a decade later Eugène Burnouf (1801-1851), a professor of comparative grammar and Sanskrit

[324] Olshausen 1843, 3.

[325] Olshausen 1843, 4.

[326] Ouseley 1821, II, 237-238, pl. XLII.

[327] Rask 1826.

at the Collège de France, published his *Commentaire sur le Yaçna* based on a systematic comparison of different Avestan manuscripts: comparing the Avestan text with two different translations of it – Anquetil Duperron's translation of the Middle Persian commentaries and the Sanskrit translation of Neryosang – he was able to identify and explain a number of grammatical forms.[328] Following in both these scholars' steps, the Danish scholar and Sanskritist Niels Ludvig Westergaard (1815-1878) went to Bombay and then Yazd and Kerman to collect Zoroastrian manuscripts, again with the financial support of the Danish crown, and these were added to those brought back by Rask in the *codices Hafnienses*. Collating with the manuscripts of this collection others kept in libraries in London, Oxford and Paris, he published the very first edition of the (available) Avestan corpus, printed with especially cut Avestan letters, between 1852 and 1854.[329] Westergaard also worked on Middle Persian, preparing the first facsimile edition of a Middle Persian text based on a manuscript in the Copenhagen collection (K20, the *Bundahišn*); he annexed to it a copy of the Hājjiābād inscriptions, but without commenting these.[330]

The decipherment of Old Persian cuneiform: how Middle Persian epigraphy contributed.

The turn of the nineteenth century also saw the decipherment of Old Persian cuneiform, and the veil of mystery covering the otherworldly inscriptions engraved on the ruins of Persepolis that had fascinated scholars and travellers for centuries was suddenly lifted. Now, Silvestre de Sacy's pioneering work on Middle Persian had its role to play in this extraordinary rediscovery. In 1802 the German-born scholar and professor of theology at the University of Copenhagen, Friedrich Münter, published his *Versuch über die keilförmigen Inschriften zu Persepolis*, in which he made significant steps towards the decipherment of Old Persian cuneiform.[331] Based on important observations made by early European travellers, such as the fact that cuneiform was written from right to left (della Valle) and that the inscriptions presented three versions in three different types of writing systems (Niebuhr), which he surmised – probably inspired by Silvestre de Sacy's recent discoveries – were translations of the same text in different languages, he noted that certain series of characters recurred frequently:[332] one set in particular

[328] Burnouf 1833.

[329] Westergaard 1852-1854.

[330] Westergaard 1851.

[331] Münter 1818 [1802].

[332] Münter 1818, 123.

– which turned out to be the word for 'king' – was repeated particularly often, in some cases with different endings, which Münter correctly recognized to be inflections of the same word. He concluded that cuneiform was most probably an alphabetical writing system, rather than an ideographic one – another major debate dating from the earliest copies of cuneiform writing – although he does not dispel this latter possibility completely: the frequent repetition of certain sets of characters made it more likely that the recurring unit made up a word rather than a phrase.[333] Münter even supposed that the oft-repeated set of seven figures with varying endings must be a "Königstitel", although he makes space for Silvestre de Sacy's personal suggestion to him that it could be a religious formula (religionsformel):[334] this also indicates that the scholars were in close communication, illustrating in what way work on Middle Persian and Old Persian epigraphy was closely interwoven. Later that year, the German scholar and professor at the University of Göttingen Georg Friedrich Grotefend – though not an orientalist – presented a paper which laid the groundwork for a phonetic decipherment of cuneiform.[335] Based on Silvestre de Sacy's work on the Sasanian trilingual inscriptions, Grotefend posited that the often-repeated word already identified by Münter and which occurred in different inflected forms, must be the Old Persian word for 'king' in the formulaic phrase "king of kings".[336] He then supposed that the term directly preceding this phrase must be the first name of a king, closely followed by the name of his father, on the model of the royal titulature in the Sasanian inscriptions. He posited after Münter[337] – and classical historiography – that the monuments on which the cuneiform inscriptions were engraved probably dated to the time of Darius son of Hystapes – and therefore the epigraphic text also: he thus calques the names Xerxes and Darius – which he transcribed phonetically after the Hebrew transcription DARYAVESCH – on the cuneiform figures.[338] His findings were amply commented and discussed by Silvestre de Sacy in a letter published in the *Magasin Encyclopédique* a year later:[339] although the French scholar praises Grotefend's solid methodology he is not convinced by his choice of the names Darius and Xerxes, considering it arbitrary.[340] It is also worth noting

[333] Silvestre de Sacy 1803, 458.

[334] Münter 1818, 126-128.

[335] Grotefend 1824 [1805]; see also Silvestre de Sacy 1803, Wilsdorf 1952, Schmitt 2002.

[336] Grotefend 1824, 344-348.

[337] Münter 1818, 33.

[338] Grotefend 1824, 332, 348.

[339] Silvestre de Sacy 1803, 461-466.

[340] Silvestre de Sacy 1803, 465.

that scholars, including Münter, Grotefend and Silvestre de Sacy, considered that the – first type of – cuneiform inscriptions were in Zend (Avestan), and Grotefend's suggestions for the genitive endings of names is entirely based on Anquetil Duperron's pioneering grammar.[341] Work on Zoroastrian manuscripts as well as cuneiform and Middle Persian inscriptions was intricately connected. Thus Westergaard, who came back from Iran not only with Zoroastrian manuscripts but also better draughts of the cuneiform inscriptions of Persepolis, gave these to his teacher Christian Lassen; the latter greatly improved the decipherment of the Old Persian alphabet.[342] Westergaard himself made some tentative steps towards determining the phonetic value of characters in the Elamite version of the Achaemenid inscriptions.[343]

In return, scholars working on Old Persian also contributed to improving Silvestre de Sacy's readings. Sir Henry Rawlinson, an army officer in the British East India Company posted in India and then in Iran in 1833, first focused his attention on the two Old Persian inscriptions of Hamadan; the repetitive nature of these texts allowed him to make rapid progress with the decipherment of the script.[344] In 1837 he was able to make a full copy of the Old Persian version of the Bīsotūn inscription, and, thanks to the Avestan grammar in Burnouf's *Commentaire* – which the British scholar refers to systematically in his memoire – he eventually put forward a grammatical translation of Darius' Bīsotūn inscription rather than a mere transcription of the text.[345] He further makes crucial observations concerning the cuneiform writing system, observing for instance that it was syllabic – certain graphemes carried inherent vowels – rather than alphabetical.[346] He is also able to improve on Silvestre de Sacy's reading of the Sasanian royal titulatures by correcting the French scholars' erroneous transcription of the term '*bag*', correctly linking it to old Persian *baga* 'god' which better suited the 'Theos' in the Greek versions, thereby adding the letter 'gimel' to Silvestre de Sacy's inscriptional Middle Persian alphabet.[347] We find in Rawlinson informed comments on Middle Persian, such as the fact that the language was represented by three related but distinct alphabets

[341] Silvestre de Sacy 1803, 460-462; Münter 1818, 74-75.

[342] Lassen and Westergaard 1845.

[343] Westergaard 1840 and 1845.

[344] Rawlinson 1848, 5.

[345] Rawlinson 1848, 9.

[346] Rawlinson 1848, 33.

[347] Rawlinson 1848, 93-94, n. 2, 293.

which the scholar terms the 'lapidary', 'numismatic' and 'cursive' after the stages defined by Longpérier's description of the script.[348]

Towards a biography of writing.

Parallel to the work on Old Persian and Avestan texts, Sasanian inscriptions continued to be rediscovered, including in sites that were already well-known. Ouseley's copies of the two Middle Persian inscriptions of Persepolis, and Ker Porter's draughts of the bilingual inscriptions in the near-by site of Hājjiābād were briefly mentioned above. Eugène Flandin and Pascal Coste also chanced upon Kerdīr's inscription at Naqš-e Rajab. The French military painter and architect respectively were especially appointed by the Institut de France to join the embassy of Comte de Sercey that had been sent to the Qajar court in 1839 to take advantage of the collapse of diplomatic relations between England and Persia following the siege of Herat just a year earlier.[349] Flandin and Coste produced an extensively illustrated account of their travels. After Niebuhr, they visited the rocky recess of Naqš-e Rajab located on the road between the Persepolis platform and the site of Naqš-e Rostam: the high priest's inscription had been hidden by a bush growing from a crack in the cliff, and when Flandin pushed it aside to get a better look at the bas-reliefs, he saw that the rockface was covered with an ancient inscription.[350]

In order to highlight better the main breakthroughs concerning the decipherment of inscriptional Middle Persian which these rediscoveries brought about and to trace the progress in scholarly understanding of main points of contention concerning the Middle Persian script and language – such as the relationship between monumental and cursive Middle Persian and the use of heterograms – the following section proposes to focus on one single epigraphic text and follow the different publications and translations dedicated to it: this will not only allow us to chart out the evolving scholarly interests, understanding and knowledge of inscriptional Middle Persian but also to follow the complex 'life' of a given text. The methodological approach consisting in drawing out the 'biography of an inscription', is modeled on the notion of a 'cultural biography of things' put forward by Kopytoff in 1986 in a collective work edited by the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*.[351] The idea has been applied

[348] Rawlinson 1848, 44, n. 2.

[349] This is explicitly explained in the preface to Flandin and Coste's travelogue, 1851, I, 4-5.

[350] Flandin and Coste 1851, II, 135 and IV, pl. 190.

[351] Appadurai 1986.

to texts by Béatrice Fraenkel in the context of her seminar at the EHESS on the anthropology of writing. The approach developed by Appadurai and Kopytoff implies that an object, its interpretation, and status change and evolve: the object has the capacity to acquire a history, a 'life', and through it in turn to influence the life of people. Thus, the fame of certain objects – weapons and jewels for instance, and we might add, real or imagined – and those that possess them often go hand in hand. Kopytoff focuses on objects that circulate and that are exchanged: it is through this exchange that they acquire value, both symbolic and economic, and his work consists in identifying the different phases of the object's life. The Sasanian monumental rock inscriptions that are the subject of this work do not circulate – although as we will see it is not so simple – but the model is readily transposable. For instance, archaeologists have recently adapted the notion of 'a cultural biography of things' to monuments and even places.[352] In the case of our corpus of texts, it helps to create a focus within the wider history of research on Middle Persian and highlights how a given text contributed to the progress of a particular field of study as successive scholars tackled it. In turn, the case study developed below provides an opportunity to refine the notion of a 'biography of writing': do we mean to record the life of the material inscription, the engraved rock itself, which can be a particularly important aspect if a text has been partly effaced and reworked; or do we intend to follow the history of research dedicated the decipherment of this inscription, which is the main focus in this study, in order to highlight the major advances made in the field and how this particular text contributed to it; or again we can mean to trace the life of the text itself through the copies and replicas made of it on different text carriers: in this respect the text of Šābuhr's Hājjiābād inscription has a particularly rich and eventful life story.

[352] Marsh and Jones 2014.

Chapter 4

Towards a biography of writing: Šābuhr's inscription at Hājjiābād

I. Early studies of the Hājjiābād texts: contentions over the "nature" of Middle Persian.

The first copies of Šābuhr's bilingual inscription at Hājjiābād.

The rediscovery of the Middle Persian and Parthian bilingual inscription of the Hājjiābād grotto in Fārs is usually attributed to Sir Robert Ker Porter (1777-1842),[353] but another British traveller ought to be credited – if not for discovering the inscription, since it was local inhabitants who led him to it – for venturing beyond the well-known sites of Persepolis and Naqš-e Rostam in search of undocumented antiquities. Sir James Justinian Morier (1782-1849), a British diplomat and writer, was famous in his time for his popular novel *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan*, a satirical portrayal of Persian society packed with orientalist motifs that follows the adventures of the mischievous Hajji Baba.[354] Morier undertook his *Second Journey* to Persia between 1810 and 1816, joining the embassy headed by Sir Gore Ouseley in charge of accompanying the Persian ambassador Mirzā Abu'l-Hasan – "feasted and exhibited in London for nine months" – back to the Qajar court.[355] On their journey north to Isfahān from the gulf, the party are detained in Shiraz and Morier visits the ruins of Persepolis. He compares De Bruijn, Chardin and Niebuhr's drawings of the inscriptions and reliefs with what he sees *in situ* and follows della Valle and Chardin in exploring the underground channels of the terrace, conscientiously repeating motifs – such as his servants' growing fear as they progressed deeper into the dark passageways and his own disappointment at not being able to advance any further than his predecessors – developed in the French traveller's account.[356] Morier, however, was especially intent on finding "some object that had never yet been described by other travellers" and paid local men to excavate the

[353] See for instance Thomas 1868, 70 and Gignoux 1972, 9.

[354] For an overview of the different editions of this work, first published in 1824, see Amanat 2003.

[355] Morier 1818, 1-2.

[356] Morier 1818, 77-78.

terrace, until an order from the governor put an end to his activities.[357] His enquiries eventually led him to a cavern "still unexplored by Europeans" known as the "Zendan Jemsheed" – yet another instance of the association of monuments and ominous locales with this mythical Persian king. Following the river Pulvār from Naqš-e Rostam, the party reached the village of Hājjiābād in the vicinity of which lay the rocky recess engraved with the inscription. Morier set to work to copy the inscription, but his guides were reluctant to linger after nightfall for the region was "infested with Bakhtiarees" and urged him to rush his drawings; his account contains only a small sketch of the cave and an approximate copy of a few lines of Parthian, which Morier knew at least enough about to describe as "Pehlavi" **[Fig. 4.1]**.[358]

Morier put Hājjiābād on the map for future travellers and both the Middle Persian and Parthian versions were copied a year later in 1817 by Ker Porter, a Scottish diplomat and artist appointed as historical painter to the court of Tsar Alexander I (1777-1825), where he married a Russian princess, Mary von Scherbatoff, who was a cousin of Alexei Olenin, the Imperial Secretary of State and the President of the Russian Academy of Fine Arts in Saint Petersburg. Ker Porter travelogue is dedicated to George IV of England, but in his preface, he publishes a letter addressed to him by Olenin, encouraging him to make accurate drawings of the ruins of ancient sites in Persia, "nothing suppose, nothing repair", suggesting that his journey was made with the support of the Academy.[359] More particularly, Olenin asks his "cousin" to record "the precise form of the Pahlevi and Zend characters", indicating that the recent discoveries in Europe were animating the Russian intellectual circles also. Ker Porter left Saint Petersburg in 1817 for Odessa, from where he intended to cross the Black Sea to Constantinople; however, because of an outbreak of plague there, he was forced to change his route and finally reached Persia by land through Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.[360] He then made his way down through Qazvīn, Tehrān, and Isfahān to the province of Fārs. On his way from Pasargadae to Persepolis Ker Porter and his suite followed the bends of the river Kūr (Pulvār) into the dell of Hājjiābād. He describes an idyllic landscape, with ripening plentiful harvests, well-watered plains and tortoises crawling in the abundant vegetation; crystalline springs flowed from a series of grottos and gushed out from high up in the cliff, falling into the valley in cascades.[361]

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[357] Morier 1818, 76-77.

[358] Morier 1818, 79-81.

[359] Ker Porter 1821, I, vi-viii.

[360] Ker Porter 1821, I, 6-7.

[361] Ker Porter 1821, I, 509-511.

He notes that some caves, held to be holy by local inhabitants, were strewn with innumerable lamps. The party halted in the village of Hājjiābād, where the author was told about a 'piece of antiquity' and brought to the cave engraved with the inscription of Šābuhr I.[362] The natural recess had been widened and its walls made smoother by manual labour, and four deep frames had been cut into the rock, two engraved with a version each of the bilingual text while the other two were left empty. Ker Porter took a careful copy of the inscription, recognising the script to be "Pehlevi", although he extends this identification to both versions **[Fig. 4.2]**. He expresses his hope that his copies will be brought to the attention of Monsieur de Sacey (*sic*), but Silvestre de Sacy never published a study of these.

A few years after Morier and Ker Porter's visits to the site, the Irish-born Major-General Sir Ephraim Gerrish Stannus, Resident of the East India Company in Bushehr, undertook excavations at Persepolis in search of new antiquities; his name is engraved twice on the ruins of the terrace. He unearthed several bas-reliefs and column capitals – which were, however, promptly reburied by locals: according to the British traveller Alexander, an especially destructive flight of locusts was blamed on the excavations of the ancient vestiges – and embarked on the confection of a series of plaster casts of the sculptures and inscriptions.[363] Evidently well-informed about Morier and Ker Porter's recent discoveries, Stannus also went to Hājjiābād to make casts of the engraved texts. These were shipped to England from Bushehr in 1826;[364] a set was displayed at the British Museum and another given to the Royal Asiatic Society. The original casts were donated to the Royal Dublin Society and were first published in this Society's *Transactions* in 1835. It was after these that Edwin Norris, secretary of the Royal Asiatic Society produced the first pentagraph copies of the Hājjiābād inscription.[365]

Following the siege of Herat in 1838, diplomatic relations between England and Persia collapsed and the French crown promptly sent an embassy to the Qajar court a year later to take advantage of the rift. The French military painter Eugène Flandin and architect Pascal Coste were especially appointed by the Institut de France to join the embassy and to produce illustrations for their account of the mission (see Chapter 3).[366] In step with their British

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[362] Ker Porter 1821, I, 512-515, pl. 15.

[363] Alexander 1827, 137. On Stannus' plaster casts of the sculptures and inscriptions of Persepolis and the great impact these made when they were displayed at the British Museum for the first time (placed between Egyptian and Classical antiquities), see Simpson 2000.

[364] Curzon 1892, II, 116; Simpson 2007, 349-351.

[365] Thomas 1868, 70-71.

[366] Flandin and Coste 1851, I, 3-7.

predecessors, Flandin and Coste made the detour that took them to the Hājjiābād cave during their 10-day stay at Naqš-e Rostam and Naqš-e Rajab spent copying the bas-reliefs and inscriptions. They were taken to the grotto by the son of the district Hakim and recorded two names for the cave, Zendān-e Jamšīd, and Šeykh ʻAlī, after a legend according to which ʻAlī came to meditate in the caves around Hājjiābād.[367] Flandin and Coste produced two plates of the site: a panoramic view of the valley as seen from the cave **[Fig. 4.3]** and a detail of the bilingual inscription **[Fig. 4.4]**.[368] The first decipherment of the Hājjiābād texts was based on the comparison of Norris' pentagraphs and Flandin and Coste's drawings.

Scholars debate the relationship between manuscript Middle Persian and the language of the Sasanian inscriptions.

In an annex to his 1851 edition of the *Bundahišn*, Niels Ludvig Westergaard published Norris' pentagraphs, but without commenting on them. That Westergaard did work on them however becomes apparent from his discussion of the relationship between inscriptional and manuscript Middle Persian in the preface to his *Zendavesta*.[369] After giving an overview of the different manuscripts that compose the Zoroastrian corpus, Westergaard concluded – following the Zoroastrian tradition – that the texts were assembled and put into writing in the Sasanian period: the Sasanian kings, who piously describe themselves as *mazda-worshipping*, ordered the *mowbed*s to 'restore' the ancient religion that was in decline after five centuries of Hellenistic rule. According to Westergaard, the script used to put the Zoroastrian corpus into writing was a "species of the Semitic alphabet" used under the Sasanian dynasty which gradually evolved into the Avestan script known from the extant manuscripts.[370] To add "new lustre" to Zoroastrianism and to facilitate the understanding of the older texts, additional ones – namely, "Pehlevi" translations and commentaries – were then added to the scriptures.

Now, *Pehlevi*, warns Westergaard, carries "two distinct significations" and designates two idioms belonging to different language families: "The official language of the Sassanian kings was called Pehlevi and this is not any Iranian tongue, but […] a Semitic one in two

[367] Flandin and Coste 1851, II, 138-140.

[368] Flandin and Coste 1851, *Planches*, IV, pl. 193 and 193 *bis*.

[369] Westergaard 1852-1854, 19-21.

[370] Westergaard 1852-1854, 19. The relationship between this "proto-Avestan" script and either inscriptional or manuscript Middle Persian alphabet is, however, not explained.

closely related dialects[371] with some intermixture of Persian words."[372] Remarkably, "Sassanian-Pehlevi", the language of the Sasanian royal inscriptions and coins, is thus considered to be a Semitic idiom. He continues: "This Semitic language differs essentially from what Neriosangh calls *Pehlevi* (*Pahlavi-bháṣá*) which has indeed the same written character, but is by nature Iranian and particularly Persian. This is the proper Zand- or commentary-language."[373] Westergaard thus considered the language of Zoroastrian manuscripts to be a separate, Iranian idiom, unrelated to the (Semitic) one used in the inscriptions and coins. It is worth noting that although the languages of the manuscripts and inscriptions are said to be entirely unrelated, the cursive Middle Persian *script* is understood as deriving directly from inscriptional Middle Persian.

Westergaard also notes that the medieval Parsi scholar Neriosangh, on whose Sanskrit translation he based his study of the Avestan corpus, describes the language of the Zoroastrian commentaries as "intricate": this intricacy is, Westergaard suggests, due to the "arbitrary signs", or "ideographs" used for key parts of speech such as pronouns and prepositions.[374] These only "have the appearance of real words" – perhaps this description may imply that they were not read phonetically – although they can "be made readable" by a special transcription in Avestan, Persian or even Gujarati characters, which is what is referred to as *pāzand*: *pāzand* is thus clearly defined as a transcription process rather than a specific writing system or language. For Westergaard, the Zoroastrian priests deliberately hid Middle Persian under an "artificial and unnatural garb" to make learning it difficult for laymen as well as for the Arab invaders. He further records that in addition to – and separately from – these ideographic signs, Middle Persian *also* has Semitic loanwords: these are marked by the strange use of specific graphemes, and "pertain to the writing system and do not enter the language", a peculiar observation that suggests here again that the Semitic forms were not read phonetically. Westergaard considered these Semitic loanwords to have been inherited from "Sassanian-Pehlevi" (the "Semitic" language of Sasanian inscriptions), when new commentaries in "Zand-Pehlevi" (the Iranian language of Zoroastrian manuscripts) were prepared, based on the older ones, towards the end of the Sasanian period. He gives an example of one such loanword:

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[371] The two "closely related dialects" is a reference to Parthian and Middle Persian, known both form the trilingual Sasanian legends and the Hājjiābād text.

[372] Westergaard 1852-1854, 19.

[373] Westergaard 1852-1854, 19.

[374] Westergaard 1852-1854, 20.

"BARBITA".[375] This aramaeogram, which represents the Middle Persian term *wispuhrān* "princes" – BRBYT'n – occurs in both the (Parthian and Middle Persian) versions of the Hājjiābād inscription, indicating that Westergaard had partly deciphered this rock-cut text, but without publishing his results. Evidently, he had derived his understanding of "Sassanian-Pehlevi" – the 'official' "Semitic" language of the Sasanian kings – from his work on the Hājjiābād inscription. Westergaard's example of the heterogram BRBYTA as a "Semitic loanword" passed from the language of the inscriptions into the "Zand-Pehlevi" of the Zoroastrian scriptures, also reveals that he regarded the former ("Sassanian-Pehlevi") to be Semitic because of the frequent recourse to aramaeograms in Middle Persian inscriptions. Westergaard, who so astutely explained the "intricate" terms mentioned by Neriosangh as functioning like ideograms, thus curiously had difficulty extending this understanding to the Semitic-looking terms of Middle Persian: his persistence in viewing them as loanwords is precisely what led him to the erroneous distinction of the language of the Sasanian inscriptions and that of the Zoroastrian manuscript into two separate (and respectively Semitic and Iranian) idioms.

Middle Persian: Semitic, "Aryan" or a "mixed" language?

The very same year, Martin Haug, a German orientalist who dedicated his habilitation dissertation in Bonn to the "Teachings of Zoroaster based on the ancient songs of the Zendavesta", published his own study of the *Bundahišn* headed by an essay on Middle Persian. Haug essentially uses *Pehlewi* and *Huzûresch* synonymously, as had Anquetil Duperron, although to differentiate inscriptional Middle Persian from its manuscript counterpart, he seems to prefer *Pehlewi* for the former and *Huzûresch* for the latter. Disagreeing with Westergaard, he argues that Sasanian inscriptions and the Zoroastrian commentaries showed, on the whole, the same 'basic character' (*Grundcharakter*), consisting of a mixture of Semitic and Iranian components.[376] The main difference pertained to the prevalence of one or the other component: the inscriptions showed a predominance of Semitic linguistic features, with the Parthian version of the Hājjiābād text – called inscription B – being the more Semitic of the two "dialects".[377] Still, although inscriptional and manuscript Middle Persian are considered 'closely related'

[375] Westergaard 1852-1854, 21, n. 1

[376] Haug 1852-1854, 6.

[377] Haug 1852-1854, 23.

(*nahe verwandt*),[378] Haug does not identify them exactly as the same language, therefore agreeing with Silvestre de Sacy's initial sentiment. He also concludes that, in view of the numerous Semitic terms and syntactical elements featured in both the inscriptions and the manuscripts, the "original component" (*der ursprüngliche Bestandtheil*) of all three languages – the two dialects illustrated in the Hājjiābād inscriptions and the language of the manuscripts – was a Semitic idiom to which Iranian words were progressively added.[379] Remarkably, like Westergaard, Haug thus considered the official "Reichs- und Landessprache"[380] of the Sasanians to be essentially Semitic.

Two years later, Friedrich Spiegel published his *Grammatik der Huzvâresch-Sprache*. Spiegel, a German orientalist who first specialised in Pali, was introduced to the *Codices Hafnienses* in the early 1840s by the Orientalist Olshausen (see Chapter III) when working in Copenhagen on Pali manuscripts; he dedicated the remainder of his life to the study of Zoroastrian manuscripts and their languages. Spiegel begins his description of the Middle Persian language, which he calls "Huzvâresch", by painting the backdrop against which this extraordinary mixed language ("Mischprache"), presenting both Aryan and Semitic elements, was born. He tells the story of the invasion of the Near East and Europe by the mighty Iranian tribes from Central Asia, whose vigour the "effeminate empires" (*verweichlichten Reiche*) of Mesopotamian dynasties such as the Assyrians and Babylonians could not withstand.[381] The autochthonous Aramaeans, subjected to what Spiegel terms the Indo-Germanic peoples (*indogermanischen Völkerschaften*) of the Medes and Persians, were nevertheless 'spiritually victorious' over their invaders through the 'silent influence of their higher education': the Achaemenid kings adopted a type of writing system – cuneiform – after the Mesopotamian model.[382] The Semitic languages of Mesopotamia did not at first influence the language of the Persians, and Old Persian remained devoid of Aramaic loanwords. Now, an Aramaic-speaking tribe, the Nabateans, lived on the border of the 'Iranian ethnic area': the geographic proximity of an Aramaic people with the Iranian territory gave rise to Middle Persian.[383] Spiegel, like Anquetil Duperron, traces back the emergence of Middle Persian to a precise point in time and

[378] Haug 1852-1854, 6.

[379] Haug 1852-1854, 29-30.

[380] Haug 1852-1854, 6.

[381] Spiegel 1856, 4.

[382] Spiegel 1856, 4-5.

[383] Spiegel 1856, 24.

space: it is a dialect resulting from the close and repeated cultural contact between Semitic and Iranian peoples, in the period immediately following that of Alexander and the Seleucids.

The curious introduction of the Nabatean tribe as being key to the origin of Middle Persian was influenced by the important memoir that Étienne Quatremère had dedicated to the Nabateans in the *Journal Asiatique* a few years earlier.[384] Quatremère attempts to determine the relationship between Nabatean, Aramaic, Syriac and Chaldean, which he concludes represent different dialects or stages of the same language. He gives an exhaustive overview of the different classical historiographers and Arabo-Persian chroniclers who mention the Nabateans and their language. Because of the allusion to the presence of 'Nabatean words' in Middle Persian, Quatremère gives a full translation of the passage in the *Fihrist* of al-Nadīm describing the *huzwāreš* spelling used by the Persians (see Chapter I), discussing it for the first time – since the middle ages – in the context of a study of the linguistic landscape of Persia.[385] For Quatremère, *huzwāreš* is a form of 'cryptographic writing convention'; he compares it to the practice of writing Latin terms in French, which can be used even by those who are not acquainted with this idiom. Quatremère's somewhat awkward explanation is nevertheless a major step forward. Rather than viewing aramaeograms as Semitic *loanwords* adopted into the Persian language – which was the assumption of western scholars before him, including Anquetil Duperron, Silvestre de Sacy and Westergaard – Quatremère casts the practice of using *huzwāreš* (heterograms) as a '*writing convention*' – in other words, as a feature of the Middle Persian *script* not its language.

The importance of Quatremère's comment is not completely grasped by Spiegel, even though he repeatedly refers to the former's study. Spiegel persists in viewing the 'Semitic components' in Middle Persian as loanwords, and in his grammar, he separates his study of Iranian and Semitic terms into two distinct chapters.[386] Spiegel admits he is baffled by this extraordinary *Mischsprache*,[387] and by the way in which foreign linguistic material could both penetrate and yet not penetrate a language. He even considers the possibility that Middle Persian was never spoken: it would be a 'made-up' language or a special learned 'style' ("Stylart"), with scribes integrating Aramaic words they considered elegant.[388] Spiegel is

[384] Quatremère 1835.

[385] Quatremère 1835, 255-256.

[386] Spiegel 1856, respectively 40-58 and 58-62.

[387] Spiegel 1856, 164.

[388] Spiegel 1856, 165.

evidently wrestling with the idea that the Aramaic components of Middle Persian are a convention, but still has difficulty distinguishing language from writing system. Nevertheless, in contrast to Westergaard and Haug, this leads him to conclude that the essence ("das Wesen") of "Huzvâresch" (Middle Persian) belongs in the Iranian – or Indogermanic – "*Sprachstamm*".[389]

Spiegel's grammar is based on his study of Middle Persian manuscripts, but he does discuss the Sasanian inscriptions in an appendix.[390] He observes that scholars working on Sasanian inscriptions still heavily depended on there being Greek versions to support their conjectures: he mentions that Silvestre de Sacy himself had for that reason not been able to decipher the Hājjiābād inscription, although he was confident that it was written in the same script as the Sasanian trilingual inscriptions,[391] which is the only explanation we have for Silvestre de Sacy's silence concerning Hājjiābād. Nevertheless, Spiegel insists that the difficulty of deciphering the inscriptions is no reason to distinguish their language from that of the manuscripts: the manuscripts dealt for the most part with religious subjects, necessarily entailing a different vocabulary; even based on the short legends deciphered, the language could hardly be called different.[392] Thus, in stark contrast to Westergaard, as well as Haug, Spiegel regarded inscriptional Middle Persian as recording the same idiom as that in the Zoroastrian commentaries and distinguishes three main states of the "Huzvâresch" script: inscriptional, numismatic and manuscript.[393] Spiegel offers an impressively accurate transliteration of the royal titulature recorded in the Parthian version of Hājjiābād – in Hebrew characters, after the widespread convention of his time – remarking on the seeming freedom (*Freiheit*) in the use of 'Semitic' versus Iranian spellings: in the first and third lines the word 'god/lord' is spelled – with the aramaeogram – ALHA, while the fourth line presents the phonetic rendering *bag* (*bg*) as in the Middle Persian version. He comments that the language appeared to be only a minor variant (*nur wenig abweichend*) of its Middle Persian counterpart, a "*Dialekt(e)*".[394]

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[389] Spiegel 1856, 159.

[390] Spiegel 1856, 166-185.

[391] Spiegel 1856, 174-175.

[392] Spiegel 1856, 168-169, 175.

[393] Spiegel 1856, 167.

[394] Spiegel 1856, 175.

Identifying the language of "Inscription B" at Hājjiābād.

The bilingual inscription of Hājjiābād offered more substantial Middle Persian-Parthian comparative material and significant progress on the Parthian alphabet was achieved by the English numismatist and collector Edward Thomas, a servant of the East India Company in Bengal and Treasurer of the Royal Numismatic Society. In a study dedicated to the Arab-Sasanian coins from the early Islamic period he put forth a table presenting the correspondences between the Hebrew, the Parthian – "Chaldaeo-Pehlevi" or "Persepolitan Pehlevi" because of the (erroneous) assumption that this type of writing was found only on monuments in the Persepolis region – Sasanian Lapidary, described as a "vulgar version" of the former, and the Sasanian "numismatic" alphabets;[395] it was on this table that Spiegel based his decipherment of the royal titulature in the Parthian version of Hājjiābād.

Scholars disagreed on what the language of inscription B at Hājjiābād ought to be called and debated its linguistic relationship to Middle Persian. The term "Parthian" to describe it was suggested by Rawlinson in his edition of the Bīsotūn inscription. He distinguished three variants of the script. In addition to the form attested in Hājjiābād, he mentions a Parthian numismatic alphabet;[396] he also takes the inscriptions from Šīmbār and 'Tang-e Soluk' (Tang-e Sarvak), later recognised by Henning to be Elymaean Aramaic, to present a very crude form of Parthian.[397]

Thomas' labelling of the script as "Persepolitan Pehlevi" was endorsed by the French scholar François Lenormant (1837-1883) in a 'mémoire' dedicated to Middle Persian palaeography. Lenormant was an archaeologist and numismatist, the son of Charles Lenormant – Curator of the Cabinet des Médailles and companion of Champollion during his 1828 mission to Egypt – and a controversial figure: he produced scientific publications in his teenage years but was accused of forging several inscriptions and including them with authentic material.[398] Lenormant attempts to determine the 'genealogical relationship'[399] between the Middle Persian alphabet and the Aramaic and Palmyrene scripts, one of the recurring topics of scholarly discussion since Hyde and the Abbé Barthélémy: his letter by letter comparison of the three alphabets along with Hebrew bring him to the conclusion that Middle Persian was a sister script

[395] Thomas 1850, 262-272, pl. 1.

[396] Rawlinson 1848, 44, n. 1.

[397] See Henning 1952; Shaked and Bivar 1964.

[398] Masson 1994.

[399] Lenormant 1865, 214.

of Palmyrene – but not derived from it – descended from Aramaic.[400] He distinguishes four palaeographic stages of Middle Persian in order of their 'degeneracy' from Aramaic:[401] the "Persepolitan Pehlevi" – he rejects Rawlinson's appellation "Parthian" arguing like Thomas that the main instances of this script were found in the Persepolis region – the "Sasanian Pehlevi" – corresponding to Middle Persian – the cursive script of the Zoroastrian manuscripts and a "proto-Pehlevi" script on Parthian coins. For Lenormant, Parthian is thus a 'stage' of Middle Persian.

Although this classification contains a strong element of chronology, Lenormant departs from his numismatist predecessors in that he allows for the possibility that a version of monumental and cursive Middle Persian co-existed.[402] To back this opinion, he cites the famous passage in the *Fihrist* which describes the multiplicity of alphabets used in pre-Islamic Persia. This leads him to consider the chronicler's addendum on the "*zawaresch*" spelling: Lenormant flatly describes the passage as obscure but concludes that the Semitic words used in Middle Persian were a form of 'mystic cryptography' comparable to the Jewish tradition of reading Adonai when encountering the tetragrammaton YHWH in the Bible.[403] He also makes an astute observation concerning the 'corrupted' spelling of the name 'Ohrmazd': following the example of the Jewish reading convention for YHWH, he suggests the word be read 'Ahuramazda' after the Avestan pronunciation, instead of Anquetil Duperron's phonetic "Ahnouman".

Parthian was also put forward as the "missing link" between the Aramaic-derived script engraved on Pali coins from Bactria – now known as the Kharoṣṭhī script – and the Sasanian numismatic alphabet. Horace Haymon Wilson, a numismatist and professor of Sanskrit at Oxford, published in 1841 his *Ariana Antiqua*, a work dedicated to coins and other antiquities found in Afghanistan by the British archaeologist Charles Masson (James Lewis) under the auspices of the East India Company. After classical historiography, Wilson defines "Ariana" as the geographic entity extending from the Indus to Carmania and from the Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea.[404] It is worth noting that whereas Silvestre de Sacy had tentatively read 'APIAN' in the Naqš-e Rostam inscriptions – and in fact translated ANAPIAN as 'Tūrān' – Wilson

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[400] Lenormant 1865, 211. Lenormant ascribes to Silvestre de Sacy the hypothesis that Middle Persian derived from Palmyrene, but this is not clear from the *Diverses Antiquités de la Perse,* Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 122.

[401] Lenormant 1865, 216-219.

[402] Lenormant 1865, 197.

[403] Lenormant 1865, 200-201.

[404] Wilson 1841, 120-122.

confidently states that Ariana is "in fact, the same as IRAN, the proper appellation of Persia",[405] marking a striking evolution in Western historiography whereby the appellation "Persia" was beginning to be considered "wrong". Wilson notes that the script on the Pali coins presents some analogy with the inscriptional Middle Persian alphabet. Now, "the medium by which [the Kharoṣṭhī script] merged into the Pehlevi of the Sassanians" would be provided by the second (Parthian) version of the Hājjiābād inscription: this observation leads Wilson to conclude that the Kharoṣṭhī script was once used throughout Central Asia and Iran, in "the entire region from the Hindu Kush to the vicinity of Persepolis […] in the whole of which, it is to be inferred, both letters and language were once intelligible to the people".[406] The scholar evidently regarded the Kharoṣṭhī script as recording the original language common to all people living in the geographic entity of "Ariana"; he decides to name it the *Arianian* alphabet. Parthian is presented as being a stage in the "transmutation" of this original *Arianian* script, while Middle Persian would derive directly from Parthian.

Early translations of the Hājjiābād inscription, or how to be misled by aramaeograms: King Šābuhr I as supreme lord of the Jews.

Based on his careful comparative study of the two versions at Hājjiābād for his alphabet of "Persepolitan Pehlevi", Thomas first put forward a brave attempt at a reading of the Hājjiābād inscription. In 1867 he published an extensive article which brought together all the Sasanian inscriptions that were known to Western scholarship in his day; as such it was the first work to consider the Sasanian epigraphic corpus as a whole. It is headed by a study of the "career of the Phoenician-Babylonian script" stretching across nine centuries and culminating in the modern Arabic script.[407] Parthian and Middle Persian, which appeared at some mid-way point in this story, are considered "rival" scripts rather than descendants of one another as proposed by Wilson. With this study, Thomas is determined to bring to the fore what he considered a neglected writing system compared to others which excited the fascination of scholarship in his time, declaring from the outstart: "let Hieroglyphics and Cuneiform retain their ancient fame".[408] Thomas' overview of the Sasanian inscriptions shows that little progress had been made in his time beyond the decipherment of royal titulature. For instance, Kerdīr's inscription

[405] Wilson 1841, 120.

[406] Wilson 1841, 260-262.

[407] Thomas 1868, 5-22.

[408] Thomas 1868, 6.

at Naqš-e Rajab, copied by Flandin and Coste, is still attributed to Ardašīr because it is engraved next to this king's bas-relief; for the same reasons his inscription at Naqš-e Rostam is attributed to Šābuhr I. The numismatist does notice the recurrence of a term, *krtyr*, which we now know to be 'Kerdīr', the name of the high priest who authored both texts. He emends *krtyr* to *kytrum* however, identifying it as deriving from the Semitic root meaning 'crown'.[409]

Nevertheless, Thomas' publication did put forward original material. Although written by him, the article appeared as co-authored with Sir Henry Rawlinson for it published the latter's personal field notes concerning the Paikuli inscription, with a description of the site's geographical location and an account of the local lore concerning its history.[410] Thomas offers a transliteration – in the modern Parsi Middle Persian script for the Middle Persian version and in Hebrew for the Parthian – and a transcription in New Persian of the engraved blocks drawn by Rawlinson, but without offering a translation. He makes an explicit appeal to fellow scholars and chance travellers to help improve the existing copies of the Paikuli text by bringing back photographs, impressions, rubbings, or drawings of the blocks, providing to this effect the exact geographical coordinates of the site.[411]

Heading the article was also a photograph of Stannus' plaster casts of the Hājjiābād inscription, the other focus of Thomas' study. The scholar for the first time put forth a full, if approximate, transliteration and transcription – respectively in Hebrew and in New Persian – of the bilingual text and offered a tentative translation **[Fig. 4.5]**. Influenced by the well-known formulae of the Sasanian label inscriptions, Thomas identified the first word as *ptkr* (*pahikar*, 'image'), although the palaeography could not support this reading. Surprisingly he also misinterprets the second word, the demonstrative pronoun *ēn* spelled with the aramaeogram ZNE, well-known from the Sasanian legends, and reads "*zan*" (Middle and New Persian, 'woman'), translating it as the more neutral 'person'; Šābuhr I's titulature had already been deciphered by Spiegel. Thomas thus renders the first lines as a standard label formula, without the demonstrative: "representation of the person of Shapur king of kings".[412] Some aramaeograms are correctly identified by Thomas – such as BRBYTA, already explained by his predecessors – while phonetically spelled terms like *bērōn*, 'outside', are recognised thanks to comparison with New Persian. But for the greater part of the text, Thomas' work presents a

[409] Thomas 1868, 32.

[410] Thomas 1868, 56-80.

[411] Thomas 1868, 3-4.

[412] Thomas 1868, 73-76, 98.

series of misinterpretations leading to an extraordinary translation. Thus, the phrase AMT ZNE HTYA (*kā ēn tigr*, 'when the arrow'), is entirely misunderstood: ZNE is given as 'people' (see above), HTYA he links to New Persian *xodā*, 'god', and AMT to Arabic امة which he believes to mean 'many', giving "Lord of many races".[413] Similarly, the old mistake made by Silvestre de Sacy in reading the relative *kē*, MNW, as *mēnōg* – 'immaterial', but stretched by the French scholar to 'celestial' – persists, so that MNW YDE is translated as "the divine hand/aid". More problematic still for the general interpretation of the text is Thomas' misunderstanding of the aramaeogram 'to be' YHWWN as phonetically spelling the (Arabic) word for 'Jew', *yahud* — it appears with the personal ending 't' and 'd' in the Parthian version.[414] In the Middle Persian version where this verb is preceded by the adverb *ōwōn*, read *'rgwn* by Thomas and linked to the Greek ἄρχων, the resulting translation is extraordinary: Šābuhr would not only be describing himself as the 'Lord of many races' but more specifically "the supreme lord of the chosen Jews". Here the idea of 'chosen' is derived from the terms ADYN *bērōn* ('there beyond'), translated as "lawless [*a-dēn*] outside": "the separate sect declares itself outside… claiming a special pre-eminence as 'chosen'".[415]

Thomas himself admits not being very 'satisfied' with the resulting translation but nevertheless seriously entertains the idea that this inscription is a "unique manifesto" testifying to the "Western influences to which Sapor was subjected after his conquest of Valerian" and to the conversion of the Sasanian king – by Mani – to the "true faith".[416] The scholar concludes that Šābuhr probably remained a convert to Christianity for the rest of his life for had he reverted to the "newly defined creed of his father" he surely would not have "allowed this formal record of his adhesion to a more enlightened religion to have remained undisturbed till his death". It is worth noting that this remarkable interpretation was not wholly rejected from the outset: the British traveller George Curzon mentions, in his description of the Hājjiābād cave and its inscription, Thomas' theory concerning the conversion to Christianity of Šābuhr I, conceding nevertheless that there was no external evidence for it.[417]

It must be remembered that Thomas was a numismatist; his unfortunate readings of several heterograms may be explained to a greater extent as resulting from his lack of

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[413] Thomas 1868, 73-77, 98.

[414] Thomas 1868, 85-88. "In like manner, I can hardly be mistaken in accepting the ايهوت and يهوت (in line 9) as the common designation of the Jewish nation at large", Thomas 1868, 85.

[415] Thomas 1868, 90.

[416] Thomas 1868, 100.

[417] Curzon 1892, II, 116.

knowledge of the Zoroastrian scriptures: Silvestre de Sacy's spectacular decipherment of inscriptional Middle Persian as we saw was largely enabled by his systematic comparison of key terms with possible counterparts from the manuscripts. As West would later observe, part of the problem was that Thomas – like many others – considered inscriptional and manuscript Middle Persian as quite separate languages.

II. Working with the Parsi scholars of Mumbai.

The Hājjiābād inscription intrigues the Parsi scholars of Mumbai.

Nevertheless, knowledge of manuscript Middle Persian could not alone provide the key to the decipherment of the Hājjiābād inscription. Indeed, the bilingual text intrigued experts of the Zoroastrian scriptures such as the Parsi scholar Dhanjibhai Framji but his translation of the inscription was rather unsuccessful. Framji served as the president of the Mulla Feroze Library – now part of the K. R. Cama Oriental institute – and of the Mulla Feroze Madressa, an institution founded in 1854 by the Kadmi Anjuman (the Parsi Zoroastrian reformist council)[418] and which provided free education in Avestan, Middle Persian and Persian to Parsis. He was also a member of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society – which had only just begun admitting Indians as members[419] – and the author of *A Grammar of the Huzvarash or Proper Pehlvi language* (1853, in Gujarati) as well as *On the Origin and Authenticity of the Arian Family of Languages, the Zand Avesta and the Huzvarash* (1861). On their respective title pages, the publication date of the works is given according to three eras: of Zoroaster, of the last Sasanian king Yazdegerd and of Christ. Bombay in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was a dynamic center of modern Zoroastrian studies driven by eminent Parsi scholars such as Jivanji Jamshedji Modi (1854-1933), Tahmuras Dinshah Anklesaria (1842-1903) – themselves either Zoroastrian priests or born in priestly families – who collected, published and printed translations and editions of important Zoroastrian manuscripts and studies of Zoroastrian religion and traditions. It was also through the Parsi community of Bombay, several

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[418] On the birth of the Zoroastrian Kadmi movement and the history behind the division of the Parsi community between the Kadmis and Šāhānšāhis, see Vitalone 1996, 9-16, and also Hinnells 1989 and Karanjia 2009. The Kadmi movement emerged in India (first Surat and then Bombay) in the early 18th century and vindicated the use of the Iranian Zoroastrian calendar, which presented some differences with that followed by the Parsis of India.

[419] Since 1841.

members of which were wealthy traders and industrialists, that funding for important publications in Iranian studies outside of India was secured, such as Herzfeld's *Paikuli* (see below): indeed, throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the Parsi community had experienced a period of phenomenal economic success, favoured by the establishment of European commercial companies in India, for whom leading Parsi families acted as brokers, and the resulting intensification of trading activities and exchanges with Europe. Vitalone has suggested that this important economic development may have partly fueled the reinforcement of the Parsis' self-awareness of being a religious and cultural community which existed independently from their Zoroastrian coreligionists in Iran.[420] It is against this socio-historical background that the dispute over the calendar reform advocated by the Kadmi religious and scholarly movement – and opposed by the rest (an important majority) of the Parsi community, known as the Šāhānšāhis – must be understood: while the Kadmis proposed to solve the one-month discrepancy which existed between the Parsi and Irani calendars by 'correcting' the Parsi calendar and aligning it with the Irani one – and more generally argued for considering the Iranian Zoroastrian religious practices as 'superior' – the Šāhānšāhis strongly favoured maintaining the Parsi calendar unchanged. Controversies such as that over the calendar led to an intensification of the relations and scholarly exchanges between the Iranian Zoroastrians and the Parsis of Bombay throughout the eighteenth century: gradually however, the members of the Kadmi movement became the Irani Zoroastrians main interlocutors and ceased to be consulted by the rest of the Parsi community.[421] The Kadmis continued to actively support their coreligionists in Iran, with the collection of funding, and the foundation, for instance, of the Society for the Amelioration of the conditions of the Zoroastrians in Persia was established in 1854 and the Iran League of Bombay in 1922.

Although Qajar Iran was seeing its own revival of interest for its pre-Islamic past, it focused on the Achaemenid period, with the extensive use of Achaemenid motifs in Later Qajar art.[422] Imagery pertaining to the *ruins* of Persepolis in particular became popular: large houses and pavilions built in Shiraz in the second half of the nineteenth century were decorated with stone relief sculpture and plaster carvings displaying motifs of the Persepolis iconographic program and Judith Lerner describes a series of large carpets woven in the early twentieth

[420] Vitalone 1996, 9-10.

[421] Vitalone 1996, 10.

[422] On the subject of the revival of ancient Persian imagery in Modern Iran (and India), see most recently Grigor 2021.

century that reproduce nineteenth century drawings of Persepolis organised according to the terrace's actual plan.[423] Similarly, an inscription at the *tacara* commissioned by the Qajar king Naser al-Din Shah (1848-1896) in which he declares that he had picked up the monument's fallen blocks, wiped the earth from them and restored them to their upright position,[424] illustrates the integration of the Achaemenid ruins in political discourse. Lerner has proposed that the decipherment and translation of the cuneiform inscription of Darius at Bīsotūn by Rawlinson played a significant role in this revival: according to the British scholar, Muhammad Shah wanted to have his translation engraved under the cuneiform originals on the Bīsotūn mountain.[425] Still, it was not until the Pahlavi dynasty that the Parsis of India were ostentatiously welcomed 'home' to Iran – with Reza Shah declaring to Dinshah Jeejeebhoy Irani, founder of the Iran League in Bombay and leader of the Parsi delegation to Iran in 1932 that they were 'children of this soil'.[426] The Pahlavi crown backed important publications in ancient Iranian studies such as the *Corpus inscriptionum iranicarum* (see below).

The work of the Parsi scholars of Bombay focused on the study of Zoroastrian manuscripts and Dhanjibhai Framji had a very specific reason to tackle the decipherment of the Hājjiābād inscription. In the introduction to his work on the *Zand Avesta and Huzvarash*, he declares his intention to prove, through comparative philology, that the Zend language (Avestan) did not derive from Sanskrit but was a "primitive" language, "more perfect in its structure than the Vedic Sanskrit".[427] The Parsi scholar further declares that Avestan was the "hagiographical language and cuneiform the demotic language of the Primal Arian Nation".[428] These observations, like the title of his work promising to prove the authenticity of Avestan, are a direct response to the contention in Europe concerning the reliability of the Zoroastrian manuscripts and the 'genuineness' (see below) of the languages (Avestan and Middle Persian) in which the Zoroastrian scriptures are written in. There were different aspects to this contention. First, English scholars such as Sir William Jones and John Richardson who published together *A Grammar of the Persian Language* in 1771, deemed the scriptures brought back by Anquetil Duperron a fabrication by the Parsi priests of Surat. Jones, in a brutal letter written in French, directly addressed to Anquetil Duperron, and published in 1771 – the very

[423] Lerner 2017, 112-114.

[424] Mostafavi 1978, 228-229.

[425] Lerner 2017, 115-116.

[426] Coyajee 1948, vi; Hinnels 1989.

[427] Framji 1861, vi.

[428] Framji 1861, vii.

year that the latter published his *Zendavesta* – dismissed the content of the Zoroastrian lore as fables brought back from India and regarded Anquetil Duperron's work itself as a "tissu d'exclamations puériles";[429] while Richardson, a lexicographer of New Persian, argued in the dissertation which headed his *Dictionary* that the texts were spurious on account of the languages they were written in: the important number of Semitic words contained in Middle Persian and Avestan (*sic*) – this is clearly a confused allusion to aramaeograms in Middle Persian; Avestan does not present the use of heterograms – made these two languages highly suspicious, while neither presented a clear connection to New Persian; he decided that both idioms were 'invented' and judged the Zoroastrian scriptures of "uncommon stupidity".[430] As we saw, the notion that Middle Persian, because of its 'mixed' nature, was invented is an idea entertained by Spiegel also. Linked to this was the doubt expressed by other scholars concerning the nature of Avestan as an independent language: William Erskine, a Scottish orientalist and historian posted at the recorder's court in Bombay published a letter in the Transactions of the Bombay Literary Society in which he argued that Avestan was a dialect of Sanskrit introduced from India in the context of religious practice but never spoken as a live language.[431] The Danish scholar Rasmus Kristian Rask (1787-1832) strove to rehabilitate Avestan as an authentic, independent language, in his *On the Age and Genuineness of the Zend Language and Zendavesta* first published in 1826, as well as in a letter sent to the Royal Asiatic Society by its Bombay Branch and published in 1834 – the latter was a direct response to Erskine's essay.[432]

Dhanjibhai Framji aimed to prove that Avestan is linguistically independent and more ancient than Sanskrit[433] and that Middle Persian (*Huzvarash*) is not only independent from the Semitic linguistic branch but also 'superior' (possibly in the sense of 'older') to it.[434] Much of scholars' discussion had been confined to the study of the Zoroastrian manuscripts and had not concerned the Sasanian inscriptions. For Dhanjibhai Framji's demonstration, however, the bilingual inscription of Šābuhr at Hājjiābād was particularly important as it provided original evidence for the existence of Middle Persian in Iran in the early Sasanian period:[435] the Parsi

[429] Jones 1807, 432.

[430] Richardson 1806, v-vi; see also Haug 1862, 17-20.

[431] Erskine 1820, esp. 297-300, cited by Rask 1834, 527.

[432] Rask 1826; Rask 1834.

[433] Framji 1861, 57.

[434] Framji 1861, 74-76.

[435] Framji 1861, 72.

scholar is therefore eager to prove it to be Middle Persian – rather than a dialect of Middle Persian – and also considers Parthian to be nothing other than an 'older version' of Middle Persian,[436] identifying to this effect three variants of Middle Persian, the cursive, the lapidary and numismatic forms.[437]

Dhanjibhai Framji begins his study by giving a comparison between the copies of the Hājjiābād inscription in Ker Porter and Westergaard's respective publications. He then offers a transcription with a corresponding word-for-word translation, as well as two free translations based on each copy to show their slight divergences.[438] The Parsi scholar does not make Thomas' mistake in assuming that the first word reads *pahikar* and deciphers the letters *tglhy* correctly, reading "*tagrāhī*" (*tgl'hy*, *tigrāh*, 'bowshot', see below): however he explains it as being formed on Middle Persian *tagīg* ('swift, strong') and *rāh* ('way') translating it as 'zealous'.[439] Like Thomas, he surprisingly has difficulty with the second word, the demonstrative pronoun ZNE, which he transliterates alternatively as *zakī* and *vanī* and translates as 'just'.[440] Apart from a few words deciphered correctly – he identifies ALHA as being the counter part of *bag* – and some interpretations coming close – AMT as 'time' for example, rather than 'when' – Framji's readings are erroneous. HTYA, 'arrow', is explained as a verb – 'he is' – while the verbal form YHWWN, so seriously misunderstood by Thomas is not commented on. It is difficult to make any sense of the resulting translation: the Sasanian king Šābuhr is presented as describing his just and pious rule, receiving the blessings of Ohrmazd and in turn bestowing blessings upon the nobles of the kingdom, thus harming the "wicked Patīākī"— this last name is a misreading of *paydāg* 'visible'.[441] This unsuccessful decipherment of the Hājjiābād inscription by an expert of Zoroastrian scriptures shows just how far apart the worlds of Middle Persian inscriptions and manuscripts remained.

Still, the next significant step in the decipherment of the Hājjiābād inscription was taken by Martin Haug, and it will soon become apparent that his breakthrough rested on the glossary of aramaeograms – the *Frahang ī Pahlawīg* – which was brought to his attention by the Dastur

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[436] Framji 1861, 93

[437] Framji 1861, 74.

[438] It is not clear why he describes the English translation based on Ker Porter's copy – which he judges 'very incorrect' – as being based on "Major Vans Kennedy's work on the origin of languages", Framji 1861, 80.

[439] Framji 1861, 88-90.

[440] Framji 1861, 83, 90. It is not clear what language Dhanjibhai Framji is referring to for the translation of *zakī* and *vanī* as 'just'.

[441] Framji 1861, 87.

Hoshangji Jamaspji, highpriest of the Parsis in Malwa, with whom he closely collaborated for its publication.

The importance of the Pahlavi-Pāzand Glossary for the understanding of the Middle Persian heterographic writing system.

Haug, who was appointed professor of Sanskrit in Pune and lived in India for several years, published the first edition of his *Essays on the Sacred Language, Writings and Religion of the Parsees* in Bombay in 1862. At this point, much of his understanding of Middle Persian corresponds to what he had already exposed in his preliminary work of 1854: Middle Persian is regarded as a basically Semitic language presenting a mixture of Iranian elements while the Parthian version of Hājjiābād recorded an even 'more Semitic' dialect of Middle Persian; the 'Semitic elements' of Middle Persian – and Parthian – are still described as being loanwords.[442] Nevertheless, during his work with Parsi priests, Haug was able to attend readings of Zoroastrian scriptures and he made a fundamental observation, which had entirely escaped Anquetil Duperron and could not be picked up on by European scholars confined to working from manuscripts. He noted that it is specifically the 'non-Iranian' elements of Middle Persian that are termed *huzwāreš* by the priests: the term is therefore not a synonym for 'Pehlevi' and the Semitic words had a special status in the written language. Crucially, he was able to observe that upon encountering such a Semitic word during their readings, the Parsi priests pronounced the equivalent Persian term rather than the 'foreign' one, although if asked, were also able to decipher it phonetically. Haug further records the use of phonetic complements, or 'Iranian terminations' added to the Semitic words to 'facilitate' their reading.[443] These observations, added in a footnote to his grammar, are illustrated by a few examples – the priests pronounce *xwāstan*, 'to wish' rather than *bunshunastan* – that much resemble the explanation of the Middle Persian writing-system by Ibn Muqaffa'. Haug does not make the link with this passage yet however, and openly mocks Westergaard's "strange opinion" that the Semitic elements function as ideograms. For Haug, this curious practice arose when Middle Persian became a dead language: Parsi priests began to "restore" the "pure" Iranian words where they read foreign ones, but, not daring to change the scriptures, substituted them in reading only.[444] The gradual "extermination" of foreign words and their replacement with Iranian ones eventually

[442] Haug 1862, 46-49.

[443] Haug 1862, 47.

[444] Haug 1862, 48.

gave rise to the form called *pāzand*, in which the less ambiguous Avestan characters were used to note the Iranian terms: like Westergaard, Haug thus recognises that *pāzand* is used specifically in the context of the scriptures, as an exegetical tool and is not a dialect.

Five years later, Haug published the *Zand-Pahlavi Glossary*, edited by Dastur Hoshangji Jamaspji. A version of this index of Avestan-Middle Persian terms, commonly known as the *Frahang-ī oīm* after the first Avestan-Middle Persian pair (the number one) which it records, had been published by Anquetil Duperron a century earlier, but the terms appeared in transcription and were rearranged alphabetically;[445] the *Glossary* was printed in Avestan and Middle Persian characters with the terms grouped in thematic sections after the manuscript tradition. In his introduction, the Dastur comments on the etymology of the term *huzwāreš*, corrected to "Huzvânesh", which he derives from "Huzwan-Ashar", "the language of Assyria", and boldly places the emergence of Middle Persian in pre-Achaemenid times.[446] His claim is fully supported in the preface by Haug, who argues that this would explain the Semitic forms in Middle Persian: *huzwāreš* terms must have been borrowed into the language at the time of the Assyrian rule over Iran and this very ancient and sacred nature of Middle Persian was the reason for Ardašīr's revival of it in the Sassanian period. For why else "did the Sasanian kings who were extremely zealous in preserving the national customs, manners and religion make an essentially Semitic idiom their official language?"[447] Haug proceeds to prove the identity of "huzvânasch" with the Low-Assyrian or 'Nabatean' dialect by identifying corresponding morphological features.[448]

Haug now declares himself "fully convinced of the complete identity" of inscriptional and manuscript Middle Persian as well as the "purely Semitic nature of both".[449] He proceeds to show that what had until then been taken as divergences were in fact similarities: the ending in manuscripts transcribed as 'man' for instance, corresponded to letter E in inscriptional Middle Persian. From his explanation of a number of terms of the Hājjiābād inscription and his identification of their equivalent cursive forms – in particular of several aramaeograms missed by his predecessors, such as LGLE 'foot' and the verb to shoot ŠDYTWN – it is evident that Haug had made a breakthrough with the decipherment of Hājjiābād.[450] The aramaeogram

[445] Anquetil Duperron 1771, II, 433-475.

[446] Haug and Hoshengji Jamaspji 1867, iii.

[447] Haug and Hoshengji Jamaspji 1867, xiv-xx.

[448] Haug and Hoshengji Jamaspji 1867, xxiv-xxx.

[449] Haug and Hoshengji Jamaspji 1867, xx-xxi.

[450] Haug and Hoshengji Jamaspji 1867, xxi-xxii.

MNW is still linked to *mēnōg* however and translated as "heavenly/divine"; it is ironically highlighted as one of the few Iranian elements to be found in the inscriptions.[451]

Now, when explaining several terms of the Hājjiābād inscription in his preface, Haug frequently refers to the *Pahlavi-Pāzand Glossary*. This second glossary was also edited by Dastur Hoshengji Jamaspji in 1867, who collated six different manuscripts for the preparation of the text. As the printing of the work began however, Haug's progress on the understanding of Middle Persian was such that he delayed the final publication: the glossary only appeared three years later in 1870 – and was printed, like the *Zand-Pahlavi Glossary*, at the expense of the Government of Bombay – augmented with an important introductory essay on the Middle Persian by Haug.[452] This lexicon of aramaeographic forms gives the Middle Persian readings spelled out phonetically in Avestan letters. It is worth noting that Anquetil Duperron, who had published a version of it – again, in transcription and arranged alphabetically[453] – as well as Silvestre de Sacy, who relied on it heavily for his readings, entirely missed the fact that the glossary was specifically geared towards explaining the 'Semitic' forms in Middle Persian. In his preface, the Dastur unambiguously states that the index was considered by the Parsi priests as the cornerstone of *huzwāreš* learning and was systematically memorised by students of the Zoroastrian scriptures.[454] It is in Haug's introductory essay that we find the first meaningful decipherment of the Hājjiābād inscription, marking a turning point in the understanding of the Middle Persian heterographic writing system **[Fig. 4.6]**.

Haug begins by restating the conundrums posed by the surprising admixture of Semitic and Iranian elements in Middle Persian as well as the seemingly bizarre choice by the Sasanian dynasts to use a Semitic language as their official idiom: scholarship had gravely misunderstood this language from the start. He denounces the separation between scholars working on inscriptions and manuscripts which stemmed from the misconception that the languages of these corpuses were different. For the first time, Haug considers the passage in the *Fihrist* containing the description of the seven Persian scripts and the *huzwāreš* spelling,

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[451] Haug and Hoshengji Jamaspji 1867, xxiii.

[452] Haug and Hoshengji Jamaspji 1870, vi. The introductory essay which headed the *Pahlavi-Pāzand Glossary* was printed separately that same year and published in Stuttgart, while a shorter version of the same work appeared in German a year earlier under the title *Ueber den Charakter der Pehlewisprche mit besonderer Rücksicht auf die Inschriften*: this title more specifically states how Haug's work on Sasanian inscriptions helped him determine the "basic character" of Middle Persian.

[453] Anquetil Duperron 1771, II, 475-525.

[454] Haug and Hoshengji Jamaspji 1870, ix.

recognising it to be "of the highest interest".[455] He argues that *huzwāreš* can neither be an alphabet – as Quatremère had suggested – nor a language, as supposed by Anquetil Duperron, Spiegel and Haug himself: rather, it must denote a special type of spelling or "Orthographie".[456] The scholar also notes that the lexicon of *huzwāreš* spellings containing 1000 words mentioned by Ibn Muqaffa', can refer to nothing else than the *Pahlavi-Pāzand* glossary which his very essay was introducing: it even still contained the two words ('meat' and 'bread') which the Persian chronicler had used as examples. Haug confirms the practice illustrated in the passage with what he had himself witnessed while working with Parsi priests and which he had described in previous works but without truly grasping its significance. He finally emends his previous support for the definition of *huzwāreš* as "the language of Syria" and connects it instead to Sanskrit *varṇa* which in some contexts can mean "a letter".[457]

Looking for possible analogous cases for this practice, Haug points out that Assyrian, which had obtained its writing system from another civilization, similarly featured 'foreign' words; Japanese also mixes in Chinese characters to which Japanese terminations can be added.[458] He concludes that Middle Persian could be considered fundamentally Semitic only in its *written* form: "Pahlavî is, therefore strictly speaking, no strangely mixed language, as it appears to be; but a purely Semitic language […] if we look only to the way in which it is written, or [a purely Iranian tongue], if we consider only the way in which it is read".[459] This is the first time that the Middle Persian language and writing system are clearly separated; Haug now describes the "Semitic" elements of Middle Persian as functioning like symbols, only a few years after rejecting Westergaard's description of them as ideographs.

The event described in the Hājjiābād inscription begins to emerge.

Based on these considerations, Haug offers correct transliterations and readings of an important number of aramaeograms in the Hājjiābād inscription, demonstrating that they all had counterparts in the manuscripts. He further notes that the final *yod* seemed to be a graphic convention of inscriptions.[460] Crucially, thanks to the *Pahlavi-Pāzand Glossary*, he identifies

[455] Haug and Hoshengji Jamaspji 1870, 37-43.

[456] Haug 1869, 20.

[457] According to Haug, see Haug and Hoshengji Jamaspji 1870, 43.

[458] Haug and Hoshengji Jamaspji 1870, 121-124.

[459] Haug and Hoshengji Jamaspji 1870, 124-125.

[460] Haug and Hoshengji Jamaspji 1870, 48.

the key heterogram HTYA, 'arrow':[461] the event described in the inscription began to emerge as marking the shooting of an arrow by Šābuhr I from the cave on the wall of which the text was engraved, in front of his court. Haug is even able to decipher and tentatively translate the inscription's rather convoluted explanation concerning the issue with the place where the king's arrow fell: the spot was out of the party's eyesight, forcing the king to get a target set up in a different place that was visible from the cave, to better mark his bowshot. Indeed, if the dell of Hājjiābād is well visible from the cave to the left, to the right it is blocked by a rocky spur which stretches out into the valley: if Šābuhr shot his arrow in this direction, it would have fallen on the other side of the spur, out of the sight of the crowd gathered around the king in the recess. In the last part of his translation however, Haug is misled by a number of erroneous readings. The old reading of the relative MNW as *mēnōg*, 'immaterial' persists and just as Silvestre de Sacy had stretched its meaning to 'celestial', Haug broadens its semantic field to 'invisible'. The relative, placed adjacently to the terms HTYA and YDE (arrow, hand) is taken as an adjective qualifying these nouns: the text is understood as describing the erection of an "invisible target for the future", in the direction of which an "invisible arrow" was shot.[462] Similarly, an "invisible hand" wrote the inscription on the cavern wall. The notion of "writing" was suggested to Haug by the aramaeogram TB, 'strong, good': intent on finding a term linked to the act of writing to go with *dast* 'hand', the scholar restores the two letters TB to KTB, the Semitic root 'to write'. The scholar is bewildered by this translation but attempts nevertheless to explain it: the king's arrow not hitting the mark was regarded as "auguring evil" for his rule; the story of a "miracle" involving an "invisible" target, hand and arrow – "things which are quite in accordance with Zoroastrian ideas" – was invented.[463] Haug concludes that the bowshot was probably regarded as a symbolic act, with the king piercing "the enemy in a mystical way". Other (less problematic) misinterpretations include the very first word: the unusual form, based on the phonetic spelling of HTYA (*tigr*), *tgl'hy*, which was not to be elucidated for almost another century, is erroneously linked to the Semitic root 'to proclaim' and translated as "edict", "This is the edict of me, Šābuhr etc."[464]

Haug closes his introduction with a few remarks on the still undeciphered inscriptions of Kerdīr at Naqš-e Rajab and Naqš-e Rostam, for which the only documents available were

[461] Haug and Hoshengji Jamaspji 1870, 52.

[462] Haug and Hoshengji Jamaspji 1870, 61-64.

[463] Haug and Hoshengji Jamaspji 1870, 65.

[464] Haug and Hoshengji Jamaspji 1870, 48.

Flandin and Coste's approximate drawings. Without offering a translation of either, he does identify important aramaeograms, such as OZLWN, "to go" in KNRb 19 and KNRm 14 – although this same term is also erroneously read in the second line of KNRb – as well as key terms such as the pair *wahišt ud dušmen* ("paradise and hell") and *ruwān*, "the soul", known from the manuscripts but not yet deciphered in inscriptions. Haug also reads the names of several Sasanian kings which allows him to deduce that the inscriptions were necessarily engraved after that at Hājjiābād. Still, the name Kerdīr is read as "crown" and related to the "*cidaris*" of Persian kings after Thomas' initial suggestion.[465] As further evidence for this, Haug points to the bas-relief next to which the Naqš-e Rajab inscription is engraved and which depicts an investiture scene with Ardašīr receiving a diadem from Ohrmazd: this diadem would be the "crown" repeatedly mentioned in the texts.

Reflections on Middle Persian palaeography.

1870 was also the year that a friend from India and student of Haug, Edward William West (1824-1905), repeatedly mentioned in the introduction to the *Pahlavi-Pāzand Glossary* as an important collaborator in the preparation of the text, published an article entitled "Sassanian inscriptions explained by the Pahlavi of the Parsis". West's family owned cotton presses in India and as a young man he was sent to Bombay to superintend the estate, becoming Chief Engineer on the Great Indian Peninsula Railway Project in 1856. During his stay in India, West was in close contact with the Parsi community, members of which worked as managers in the cotton mills and in his home. It would appear that his interest for Middle Persian was first aroused by the Middle Persian inscriptions in the Buddhist caves of Kanheri, north of Mumbai, of which he published a first edition in 1880.[466] West continued his study of Middle Persian under Martin Haug, returning with him in 1866 to Munich, where he received an honorary degree of Doctor of Philosophy. West later collaborated with the Indologist Max Müller to publish the most extensive translation of Zoroastrian texts to this date in what was to become the fifty-volume series *The Sacred Books of the East*, which aimed at collecting translations of the religious canons belonging to the major world religions of Asia for scholarly study.[467]

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[465] Haug and Hoshengji Jamaspji 1870, 65-66.

[466] Haug 1878, 50; West 1880.

[467] West 1880-1897; Cereti 2000; for a recent critical analysis of the ambitious editorial project behind *The Sacred Books of the East*, see Molendjik 2016.

The title of West's article explicitly states the role of manuscript Middle Persian in the decipherment of Sasanian inscriptions. After Haug, he proceeds to make a word for word analysis of all the Sasanian inscriptions known in his day to show that most terms could be found in the Zoroastrian commentaries:[468] the identity of both idioms could thus be considered established and the main difference between them was palaeographic.[469] West also notes that the 1000 year interval in the use of Middle Persian between the Sasanian inscriptions and the earliest known manuscripts could be bridged by the legends on Sasanian coins and medals, the drawings of Middle Persian letters in Arabo-Persian chronicles, as well as the Kanheri inscriptions: he observes that the script of this series of rock-cut texts, dated to the end of the tenth century and therefore over three centuries older than the oldest known Middle Persian manuscripts, present "no sensible difference in the form of the letters".[470] This overview of Middle Persian palaeography leads the scholar to reconsider the description in the *Fihrist* of the different alphabets used by the Persians. Lenormant had suggested that one of the alphabets mentioned by the Arabo-Persian chronicler would be the 'numismatic' Sasanian alphabet. West goes further and argues that the passage indicated that a cursive Middle Persian script was probably used contemporaneously with the monumental form illustrated in the early inscriptions, from the very beginning of the Sasanian period, lending further weight to the identification of the languages recorded in the inscriptional and manuscript corpuses.

In 1876 Martin Haug passed away leaving his ongoing work on the Zoroastrian scriptures and their languages unfinished and it was West who published, in London, a new edition of his *Essays* with an updated introduction. The work is dedicated to the "Parsis of Western India in Memory of the Old Times of Friendly Intercourse enjoyed both by the Author and by the Editor" and the introduction is supplemented with a chapter recording a brief history of Zoroastrian studies among the Parsis: it offers an overview of the important known copyists of Zoroastrian manuscripts as well as the Parsi scholars who contributed to the collection, preservation, study and translation of Zoroastrian manuscripts since the 18th century.[471] It ends with an unambiguous plea to the Dasturs and the Parsi community of India to consider their "duty to collect and multiply correct unimproved copies of all the oldest manuscripts extant"

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[468] Predictably, West's explanation of the Hājjiābād inscription presents the same erroneous readings as Haug's, such as MNW as "spiritual, invisible" and TB as deriving from the root KTB "to write", West 1870, 368-376.

[469] West 1870, 370-372.

[470] West 1870, 386-391.

[471] Haug 1878, 54-62.

and learn all the languages necessary to study the manuscripts which their religion is based on. Haug's erroneous readings of the Hājjiābād inscription remain uncorrected however and the miraculous event described at the end of the inscription still involves an invisible arrow, target and hand.[472]

Reception of Haug and West's translation of Hājjiābād: the aramaeograms MNW and TB remain problematic.

As Haug and West's work progressively lifted the veil of mystery surrounding the Hājjiābād inscription, some scholars could not help but express some disappointment. In the very first overview dedicated to the history of Middle Persian epigraphy, published in 1898 in the recently inaugurated journal of Oriental studies *Le Muséon*, the French orientalist and numismatist Edme Drouin (1838-1904) commented, "On sait qu'il s'agit dans ces deux inscriptions d'une flèche qui fut lancée par Sapor I contre un but invisible […] Il est regrettable que ce double texte […] ait été gravé pour conserver la trace d'un fait aussi futile, au lieu d'un événement historique qui aurait eu pour nous bien plus d'intérêt".[473] Nevertheless, the French scholar is also the first to link Šābuhr's shooting to the legend of Āraš, a hero who features already in the Avesta but became particularly prominent in the Parthian period and was celebrated from his archery skills: during the mythical war between the Iranians and the Turanians, Āraš (Avestan Ǝrəxša) was asked to shoot an arrow to mark the boundary between the two empires; his arrow fell far, far away, extending the Iranian territory all the way to the remote regions of Khorasan. It appears that Drouin interpreted the description of Šābuhr's arrow falling 'out of sight' and hitting an 'invisible' target as narrative motifs referring to the Parthian hero's mighty bowshot.

Comments concerning Haug and West's decipherment were also put forward by Friedrich Müller, an Austrian linguist and professor of Sanskrit and comparative philology at the University of Vienna. In a dedicated article, Müller offers his own transcription of the bilingual text both in (manuscript) Middle Persian and Hebrew characters, with a new translation in German. He is convinced by West and Haug's conclusions concerning the identity of the language of the inscriptions and the manuscripts, but reverts to describing inscriptional Middle Persian as presenting a higher degree of "semitischen Mischmaschs"[474] and calls the

[472] Haug 1878, 87-90.

[473] Drouin 1898, 11.

[474] Müller 1892, 72.

Semitic elements as Aramaic "Lehnwörter"[475]: the functioning of the Middle Persian heterographic writing system would still take time to sink in.

Comparing Middle Persian *čītāg* to Balochi *čēdak*, Müller identifies the target in the inscription as being a 'stone pillar' "Steinpfeiler" and translates the term as "Schiesssäule".[476] The meaning of the word had until then only been guessed at from the context by Haug although he did link it to the Iranian root *čin-* 'to pile up, collect'.[477] Müller proceeds to compare the Hājjiābād inscription with the passage (23,852) in the Iliad describing the archery contest in the funeral games organised by Achilles for Patroclus. The target in this case is a ship's mast to which is tied a live dove: the archer who hits the dove gets the first prize, while the one who hits only the rope is placed second. Curiously, this leads Müller to understand the term *gyāg* ('place'), transliterated "*wajāk*" by Müller after Haug, to mean 'bird' by linking it to the Avestan *wi-* 'bird', a hypothesis first put forward by Haug but promptly abandoned.[478] In Müller's translation, the "bird" attached to the stone pillar is "absent" forcing the party to re-erect a target where the king's arrow fell. Müller also criticises Haug's translation for making too much allowance for "modern mysticism", because of the repeated translation of MNW as "invisible, immaterial": " (dass) sie uns zumuthet an Dinge zu glauben, die zwar mit dem modernen Mysticismus, aber nicht mit der mehr nüchternen Weltanschauung der Vorzeit sich vereinigen lassen".[479] Preferring the more 'sober' translation offered by Silvestre de Sacy, Müller renders MNW by 'himmlische' in the word for word translation as well as in the royal titulature, but, conveniently, leaves it out entirely in the free translation — unless the idea of "celestial" is suggested by the description of the target as "special" and "intended for his Majesty", making the notion of "celestial" almost synonymous to that of "royal". The last line is explained as a form of royal signature: "this the (king's) hand has written".[480]

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[475] Müller 1892, 75.

[476] Müller 1892, 72.

[477] Haug and Hoshengji Jamaspji 1870, 56.

[478] Müller 1892, 72; Haug and Hoshengji Jamaspji 1870, 58.

[479] Müller 1892, 71.

[480] Müller 1892, 72-74.

III. Archaeological campaigns in Iran and their contribution to the study of the Hājjiābād inscription(s).

New documents for the study of Sasanian inscriptions: photographs.

Haug and West had worked with the Parsis of India, but neither was able to go to Iran to visit Hājjiābād and the only documents available to them for the decipherment of the text were the tentative hand-drawings of Flandin and Coste and Stannus' incomplete casts. With Franz Stolze and Friedrich Carl Andreas's expedition to Persia, an entirely new type of document became available to scholars of Middle Persian epigraphy: photographs. In 1882 the German scholars published a monumental two-volume work collecting 150 photographs and plans of the most important archaeological sites of ancient Iran, including details of many Achaemenid and Sasanian inscriptions. Stolze, who was trained as a geographer and mathematician, travelled to Isfahan in 1874 at the behest of the Prussian ministry of Education and Medicine in the framework of an astronomic expedition sent to observe the passage of Venus; he was then commissioned to join the archaeological expedition in Persia directed by Andreas, professor of Western Asiatic philology at the University of Göttingen, in his capacity as photographer, astronomer and geographer.[481] Stolze participated in the excavation work carried out by Andreas' team at Bushehr, where they reported finding cuneiform-inscribed bricks; the two men then travelled together to document the sites of Kāzerūn and Bišāpūr. They were heavily affected by their many months' work in the scorching heat, and upon their return to Shiraz, Andreas remained there to recover; Stolze proceeded alone to Persepolis where he photographed the Achaemenid cuneiform inscriptions as well as the Middle Persian inscriptions of Naqš-e Rajab, Naqš-e Rostam and Hājjiābād **[Fig. 4.7]**,[482] setting up his laboratory of photography at the foot of the platform and protecting his plates as best he could from the blazing Persian sun. Stolze returned to Europe by land while his plates and materials were sent back to Europe by boat, a safer, smoother but longer route. Impressively, most of his plates reached Berlin intact although some sets did shatter. It was Stolze's photographs that Ernst Herzfeld included in his monumental *Paikuli* and from these that he put forth a new reading of the Hājjiābād inscription.[483]

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[481] Andreas and Stolze 1882, I, 1-2 (n. p.).

[482] Andreas and Stolze 1882, II, pl. 126.

[483] Herzfeld 1924, II, 209.

Herzfeld and the end of the "French-monopoly" over archaeological work in Persia.

Herzfeld was trained as an architect but also studied Assyriology in Berlin, joining an archaeological expedition at Assur for two years at the turn of the twentieth century, after which he travelled extensively through Iraq and Iran where he visited the sites of Persepolis, Ctesiphon and Pasargadae. These sites soon became central to his career: Herzfeld's 'Habilitationsschrift' was dedicated to Iranian rock reliefs and with Friedrich Sarre, director of the Islamic Museum of Berlin, he jointly published in 1910 a monumental study of the most important known archaeological sites of Fārs.[484] In 1911 and 1913 he visited the site of Paikuli and began piecing together its inscription, which had not been worked on since Rawlinson.[485] During the war, Herzfeld was sent at his own request to Iraq where he worked as a surveyor, enabling him to visit Paikuli for the third time. He was appointed full professor of Near Eastern Archaeology in Berlin once the war ended, but soon returned to Persia, and to Paikuli, where in 1923 he excavated 30 new blocks of the inscription – although these were not included in it, the following year saw the publication of his cornerstone work *Paikuli*.

During the next two decades Herzfeld headed a number of expeditions and excavations in Iraq and Iran. The German archaeologist largely contributed to ending the so-called "French monopoly" – which lasted since the late 19th century – over archaeological work in Persia when in 1931 he secured funding from the University of Chicago to excavate the Persepolis terrace: post-war Germany was engulfed in an economic crisis and Herzfeld turned to the better endowed trans-Atlantic Universities for support. The veritable sway which Herzfeld held over the most important archaeological sites of ancient Iran is illustrated by Robert Byron in *The Road to Oxiana*, a travel journal recounting his ten-month journey in the Middle East, undertaken in search of the origins of Islamic architecture. At the English club in Tehran in October 1933, Byron finds Friedrich Krefter, Herzfeld's architect, deep in conversation with the American First Secretary. As it turns out, Krefter had just unearthed Darius' gold and silver cuneiform inscribed foundation plaques of the Apadana terrace while Herzfeld was away in Europe: "Rather unwillingly he showed us photographs of them; archaeological jealousy and suspicion glanced from his eyes. Herzfeld, it seems, has turned Persepolis into his private domain, and forbids anyone to photograph there."[486] Byron later visits Herzfeld in Persepolis and is much entertained by the German archaeologist who gives him a full tour of the

[484] For an overview of Herzfeld's career, see Hauser 2003.

[485] Herzfeld 1924, I, xi.

[486] Byron 2007 [1937], 44.

excavation works in the company of Bul-bul, his pet sow, which was allowed to run loose among the ruins: the animal's "trotters slithered about stairways and pavements like Charlie Chaplin's feet, to an orchestra of growls and grunts [from Herzfeld's grumpy old Airedale] and roars from the Professor".[487] Invited for tea by the archaeologist, Byron remarks on the liberally endowed expedition, and alludes to the commercial plans entertained for the site's future. Concerning the diggers' 'house', he comments: "I say house; it is a palace, reconstructed of wood on the site and in the style, of its Achaemenid predecessor, whose stone door and window frames are incorporated in it. The money was supplied by Mrs. Moore and the University of Chicago, and the outcome is a luxurious cross between the King David Hotel in Jerusalem and the Pergamum Museum in Berlin. This is as it should be, for it will have to serve the purposes of both when the excavations are finished."[488] When he asks Herzfeld for permission to take pictures of the site, promising he would confine himself to the vestiges that had always been above ground, Byron is categorically turned down. Returning with letters from the Governor of Fārs and from Seyyed Mohammad Taqi Mostafavi, who was overseeing the excavations of Herzfeld's team on behalf of the Iranian government, Byron challenges Herzfeld to physically stop him from taking his pictures and the German archaeologist is finally forced to concede.

By the mid-1930s however, German-Persian relations had deteriorated and the Persian government demanded an American director to oversee the expedition at Persepolis. In parallel, with the second world war dawning, Herzfeld, who was of Jewish descent, was forced into retirement. The German archaeologist moved first to London and then to America where he continued his career in Boston, Princeton and then New York but abandoned his work on the Sasanian inscriptions.

Herzfeld's Paikuli (1924): further progress on Middle Persian aramaeograms and important corrections to the transcription and translation of Hājjiābād.

In the preface to his *Paikuli*, the German archaeologist describes his hopeless quest for funding towards the publication of the tremendously expensive two-volume book in post-war Europe. It was finally through the active and generous support of Sir Dorabji Tata as well as several other eminent members of the Parsi community of Bombay that funds were secured: in recognition of this support Herzfeld published it in English.[489] The title suggests the work is

[487] Byron 2007, 184.

[488] Byron 2007, 184.

[489] Herzfeld 1924, I, vi-vii, xiii.

exclusively dedicated to the reconstruction of the Paikuli monument and the decipherment of the extant blocks but in reality it contains much more and diverse material, including a history of the early Sasanian empire, an essay on the Pahlavi language and the publication of a number of engraved seals kept in different private and national collections. Based on improved photographs reissued from Stolze's original plates, Herzfeld was also able to put forward new drawings and transcriptions of the main Middle Persian inscriptions known at the time.

Herzfeld's laborious work on the Paikuli blocks revealed that the text was bilingual, in Parthian and Middle Persian – which he calls respectively Pārsīk and Pahlavīk – like at Hājjiābād. "I am not a philologist" Herzfeld bluntly declares in his preface: his task was a "purely epigraphical one, viz. to put in order the heap of hundred separate blocks, the relative positions of which were entirely unknown".[490] Still, his essay on "Pahlavi" marked fundamental progress in the understanding of the Middle Persian and Parthian heterographic writing systems, which Herzfeld considered "much neglected" by scholarship.[491] He puts forward a careful study the verbal aramaeograms and their phonetic complements in both Parthian and Middle Persian – referring to the Semitic forms as "ideograms", and terms the phonetic spellings *scriptio plena* – and tackles the problem of the pronunciation of heterograms in Parthian – for which there is no known glossary – putting forth a comparative table of verbs given in Parthian, inscriptional and cursive Middle Persian, along with their Aramaic roots and their phonetic pronunciation after the *pāzand* spelling.[492] This allows him to note the exceedingly rare instances in which Middle Persian aramaeograms depart from Parthian in employing a different, synonymous, Aramaic root. He also notes that some aramaeograms could be used for different Iranian words that sound alike but mean entirely different things and are etymologically unrelated, further indicating that the reading conventions attached to heterographic forms were in some instances more relevant to their use than the Aramaic root which they derived from: in other words that these heterograms had become syllabic units.[493]

Most crucially for the understanding of the Hājjiābād text, he makes a detailed study of the heterographic spellings of pronouns (personal, relative and demonstrative): the German archaeologist is the very first, since the decipherment of inscriptional Middle Persian by Silvestre de Sacy, to recognise that the aramaeogram MNW renders the relative and

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[490] Herzfeld 1924, I, xii.

[491] Herzfeld 1924, I, 52.

[492] Herzfeld 1924, I, 58-59.

[493] Herzfeld 1924, I, 65.

interrogative pronoun *kē*, 'who'.[494] This solved the main difficulties that the Hājjiābād text still presented and corrected the long-erroneous transcriptions of Sasanian royal titulature. Herzfeld also correctly identifies the heterogram TB, *nēw*, 'good', so that the previous fanciful interpretation of the end of the text dissolved to reveal that the king was in fact challenging he who considered himself *strong-armed* to outdo his bowshot. Less happily, Herzfeld emends the first word of the inscription, drawing in an initial *mem*, to 'restore' the heterogram for *saxwan* ('speech'), MRYA, better corresponding to the notion of "edict". This emendation, apart from corresponding to Haug's own forced reading, is probably directly inspired by his (erroneous) reconstruction of the opening phrase of the Paikuli inscription: "this is the edict of the Mazda-worshipping Lord Narseh", although *saxwan* is there spelled phonetically.[495]

Herzfeld also offered a much-improved drawing and transcription of Kerdīr's inscriptions at Naqš-Rajab and Naqš-e Rostam. Apart from a number of correct decipherments and readings, Herzfeld namely rejects Thomas, Haug and West's interpretation of the term "Kerdīr" as a noun, for it was at odds with the sentence structure. The name also featured in the Paikuli inscription, in the long list of dignitaries which closes the text. Evidently uncomfortable with the idea of reading the term as a first name – what private individual could have commissioned inscriptions on these royal sites? – he settles for an intermediary reading of it as an official title: "And I, the Kartir".[496]

Samuel Nyberg and the bowshot of Šābuhr I.

Herzfeld's heavy emendation of the first word of Hājjiābād was corrected by Henrik Samuel Nyberg in a dedicated article two decades later.[497] The Swedish scholar and professor of Semitic studies at the University of Uppsala first became interested in the aramaeographic component of Middle Iranian languages, which he hoped might contribute to the study of Aramaic dialectology. Nyberg's posthumous publication of the *Frahang ī Pahlawīg* edited by his student Bo Utas, is a major contribution to the study of Middle Persian and remains the reference work for this text today.[498] Nyberg began to teach Middle Persian at Uppsala and

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[494] Herzfeld 1924, I, 64.

[495] Herzfeld 1924, I, 94-95; for a recent and corrected edition of the Paikuli inscription, see Humbach and Skjærvø 1983.

[496] Herzfeld 1924, I, 89.

[497] Nyberg 1945.

[498] Utas 1988.

elaborated a Manual of Middle Persian, first entitled *Hilfsbuch des Pehlevi*; the first volume of an updated English version was published in 1964 while the second, reportedly found on Nyberg's desk at his death, was printed posthumously. The first volume consists in an anthology of Middle Persian texts painstakingly copied out by hand by the scholar. Nyberg also included several Middle Persian inscriptions and namely an improved hand-drawn edition of the Hājjiābād inscription.[499] The second volume is a glossary of Middle Persian terms and includes a special index of what Nyberg called, like Herzfeld, Middle Persian "ideograms".

Nyberg's article is the first to offer a full transliteration of both versions of the text with a phonemic transcription underneath. It inaugurates the convention used today of presenting the aramaeograms in transliteration in capital letters and the phonemic complements and words in *scriptio plena* in lowercase, with a transcription in lowercase. The focus of Nyberg's study is the first word of the Hājjiābād texts, the different erroneous interpretations of which had failed to identify the feat which the inscription celebrated. After denouncing Haug and Herzfeld's forced readings, Nyberg rejects the translation "edict" and, like Dhanjibhai Framji, deciphers the letters *tglh'y*, transcribing it "*tiγrāhē*".[500] The drawings of Flandin and Coste and the moulds of Stannus had not been able to reach the top right corner of the Parthian version, but Nyberg relies on Herzfeld's "personal communication" to him (see below), based on Stolze's photographs, for the reading *wt'wny* of the first word in the corresponding Parthian text.

For Nyberg, *tiγrāhē* is formed on the phonetically spelled term *tigr* 'arrow'– whereas is appears with the aramaeogram HTYA in the rest of the text – to which is added the Old Iranian verbal root **āsa*- "to reach, meet", giving "pilträff, skottlängd, skottvidd", "the bowshot range".[501] The Parthian counterpart provided by Herzfeld, *wt'wny* (transcribed as '*vitāvan*') – which occurs in the *Frahang ī Pahlawīg* (25,19) where it is glossed as *windag-witaw* without further information – is linked by Nyberg to Armenian *utawan*, which denotes a unit of measure describing the distance that can be reached with the shot of an arrow: a shot-range "skott-räckvidd, skottavstånd".[502] The Hājjiābād inscription thus appeared to be celebrating a feat of archery by the Sasanian king by marking the length of his bowshot "a monument to a master

[499] Nyberg 1964, 122-123.

[500] Nyberg 1945, 65-67.

[501] Nyberg 1945, 66. He later retracted this, preferring to identify the verbal root *Hap/f 'to reach, to attain'; on this root see Cheung 2007, 161-163.

[502] Nyberg 1945, 66.

shot of the Great King":[503] the inscription indicated the place where the king had shot his arrow from and described the target that the arrow had hit; the end of the text defied any passerby – or the members of his audience? – to outdo him.

Nyberg highlights the central importance of archery in the ancient Iranian world and offers a brief comparative overview of archer-heroes in the Indo-Iranian tradition.[504] Like Drouin he makes the parallel between Šābuhr's bowshot and the myth of Āraš, and observes that the symbolic demarcation between the Iranians and non-Iranians (Turanians) which Āraš's arrow effected, as well as the hero's self-sacrifice for his country – the strength of the bowshot rips Āraš apart – would have been particularly appealing for the Sasanian king. Nyberg suggests that Šābuhr may have shot the arrow in the context of a festival. The *tīragān* festival celebrated during the month Tīr in honour of the god Tištriya, who governs Sirius, was associated with the myth of Āraš and would be a likely candidate.[505] Nyberg also compares Šābuhr's inscription to the markers erected in celebration of the medieval Swedish king Stenkil's impressive bowshots and recorded in a chronicle appended to the Westrogothic law (Västgötalagen) — a comparison that was soon to turn out particularly astute.[506]

The Czech orientalist and philologist Otakar Klíma published some notes to Nyberg's study: he preferred for instance to see *tigrāh* as being formed on the verbal root *Hah^2 'to throw', 'to hurl', rather than to "reach".[507] Still, he translates *tigrāh* as "Pfeilwurf, Pfeilschuss" – with Parthian *wt'wny* as "Pfeilschussweite" – and regards the inscription as recording "eine Sportleistung des Sassaniden Shâhpuhr. Es handelt sich um einen Bogen-schuss":[508] Nyberg's final transliteration and translation of the inscription remains accepted today. However, if the

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[503] Nyberg 1945, 71: "ett minnesmärke över ett mästerskott av storkonungen".

[504] Nyberg 1945, 71-74. He namely remarks that they occupied a different position in Greek mythology: although the bow and arrow are carried by gods and have an important role in contests, in warfare close combat has much more prestige. A comprehensive study of the "symbolic and ideological implications of archery" in royal ideology in the Achaemenid and Parthian periods was recently put forward by Panaino 2019: the author argues that the "ideological exaltation of royal archery" disappears with the Sasanians: the Hājjiābād inscription would be a "political and ideological *unicum* in Sasanian history" allowing Šābuhr to "enter a symbolic space previously covered by the Parthian dynasty", Panaino 2019, 47-49.

[505] On the relationship between the gods Tištrya and Tīr, the festival of the *tīragān* and the myth of Āraš see Panaino 1995, 52-53 and 61-85.

[506] Nyberg 1945, 72-73.

[507] Klíma 1968, 19-21. See also Klíma 1971. For the verbal root *Hah^2, see Cheung 2007, 152-153.

[508] Klíma 1971, 260.

Swedish scholar's work thus completed the decipherment of the much-studied Hājjiābād inscription, the remarkable, eventful story of this text does not stop here.

New Sasanian inscriptions are rediscovered and the Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum is created.

The twentieth century saw the rediscovery of a number of new Middle Persian inscriptions and the Sasanian epigraphic corpus grew steadily. At the tail end of the "French monopoly" on archaeological work in Iran were the excavations conducted at the site of Bīšāpūr by Roman Ghirshman, a French archaeologist of Ukrainian-Jewish descent appointed head of the Délégations archéologiques françaises in Persia in the 1931. The mission's finds at Bīšāpūr were plundered before they could be published, but Ghirshman produced a lavishly illustrated work dedicated to the series of bas-reliefs engraved in the gorge leading up to the city, which also included colour reproductions of the mosaics that decorated the floors of the Sasanian palace complex.[509] The excavations also revealed a Middle Persian-Parthian bilingual inscription engraved on a votive monument dedicated to Šābuhr I by his scribe in chief Apsāy: it records Apsāy's erection of the monument at his own personal expense, the king's great satisfaction with the statue – now lost, but which represented Šābuhr I – which was the centerpiece of the monument and lists the lavish gifts that were bestowed upon the scribe as reward.[510] This bilingual text appeared in a short compendium of ancient Iranian inscriptions – which included both Middle and Old Persian – put together by Jamshedji Maneckji Unvala, a Parsi scholar who obtained his doctorate from the University of Heidelberg, and printed at the expense of the Trustees of the Parsi Punchayet. The preface notes that the compendium was intended for the use of students at Bombay University: Apsāy's inscription at Bīšāpūr was the set text for the Master's entrance exam for the academic year 1951-1952 while the Hājjiābād inscription was prescribed for the year 1953-1954.[511] This detail shows that whereas the study of Zoroastrian manuscripts had a long history among the Parsi community, *inscriptional* Middle Persian – as well as Old Persian cuneiform – was now also considered as a core component for the study of ancient Iran in India.

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[509] Ghirshman 1956-1971. These extraordinary compositions represent motifs borrowed directly from the Greco-Roman world, including bacchic-like scenes, in a style reminiscent of mosaics from that period in Antioch, see von Gall 1971.

[510] Ghirshman 1936; see also Henning 1939.

[511] Unvala 1952.

Herzfeld himself, during his extensive surveying work throughout Iran, documented an inscription commissioned by another Sasanian high official Mihrnarseh which inaugurated a bridge in the vicinity of Fīrūzābād, as well as a third inscription by Kerdīr at Sar Mašhad, although as the specialist in (Classics and) Semitic languages Martin Sprengling bitterly observed, he did not publish it.[512] The German scholar's collaboration with the Chicago Oriental Institute inaugurated a new era of archaeological work in the Persepolis region. In 1936 the excavations headed by Erich Schmidt at Naqš-e Rostam revealed the longest inscription by Šābuhr I known to date engraved on the Achaemenid tower referred to as the Ka'ba of Zoroaster.[513] Three years later, the Greek and Parthian versions of this trilingual text were brought to light on the South and West facades of the tower as well as a practically intact inscription by Kerdīr engraved underneath the Middle Persian version of Šābuhr I's inscription. This key discovery propeled forward research on the elusive figure of Kerdīr – Sprengling was able to recognise Kerdīr as a name rather than a function and identify the different titles the high priest held – and enabled the decipherment and reconstruction of the rest of the high-priest's inscriptions as these present numerous repetitions and overlap.[514]

Scholars began to discuss the necessity to collect the known inscriptions of ancient Iran in a single volume series and in 1960 Nyberg inaugurated *The New Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum*.[515] The Swedish scholar had inherited from Herzfeld original documents including drawings and photographs obtained from Stolze's plates of most of the known Sasanian inscriptions, including Hājjiābād and Sar Mašhad: these enabled Gignoux to finally put forth an edition of the Sar Mašhad text and formed the core of the project's material at its inception.[516] Financial support for the creation of the *Corpus* did not come from the Parsi community of India this time, but from Iran itself, as well as the UNESCO. The scholar and statesman under the Qajar and Pahlavi dynasties, Sayyed Hasan Taqizadeh, backed the project and funding was secured from Mohammad Reza Shah himself. This ostentatious support for ancient Iranian studies was emblematic of a new era in Iran under the Pahlavis who vindicated an unbroken continuity of rule between pre-Islamic and modern Iran – it culminated in

[512] Herzfeld 1926, 256–257; Sprengling 1940a, 202: "The beginning of SM [Sar Mašhad] is known to Professor Herzfeld and God, and, perhaps, Nyberg, but not to us ordinary mortals".

[513] Sprengling 1937; Sprengling, 1940b; Huyse 1999a.

[514] Sprengling 1940a; for a synoptic edition of the high priest's inscriptions, see Gignoux 1991.

[515] Nyberg 1960; see also Sims-Williams 1993.

[516] Gignoux 1968; Nyberg 1960, 42-44.

Mohammad Reza Shah's lavish celebrations in 1971 of the "2500 years" of the Persian Empire at the foot of the Persepolis platform.

Hājjiābād's twin inscription at Tang-e Boraq.

With the outbreak of World War II, Iranian archaeologists such as Ali Sāmi and Seyyed Mohammad Taqi Mostafavi who had supervised the excavations carried out by the Oriental Institute on behalf of the Iranian government took the lead in continuing archaeological surveys. A series of Middle Persian inscriptions were documented by Ali Sāmi and published in 1957: these inscriptions, for the most part private, were first printed in an Iranian journal and in Persian and did not make their way – and still have not – into the *Corpus inscriptionum iranicarum*, although Gignoux was able to add them to the bibliography of his *Glossaire des inscriptions pehlevies et parthes* which was published as a volume of the *Corpus* in 1972.[517] Drouin, who had been disappointed about the insignificance of the event recorded at Hājjiābād would have been taken aback by one of the inscriptions documented by Ali Sāmi. A very fragmentary bilingual inscription in Middle Persian and Parthian recording another bowshot by the same Sasanian king was found in the Tang-e Boraq cave, 100km away from Hājjiābād. A – very small – photograph of the inscription was published by Sāmi in his *Sassanian Civilisation* in 1963 but it was only when an edition of this inscription was put forward by the German scholar Gerd Gropp that the extent to which it reproduced the structure and wording of the Hājjiābād text became apparent.[518] Šābuhr's shooting at Hājjiābād was not an isolated, one-off event, but part of several feats of archery performed by the King of kings in front of his court, in different parts of the – newly-conquered – Sasanian territory, indeed very much reminiscent of King Stenkil's celebrated series of exploits; these feats were recorded according to a specific formulaic phraseology which identified the exact spot from which the king shot his arrow, "I put my foot in *this* recess", listed the witnesses present during the exploit and challenged the reader to outdo his bowshot. Gropp also notes the strong similarities between the two inscriptions' contexts: like the Hājjiābād cave, Tang-e Boraq is a rocky recess; it overlooks a gorge at the bottom of which flows a deep, crystal-clear river. From gaps in the rock above and below the cave water spurts forward into the gorge feeding the river below and a carpet of bright green moss covers the damp rock-cliff, a scene reminiscent of Ker Porter's description of the lush landscape and the waterfalls tumbling down the rockface at Hājjiābād,

[517] Sāmi 1957 and Gignoux 1972, 10.

[518] Sāmi 1963, 70; Gropp 1969, 229-237.

although these have now completely dried up. At Tang-e Boraq, the inscription's two versions are engraved one above the other, rather than next to another, on a smooth, prepared rock-surface. The first two words of the Middle Persian version are preserved according to Gropp's drawing – although it is very difficult to see this from his photographs – and if the rest of the first line is lost it appears to reproduce the formula which begins the Hājjiābād text. The shooting conditions at Tang-e Boraq were better than at Hājjiābād however, so that the main difference between the two inscriptions is that the section which describes the arrow falling beyond the target and out of the party's eyesight – which led to the re-erection of another target at Hājjiābād – is omitted at Tang-e Boraq. Gropp notes a tall and slender boulder in the valley below which he suggests may have served as a marker for the king's shot.

When text editions take a life of their own.

Further monumental examples of the Hājjiābād inscription have not – yet – been brought to light, but the text was found inscribed on a series of different artefacts which appeared on the antiques market in the 1960s and 1970s, marking a new twist in the remarkable trajectory of this text. David Neil Mackenzie, a British scholar of Middle and New Iranian languages who held the Chair of Oriental Philology in Göttingen and is the author of the only dictionary of Middle Persian available in English to this day, published in 1978 a curious Parthian inscription engraved on a silver plaque kept at the Department of Western Asiatic Antiquities in the British Museum (BM 136772). The provenance for the object was loosely described as a "European private collection".[519] The first 14 lines closely reproduce the Parthian version of the Hājjiābād inscription albeit with the first word presenting some palaeographic differences, while lines 15 to 21 repeat this same inscription from the beginning with two learned variations: the phonemic spelling *be* is replaced by the corresponding aramaeogram BRE and the aramaeogram AYK is substituted for another, ANW. The erudition of these variations made MacKenzie dispel the possibility that the inscription might be a forgery: on the contrary, the Middle Persian spellings BRE and AYK pointed to the inadvertence of an "old non-Parthian scribe".[520] Nevertheless, the find baffled the scholar: a silver plaque could not possibly be a school exercise or even a miniature draft for the rock-cut text. He finally concluded that the object was meant as a master copy of the inscription for presentation to the king: at the sight of the sloppy attempt made by the first engraver, the chief secretary in charge of the Hājjiābād project would have asked a

[519] MacKenzie 1978, 499.

[520] MacKenzie 1978, 509.

second scribe to re-engrave the text; careful not to waste a precious piece of material, the latter decided to engrave his version below that of his predecessor. After painting as best he could this unlikely scenario, MacKenzie was forced to recognise that a year earlier Richard Nelson Frye, Aga Khan Professor of Iranian studies at Harvard university, had published an article in the Bulletin of the Asia Institute of the Pahlavi University of Shiraz – of which he was the Director – in which he mentioned that he was once shown a beautiful Sasanian silver plate engraved with a well-carved, but forged, inscription: upon closer examination he had identified it as being none other than the Middle Persian version of the Hājjiābād text.[521] This anecdote did not raise MacKenzie's suspicions however, and the scholar entertained the idea that the plate mentioned by Frye, because it was described as bearing the Middle Persian version of Hājjiābād, was the counterpart of the curious object in Parthian kept at the British Museum.

It was Shaul Shaked, Professor of Iranian studies at the Hebrew university of Jerusalem, who solved the enigma of the silver plaque a decade later in the *Papers in Honour of Richard Frye*.[522] He records not one but a whole series of objects kept in Museums and private collections alike bearing a version of the Hājjiābād inscription. These include a tomb-stone-like slab kept at the California Museum of Ancient Art engraved with the Middle Persian version of this inscription; a bronze plaque in a private collection with the same version **[Fig. 4.8]**; a bronze bowl with the Parthian version engraved on the outer rim; an earthenware bowl in the Yale Babylonian collection resembling a Babylonian incantation bowl, with the Parthian version inscribed in spiral lines running from the center outward and stopping mid-sentence when it reached the rim **[Fig. 4.9]**. This particular piece was strongly considered as potentially genuine by Prods Oktor Skjærvø, successor of Richard Frye as Aga Khan Professor of Iranian studies at Harvard, who argued that it presented a more cursive-like ductus of inscriptional Middle Persian.[523] This same cursive ductus was found among the spurious objects published by Shaked however, suggesting a common source for the forgery. Shaked remarked that the Hājjiābād text, which specifically points to its physical natural environment, would make little sense outside of its context and had no raison d'être on such objects. More specifically, he demonstrated that the engraved silver plaque first published by MacKenzie scrupulously copied not the Hājjiābād rock-cut inscription itself, but Herzfeld's *drawing* of the text, published in his *Paikuli* **[Fig. 4.10]**. Herzfeld gives a line-by-line draught of the inscription alternating

[521] MacKenzie 1978, 511; Frye 1977.

[522] Shaked 1990a.

[523] Skjærvø 1990, 292.

between the Middle Persian and Parthian versions. Because of lack of space, it is truncated at the bottom of page 87 and continued onto the next two pages:[524] this explained both the strange half-repeated inscription – after finishing his copy of the Parthian text, the forger went back to the beginning of the drawing and copied the six lines of the Middle Persian version on page 87 – and the sudden preference for aramaeograms used in Middle Persian in the second paragraph of silver plaque. Similarly, the bronze plaque engraved with the Middle Persian version of Hājjiābād slavishly reproduces the square brackets which Herzfeld had diligently added around the first letter in his drawing of the inscription to indicate that he was adding the initial *mem* in order to restore the term *saxwan* (MRYA, see above) **[Fig. 4.8]**: the forger was again evidently working from *Paikuli* and mistook these editorial marks for graphemes.[525]

Among the spurious objects published by Shaked is an Old Persian cuneiform inscription engraved on a silver plaque, with a small Achaemenid winged-symbol etched in the bottom left: the text, suspiciously justified to the right, was evidently written from right to left rather than left to right as Old Persian ought to be, strongly suggesting the inscription was forged.[526] We may consider that the extraordinary discovery of the gold and silver engraved foundation plaques found at the four corners of the Apadana building by Herzfeld's architect Krefter, which provoked immense international interest, inspired this counterfeit. Perhaps the Apadana foundation plaques were also the inspiration for the silver plaque at the British Museum engraved with the copy and a half of the Hājjiābād inscription. Shaked has argued that the spurious Old Persian inscription may be copying a genuine but now lost Achaemenid inscription; remarkably, in the case of the artefacts bearing copies of the Hājjiābād inscription, it was the very secondary literature dedicated to the original rock-cut inscription that produced a new series of engraved objects which made their way into museums and private collections and into the studies of eminent scholars.

[524] Herzfeld 1924, 87-89.

[525] Shaked 1990a, 270, Fig. 2.

[526] Shaked 1990a, 274-275.

Chapter 5

The emergence of the Middle Persian heterographic writing system

I. The Aramaic roots of the Middle Persian writing system.

Achaemenid Aramaic and the monolithic Achaemenid administrative tradition.

The Middle Persian script, like the Parthian, derives from Aramaic. Now, its relation to Aramaic is not only palaeographic, with the Middle Persian graphemes evolving from Aramaic letters; it is structural also and concerns the workings of the writing system itself. The use of aramaeograms, 'fossilised' Aramaic forms read 'globally' rather than deciphered phonetically according to their spelling – in other words, functioning very much like ideograms made up of letters – are a constitutional part of Middle Persian and Parthian (and Sogdian). These forms, which for so many centuries were thought to be 'loanwords' by western scholarship and had proved so difficult to apprehend, were not borrowed into the language as became clear after Haug's work with the Parsi Dastur Hoshengji,[527] but inherent to the writing system and directly linked to the history of its emergence. Recent research has focused on explaining how and why the Aramaic forms 'froze' into the aramaeograms we find in manuscripts and inscriptions and highlights the difficulty in deciding, in the case of early texts, whether these present 'corrupted' Aramaic or already a form of heterography.[528] Such issues stress the necessity of exploring the circumstances in which the Middle Persian writing system arose. The following chapter proposes an overview of the use and evolution of the Aramaic script in post-Achaemenid Persia to better highlight the backdrop against which the Middle Persian script(s) and writing system emerged, as well as to understand its articulation with other Aramaic-derived scripts such as Parthian, but also Palmyrene, Elymaean and Characenean. It will pay particular attention to the role of the Aramaic script with respect to other writing systems used by Achaemenid and post-Achaemenid dynasties such as Elamite, Akkadian and Greek, the different media it is found on, the graphic evolution of letters, the gradual obsolescence of certain graphemes and the

[527] See Chapter 4.

[528] Skjærvø 1995.

permanence of key fixed phrases and terms deriving from Aramaic epistolary formulae which eventually shaped the heterographic writing system.

When the Achaemenid king Darius I (r. 522–486 BCE) had the monumental inscription of Bīsotūn engraved high up on the mountain of the same name, recording the convoluted story of his accession to the throne, he chose to have it written in three different cuneiform scripts: Neo-Babylonian, the language of the kings of Babylonia, whose empire disintegrated with the rise of the Achaemenids;[529] Elamite, the administrative language of the royal household economy at Persepolis (and Susa); and Old Persian, (a partially artificial acrolect based on) the Persian kings' mother tongue.[530] The Old Persian cuneiform script, regarded as having been invented *ad hoc* under Darius for the very purpose of writing the Bīsotūn inscription,[531] is found in only a small number of other monumental – mainly architectural – inscriptions at prominent Achaemenid sites, as well as a growing number of inscribed objects such as seals, weights, metal-work and so forth; these inscriptions are the earliest written attestations of any Iranian language. However, Old Persian never became an administrative (written) language under the Achaemenids.[532] A fourth version of the Bīsotūn inscription was brought to light, dated a hundred years later and written in a fourth language and script – Aramaic **[Fig. 5.1]**.[533] Unlike the monumental cuneiform texts engraved so high above ground so that they were barely visible from below, this version was written in ink on papyrus and recovered far from the Persian heartland, in Egypt, among the Imperial chancery archive known as the Elephantine papyri.[534] It follows most closely the Neo-Babylonian version of Bīsotūn[535] although towards the end it works in the final passage of Darius' tomb inscription at Naqš-e Rostam, in which

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[529] Akkadian had been used in Elam as an administrative language since the second millennium BCE.

[530] An edition bringing together the three versions of this trilingual inscriptions is under preparation by Wouter Henkelman. For an edition of the Old Persian and Babylonian versions, see respectively Schmitt 1991 and von Voigtlander 1978.

[531] Huyse 1999b, esp. 52-55.

[532] Only one Old Persian inscribed clay tablet was found at Persepolis, see Stolper and Tavernier 2007. Note however that Tavernier describes Old Persian as an important *non-written* administrative language of the Achaemenid empire, see Tavernier 2017, 343-355.

[533] For a discussion of the passages in the Aramaic version which diverge from the 'original' rock-cut text, see Tavernier 2001; for the discussion of the 'literary stemma' behind the different versions of this text, see Bae 2003.

[534] Greenfield and Porten 1982.

[535] However, see Bae 2008, 138.

Darius directly addresses his future heir and instructs him on the qualities that behove a king.[536] As such, this document is representative of the use of Aramaic under the Achaemenids. First, while cuneiform scripts like Akkadian and Elamite were cut into clay tablets and rock-cut texts, Aramaic, which derives from the Phoenician script and presents many curved graphemes, was better suited to being written with ink on papyrus, parchment or potsherds (ostraca).[537] Secondly, while Elamite was restricted to highly localised archives dealing with the royal household economy,[538] and Old Persian, which has been described as a *Kunstsprache*,[539] was primarily included in the architectural programs of Achaemenid palaces, Aramaic can be seen as the administrative *lingua franca* of the Achaemenid Persian empire: Aramaic was the language of high-level communication, of travel authorisations – which, as Wouter Henkelman has observed, was probably instrumental to its wide-ranging establishment[540] – and of the satrapal chanceries, as well as certain local archives.[541] It had been an official administrative language of the Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian empires as early as the 7th century BCE, as testified by the 'dockets' or 'endorsements' written in ink on the edge of cuneiform tablets from

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[536] For an edition of Darius' tomb inscription, see Schmitt 2000. Some scholars have argued that it was this Aramaic version which Darius refers to at the end of his Bīsotūn inscription when he declares that he sent out copies of his edict throughout the different lands of his empire but the passage is highly debated, see most recently Huyse 1999b (who argues that it was OP versions that were disseminated), Bae 2008, Rossi (forthcoming, *Achaemenidica*, Vienna); for a discussion of the composition and dissemination of Darius' Bīsotūn inscription, see Shayegan 2012, esp. 122-151.

[537] See Tavernier 2017, 349. Some cases of clay tablets bearing Aramaic inscriptions in ink have been found, namely in the Persepolis Fortification archive; Wouter Henkelman has noted that these tablets were prepared with lighter clay or a cream-coloured slip, probably for better legibility, Henkelman 2008, 89-93. The Aramaic script was used in the context of administration as early as the Neo-Assyrian period, along-side Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian cuneiform script: for a helpful description and discussion of this digraphic double-copy system, see Radner 2021. Radner describes the representations of tandems of scribes – one recording in cuneiform on a tablet with the other in Aramaic on a scroll – in Neo-Assyrian art and discusses the respective favoured supports for each script.

[538] Note, however, that Elamite was also exported to Arachosia.

[539] Schmitt 2003, 29 discussed in Rossi 2017.

[540] Henkelman, pers. com.

[541] Thus Tavernier describes Aramaic as the link between the different levels of the Achaemenid administrative hierarchy, Tavernier 2017, 342. Aramaic did not only allow communication far and wide across the multi-lingual empire, but also enabled communication 'vertically', between the different levels of administration which also presented a linguistic disparity (with the highest stratum speaking Old Persian and the lowest a local language such as Egyptian).

that period.[542] Just as the Persian kings continued the use of the local, Elamite language in the Empire's heartland, they maintained the Aramaic scribal tradition of their predecessor's administration. In this sense, the use of Aramaic in Achaemenid Persia is *not* comparable to the introduction of English in India: indeed, in his monumental study of Middle Persian, Walter Henning made a parallel between the spread of English in British India and the generalisation of the use of Aramaic in Persia.[543] Although the Achaemenid empire's administrative machinery certainly led to the spread of the Aramaic scribal tradition to the very confines of Persian territory, in places – such as Bactria – where it had never been spoken (and probably never was; see below) let alone written, and introduced a form of 'communal' official administrative language in an empire that encompassed numerous peoples speaking different idioms, Aramaic was not the mother tongue of the ruling class. This is meaningful in the sense that Aramaic was an administrative language that the Persian conquerors inherited along with the scribal tradition and well-oiled administrative machinery to which it was attached. The language, the scribal tradition, the protocol for writing letters and contracts with their precise fixed formulae all went hand in hand – although as we shall see Iranian loanwords and morphology eventually made their mark on it also – and are a central aspect of the mechanisms that gave rise to the Middle Persian writing system.

The Aramaic that was used in the Achaemenid administration is variously referred to as Official Aramaic or Imperial Aramaic (Reichsaramäisch),[544] which designates both the language and the script used to write it.[545] In his *The Development of the Aramaic Script*, Joseph Naveh records general evolutionary trends in the shape of Aramaic graphemes in the course of the Achaemenid period when compared with the preceding two centuries, such as the simplification of certain letter shapes – the *alef* and the *taw* for instance drop strokes – the increasing lack of differentiation between graphemes, such as between the *dalet* and the *resh*, and a tendency towards the elongation of the downward strokes towards the left – towards the next letter, as with the *mem* and *pe* – hinting at the beginning of ligatures and heralding the

[542] Naveh 1970, 15-18.

[543] Henning 1958, 22.

[544] The term was coined in 1927 by Josef Markwart, see Folmer 2012, 578. Nevertheless, Margaretha Folmer prefers the term Achaemenid Imperial Aramaic, Folmer 2012, 578-579.

[545] On the linguistic characteristics of the Aramaic language in the Achaemenid period, see Folmer 1995 and Folmer 2012, esp. 584-586; on Achaemenid Aramaic as a standardised chancery language see Folmer 2012, Gzella 2015, 157-211 and esp. 168-177, as well as Gzella 2021, 159-193.

differentiation between medial and final forms.[546] As Naveh notes, such processes of simplification, lack of differentiation between graphemes and the tendency towards ligatures are symptomatic of cursive styles more generally, where the need to develop a rapid hand becomes the scribe's priority. The more remarkable feature of Imperial Aramaic is perhaps its homogeneity throughout the Achaemenid chanceries: the script-style of scribes writing on papyri in Egypt at Elephantine **[Fig. 5.2]** or on leather in the easternmost Achaemenid satrapy of Bactria is strikingly stable **[Fig. 5.4]**. The lack of regional differentiations in script was also an aspect of the Assyrian and Babylonian chanceries, but Naveh emphasises that this empire-wide "decided uniformity" was particularly characteristic under the Achaemenids, the extent of whose empire was at any rate vastly bigger than the relatively compact Neo-Assyrian empire.[547] Furthermore, lapidary inscriptions had typically displayed an archaising style, with several graphemes harkening back to Phoenician-Aramaic letter shapes, and it is a distinct feature of the Achaemenid period that the cursive script was generalised, replacing to an extent the lapidary style, including for inscriptions on hard materials.[548] As Naveh notes, the 'lapidary' aesthetic that can be observed on some objects entails essentially cursive forms adapted to the harder medium, with concave, curved and slanted strokes becoming more angular. This may be understood as another aspect of the strongly homogenising tendency of writing which the network of Achaemenid chanceries effected.

Archives of Aramaic texts have been recovered from the confines of the Achaemenid empire's territory. This chapter will not propose a full description of the different archives but will highlight a number of features relevant to the use and evolution of the Aramaic script in the Persian administrative context,[549] such as the adaptation of Aramaic to the transcription of Persian names and titles, the indication of the influence of Old Persian on Aramaic, the information that can be gathered concerning the scribes – namely whether they were Persian or not – the palaeographic homogeneity of the Official Aramaic script throughout the empire and the continuity of its use in administration during major political transitions.

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[546] Naveh 1970, 4-6.

[547] Naveh 1970, 21. This is also true of grammar and vocabulary, including numerous loanwords. See Folmer 2012, 584-586 and Gzella 2015, 157-211 as well as Gzella 2021, 159-193.

[548] Naveh 1970, 52.

[549] Folmer 2012; Gzella 2015, 157-211 and esp. 168-177; Folmer 2017; Gzella 2021, 159-193.

The Elephantine papyri and the letters of Aršāma.

In Egypt, the forts at Syene (modern-day Aswan) and the island of Elephantine located just opposite it yielded a rich archive of Aramaic – as well as Hieratic, Demotic, and later Greek – texts, brought to light in different chance finds in the 19th and 20th centuries.[550] Because of their strategic position, Elephantine and Syene had always been important administrative centres. During the Achaemenid period, Elephantine was the seat of the Persian *frataraka* or governor and, like Syene the site of an important military garrison.[551] The Aramaic texts reveal that the island was also home to an important Jewish temple to YHW, as well as an ancient temple to the Egyptian divinity of Khnum, guardian of the Nile waters; the disputes between the two communities, Jewish and Egyptian, including the destruction of the temple of YHW by the Khnum priests with the backing of the Persian *frataraka* Vidranga, are a recurring topic of grievances in the papyri. The Aramaic texts date to the Persian rule of Egypt (the twenty-seventh dynasty) which began in 525 with the defeat of the Egyptian Pharaoh Psammetichus by Cambyses. Whereas before the Achaemenids, it was Demotic Egyptian that had dominated as the language of administration, Aramaic now took over, although Demotic documents from this period are also attested.[552] Based on onomastics, it is possible to identify thirteen different scribes responsible for the contracts in the extant Aramaic papyri at Elephantine; six present Hebrew names while the other seven have (non-Hebrew) 'Aramaean' names.[553] However, the documents reflect a highly cosmopolitan society: the contracts are prepared for Babylonians, Bactrians, Caspians, Khwarezmians, Medes and Persians besides Aramaeans and Jews.

Another closely related archive of Achaemenid Aramaic texts are the letters of Aršāma (or the Driver letters, after Godfrey Rolles Driver who first edited them), the Achaemenid satrap of Egypt in the last quarter of the 5th century BCE.[554] The missives, written with ink on

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[550] For an overview of the history of the finds and collections/publications of papyri, see Porten 1996, 1-10 as well as Freedman 1992, II, 445-447.

[551] Porten 1996, 14-18.

[552] See Briant 1996. It should however be noted that when Darius included an Egyptian script on commemorative stone stelae it was Egyptian hieroglyphics that he chose, rather than Demotic. Thus, the Achaemenid king had a statue of himself – in the Egyptian style – made in Egypt but found in Susa engraved with a quadrilingual inscription: a version in Egyptian hieroglyphics was added to the usual Elamite, Babylonian, Old Persian trio, stipulating that the monument was erected to show whoever would read it that Darius held Egypt. For the inscription in Hieroglyphics see Yoyotte, 1974.

[553] Freedman 1992, II, 450. With one exception, the Jewish scribes drew up their documents from Elephantine and the scribes with Aramaean names wrote from Syene.

[554] Driver 1954; see now the reference edition of Ma and Tuplin 2020, I, 21-283.

parchment and probably sent from Persia or Babylonia, record the correspondence between the Persian satrap and different officers identifiable on the basis of onomastics as being Persian (Artawant) **[Fig. 5.3]**, Babylonian (Marduk), and Egyptian (Nakhtḥor)[555] in charge of overseeing of his extensive property in Upper Egypt; they concern the collection and transportation of the revenues generated by his estate and the distribution of provisions as requested by the Egyptian Nakhtḥor. Apart from the different Persian, Egyptian and Babylonian officials, the letters record the names of two scribes, one Persian (Rāšt) and one Egyptian (Aḥ-pipī). Typically, two mentions conclude the Aršāma letters: one records the name of the scribe responsible for writing the document and another that of a presumably higher official described as 'being cognizant of the order'.[556] All the officials of the second category are Persians. This duo of professionals is also found in Aramaic documents from Bactria (the Khalili archive, see below) – although there, both functions are often served by the same person[557] – which is another instance not only of the homogeneity of administrative formulae, but also of administrative functions, hierarchies and processes throughout the Achaemenid provinces.[558] It is also worth noting that a sealing conserved on one of the Aršāma letters attests to the fact that the Achaemenid satrap's seal was engraved with a legend in Aramaic; the inscription identifies the object as Aršāma's personal seal.[559]

Naveh has identified minor variations in the cursive sub-styles presented by the Elephantine papyri and the letters of Aršāma. The latter display a slightly more conservative hand **[Fig. 5.3]**:[560] certain letters such as the *aleḥ*, with its five strokes arranged like a star – the later grapheme becomes a four-stroke cross – and the *kaf*, with the double bar of the head, closely resemble the older more complex forms from the seventh and sixth centuries BCE and show less of a tendency towards simplification than the corresponding graphemes in the Elephantine papyri **[Fig. 5.2]**. Naveh terms the style of the Aršāma letters the 'formal cursive',

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[555] On Nakhtḥor, see Henkelman 2020.

[556] On these epistolary formulae, see most recently Tavernier 2020, esp. 87-94, as well as Folmer 2017, esp. 427-432.

[557] Naveh and Shaked 2012, 23-24; Folmer 2017, 427-432 who suggests that this may stem from an administrative simplification in the later Achaemenid period; for a reconstructed model of how Achaemenid administration produced administrative orders, see Tavernier 2017, esp. 378-380.

[558] For a recent, systematic comparison and discussion of epistolary conventions in the Aršāma letters and the Khalili archive of Achaemenid Aramaic satrapal letters from Bactria, see Folmer 2017.

[559] Driver 1954, 4; see the detailed study of this seal by Garrison and Henkelman 2020.

[560] Naveh 1970, 29.

contrasting it with the 'extreme cursive' of the papyri. Still, the striking uniformity of the Official Aramaic script is particularly remarkable when we consider that the scribes responsible for these different archives were local to the empire's different chanceries and did not belong to the same linguistic and cultural groups.[561]

As several examples in the following will serve to highlight, what is true of palaeography is also true for grammar, orthography, syntax, vocabulary (including with respect to numerous loanwords) and what can be described as scribal protocol/epistolary conventions – such as greetings formulae and so forth – which were all remarkably unified across the empire. Official Aramaic came along with a broader scribal tradition, where the use of the Aramaic script came hand in hand with a monolithic Achaemenid administrative practice and "imperial paradigm".[562]

Aramaic texts from Bactria: the Khalili archive.

At the other end of Achaemenid territory, in the province of Bactria, the scribes who wrote the Aramaic documents known as the Khalili archive all have Iranian names, as do all the highest officials. In fact, Shaked and Naveh note that almost all the personal names in the documents are Iranian, with many of these being recognisably Zoroastrian and a number 'typically Bactrian' with the theophoric element deriving from the name of the Oxus River.[563] These texts, written in ink on either parchment or on wooden sticks and tallies, date from the very end of the Achaemenid empire through to the beginning of the Hellenistic period: they span from 353 to 323 BCE and thus cover the first seven years of Alexander the Great's reign. In two recent articles, Rachel Mairs and Margaretha Folmer have highlighted the consistency of scribal practice – with respect to script, official terminology, address formulae, epistolary style and templates – which this corpus presents, particularly striking not only because it was produced at the easternmost extremity of the empire and is rather later in date, but also because it covers

[561] This consistency was even thought suspicious by earlier scholars of Achaemenid Aramaic texts, see Henkelman 2017, 107, n. 86.

[562] The Achaemenid scribal and administrative tradition was part of a wider administrative and economic "paradigm" the main features of which have been studied most recently in Jacobs, Henkelman and Stolper 2017. On the *conscious* exportation of this Achaemenid imperial (administrative and economic) paradigm, including in regions with no developed administrative systems, see Henkelman 2017, esp. 80-186.

[563] Naveh and Shaked 2012, 57; see similarly Tavernier 2017, esp. 370-373.

a major time of political turmoil.[564] The template which the administrative documents follow, and most particularly the dating formulae do not betray any alarm: the regnal year of the Persian kings apparently seamlessly give way to that of 'Alexander the Great', and record, as Mairs has termed it, 'business as usual' in terms of the province's economic regulation.[565]

Aramaic at Persepolis.

Finally, in the empire's heartland, the use of Aramaic is attested within the Persepolis Fortification archive of Elamite tablets: monolingual tablets in Aramaic inscribed in ink make up a small although steady percentage of the documents (under 10 per cent).[566] These cover the same time-period and much of the same subject-matter as their Elamite counterparts and record the handling of commodities such as wine, oil and grain. The use of Aramaic is also attested in the 'dockets' or endorsements added to Elamite tablets; these short catch-words sum up the subject of the tablet or provide a date and may have been intended for filing purposes.[567] Extant sealings show that Aramaic engraved seals were applied to both Aramaic and Elamite tablets.[568] Interestingly, some cases of bilingualism are also attested, for instance with the numeric total given both in Elamite and in Aramaic. The issue of the ethno-cultural background of the scribes at Persepolis is a thorny one: Henkelman has noted that the Elamite texts do not all display the same command of Elamite writing and language,[569] while the Aramaic dockets on Elamite tablets as well as the few cases of Aramaic-Elamite interaction on given tablets are suggestive of bilingualism and open the possibility that some of the Aramaic endorsements were written by scribes who also wrote the Elamite tablets.[570]

A peculiar corpus of texts found at Persepolis suggests that Aramaic was not exclusively restricted to the administrative sphere. Schmidt's excavations of the foundations of Persepolis in the early twentieth century brought to light over two hundred objects carved from a flinty green stone including mortars, pestles **[Fig. 5.5]**, trays and plates bearing Aramaic ink

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[564] Mairs 2016, 2043-2044 and Folmer 2017; on the homogeneity of Official Aramaic, see also Folmer 2012 and Tavernier 2017. Naveh and Shaked 2012, 39-50 and Folmer 2017, 419-422 observe that the opening address formulae of the Khalili documents and the letters of Aršāma are identical.

[565] Mairs 2016, 2043.

[566] Henkelman 2008, 81; Azzoni 2008.

[567] Henkelman 2008, 91-92.

[568] Henkelman 2008, 93.

[569] Henkelman 2008, 88.

[570] Henkelman 2008, 92 and Azzoni and Stolper 2015, 7.

inscriptions: these were initially thought to have been used for ritual purposes, possibly in the ceremony of the crushing of the *haoma* plant.[571] This interpretation has been rejected, and scholars are generally agreed that the inscriptions should be viewed as administrative rather than religious in nature.[572] It would appear that the stone vessels and implements were sent from Arachosia to Persepolis as tribute/gifts:[573] this is namely reflected in the texts by the occurrence of the term *bz*/*bzy* which is probably a direct calque of Old Irani *bāji-* 'tribute, tax'.[574] The texts follow a formulaic structure – which in itself is suggestive of standardised bureaucratic protocol, encouraging their interpretation as administrative records[575] – and indicate: the 'fortress' (*byrt'*) – which also describes an administrative centre[576] – where the vessel was made; the name of the person on whom an obligation of taxation was placed[577] – Bowman's "celebrant" – as well as the names and designations of accountable officials; a date; some include details concerning the object itself.[578] As such, Henkelman notes that the formulaic structure of the Aramaic stone vessel inscriptions are comparable to Achaemenid Elamite records.[579] Based on the dating formulae – unfortunately the name of the king according to whose regnal year the date is calculated is omitted – these objects and their inscriptions have been assigned to the 5th century BCE.[580] Significantly, most personal names are Iranian, and the inscriptions also contain numerous Iranian loanwords:[581] the word for 'tribute' was mentioned above, and the treasurer and sub-treasurer are similarly respectively identified as *gnzbr'* and *'pgnzbr'* **[Fig. 5.5]**. These inscriptions are thus a further example of Old Persian administrative functions being borrowed into an Aramaic text and transcribed. Among the Old Persian loanwords that can be identified is *kpwtk*,[582] a term also found in the documents of the Khalili archive from Bactria and which denotes a colour, a specific blue-pigeon tint, for which there was probably no evident translation in Aramaic. In terms of

[571] Bowman 1970, 6-15.

[572] Naveh and Shaked 1973; see most recently Henkelman 2017, esp. 102-105 and King 2019.

[573] Henkelman 2017, 104; King 2019.

[574] Henkelman 2017, 105; King 2019, 196-199.

[575] Henkelman 2017, 105.

[576] King 2019, 187.

[577] King 2019, 188-190.

[578] Henkelman 2017, 104.

[579] Henkelman 2017, 105.

[580] Bowman 1970, 56-62.

[581] Henkelman 2017, 105.

[582] Bowman 1970, 45.

palaeography, these Aramaic inscriptions on objects from Persepolis exhibit a highly cursive style which fully corresponds to that documented in papyri and parchments from that period.[583] While occasional graphemes present archaising forms – such as instances of the *shin* which can take the shape of a three-pronged fork familiar from the 6th century BCE – most letters tally with Naveh's description of 5th century Official Aramaic: thus, the *alef* is shaped like a cross, the two strokes of the *taw* do not intersect anymore to the left, the *shin* in many cases looks more and more like an upside-down F, and the left leg of the *mem* lengthens while its right leg begins to curve in; some letters are distinctly more 'modern' such as the *samekh* which can present a clearly hooked head,[584] typical of 4th century Official Aramaic.

Adapting Aramaic to Iranian phonetics: transcribing Persian names, titles and loanwords.

The inscriptions from the mortars and pestles of Persepolis briefly described above attest to an important feature of Official Aramaic, consistently illustrated by the different corpora of Achaemenid Aramaic texts: the transcription, from the earliest time, of Persian names and titles as well as loanwords, implying the adaptation of the Semitic Aramaic alphabet to Iranian phonetics. A first example is the Aramaic rendering of the names of the Achaemenid kings in the dating formulae of administrative documents, be they from Egypt or Bactria. The names of Darius (I and II), Xerxes and Artaxerxes (I and II) are the most regularly attested, although Cyrus and Cambyses occur too. Porten has further identified over one hundred different Iranian names in the Aramaic papyri, the majority are either Persian theophorous names – or compounds of *baga-*, *ṛta-*, *farnah-* etc. – or describe 'personal characteristics' such as *spytk'* 'white' or *hwm'y* 'having good thoughts'.[585] These instances show that the Aramaic transcription of Iranian terms was not a straightforward matter: even the name of the Achaemenid king Darius is spelled in a variety of ways. In the Aramaic version of the Bīsotūn inscription it is consistently transcribed *dryhwš* but alternatively *drwšh* and *drywš* in contracts.[586] Under Darius II Porten notes that the standard spelling is the *plene* form *drywhwš*, closer to the Old Persian pronunciation, although *dryhwš* also occurs. Similarly, Xerxes presents three different spellings – *xšyrš*, *xšy'rš*, *'xšyrš* – while, curiously, the more difficult

[583] Note however that the date of these inscribed objects remains uncertain, see Henkelman 2017, 104, n. 79.

[584] Bowman 1970, n. 85, pl. 20

[585] Porten 2003, 166-173; see most recently Tavernier 2020, esp. 82-83; see also Tavernier 2007, esp. 12-24 and 42-68 and Shaked 1986;

[586] Porten 2003, 173-174.

name of Artaxerxes appears to have found a standard transcription as *'rtxšsš*. Alternative spellings can also be noted for the names of high-ranking officials: in the Aršāma letters, the name of the satrap's deputy, a Persian called Artawant, is either spelled *'rtwnt* or *'rthnt* while in the Elephantine papyri the Persian *frataraka* Vidrang is alternately spelled *wydrng* and *wdrng*.[587] In this last example, we can see the hesitant use of the Aramaic *mater lectionis yod* to transcribe a Persian short vowel: like in the various spellings of Xerxes' name, where the presence of the *alef* between the *yod* and the *resh* wavers, the transcription of vowels (long and short) would be a perennial problem of adapting the Semitic script to Iranian phonetics.

Certain key functions or titles are Aramaic terms: for instance, the sole title given to Aršāma in his letters is *br byt'* or 'son of the house', thought to mean 'son of the royal house', 'Prince';[588] similarly, the provincial governor is only given in Aramaic as *pḥt'*, a term which survives in the Parthian ostraca of Nisa and is used – probably as a heterogram as we shall see – for 'satrap'. Still, the titles of high-ranking Persian officials are some of the Persian loanwords that are most frequently transcribed in Aramaic.[589] Occurring both in the Khalili archive and the Elephantine papyri is the prominent function of *frataraka*, often translated as 'chief' or 'foreman'. In Egypt, this function entailed both military and judicial authority; he was above the Troop Commander and the function was apparently hereditary.[590] In the papyri, this office is alternately transcribed *prtrd* and *prtrk'*, in two versions of the same document:[591] interestingly, this title would reappear in Persis at the end of the Seleucid period – although its semantic scope is harder to grasp for that period[592] – and the same ambiguity in spelling can be observed on the coin legends in which the title occurs. At the other end of the empire in Bactria, the Achaemenid office of *frataraka* is consistently spelled *prtrk*. Here again, the office is held by a Persian, Ahuradāta, in fact also accused of having abused his authority. In the Khalili documents he is an associate of the governor (who, like at Elephantine, is referred to as a *pḥt'*),

[587] On the occurrence of Iranian names in Aramaic texts, see Kornfeld 1978, 98-116 and for the names Darius and Xerxes in particular see respectively Kornfeld 1978, 104 and 107; see most recently Tavernier 2007, esp. 12-24 and 42-68.

[588] Driver 1954, 12-14; for a full and recent discussion of this expression, see Ma and Tuplin 2020, III, 31-38.

[589] For a full list and detailed discussion of the Iranian loanwords and personal names in the Aršāma letters, see Tavernier 2020, esp. 77-83.

[590] Porten 2003, 175.

[591] Cowley 30.5 and Cowley 31.5, see Cowley 1923, 108-122, esp. 112 and 119.

[592] See Wiesehöfer 2000 as well as the discussion below with further references, in chapter 6.

has the capacity to take away property, impose taxes and detain people.[593] In the parchments he appears in connection with the *dyny'* whom Shaked and Naveh believe were 'judges' or 'magistrates', indicating a judicial role: this corresponds exactly to the context of the term's appearance in the papyri.[594] These elements testify once more to the remarkable consistency of the Achaemenid administrative offices as well as terminology, although we can note some wavering in the spelling conventions across the Achaemenid chanceries. In the Aršāma letters, transcribed Persian titles include that of accountant, spelled *hmrkry'* in the plural. As Driver notes it is easy to equate this office with the well-attested one of *āmārgar* under the Sasanians (and already under the Arsacids):[595] again, in the Aramaic spelling of this term the long vowel *ā* before the (first) *resh* is not rendered. Similarly, the office of 'Guardian of the Seventh', *haftaxvapātā*, a title bestowed upon the infamous Vidranga is transcribed *hptḥpt'*.[596]

In the Khalili archive, where, as mentioned, almost all the protagonists are Iranian, the number of Old Persian loanwords is particularly prominent.[597] We find such Persian titles as *'pdyt'* 'supervisor', *gzbr'* 'treasurer' as well as *ywbr*, designating the person in charge of bringing or supplying barley (Middle Persian *ǰaw*) and 'camel-keepers', *'štrpny'*.[598] This compound title is particularly interesting. In the Bactrian archive, animals are generally referred to according to their appellation in Aramaic, such as *qn* for sheep, *twr* for cow, *swsh* for horse:[599] these same terms would all later become aramaeograms in Parthian and Middle Persian. Sometimes however, animals occur both according to their Aramaic and their Old Persian appellations. For instance, the word for 'camel' is encountered under the Aramaic form *gmln* (which also froze into the aramaeogram GMRA) when it stands alone and the Old Persian *uštra-* (*'štr-*), when it appears in compounds like 'camel-keepers', *'štrpny'*. This is a recurring feature of the early adaptation of Aramaic to Iranian: while 'generic' nouns ('camel') are readily given in Aramaic, when they appear in compounds ('camel-keepers') they are spelled out phonetically according to Persian terminology. It is only much later that 'hybrid' compounds take form, with the addition of phonetic complements to the 'generic' noun by then fossilised in a heterogram.

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[593] Naveh and Shaked 2012, 28.

[594] Naveh and Shaked 2012, 74.

[595] Driver 1954, 17.

[596] Porten 2003, 175.

[597] Naveh and Shaked 2012, 54-60.

[598] Naveh and Shaked 2012, 27-29.

[599] Naveh and Shaked 2012, 33-35.

In the Khalili texts, technical terms characterising animals and produce are often Iranian loanwords, such as 'grazing', 'wild', 'protected/sheltered', 'ripe' and so is the Iranian drink of sour-milk phonetically transcribed as *dwg*.[600] Adjectives describing a number of colours – probably not easily translatable as they represented a Persian 'notion' – such as *kapauta*- spelled *kpwt*) denoting a 'grey-blue' colour or again *kāsakaina*- (*kskyn*) 'green-blue' are all phonetic renderings of Old Persian terms. Finally, an impressive vocabulary of specialised terminology borrowed from Iranian concerns the legal and economic sphere, including 'guarantor', 'rations', 'decree', 'command', 'in full' with respect to the payment of a debt.[601] Similarly, one document in the Elephantine papyri includes a particularly important number of Old Persian technical terms. It is a letter written to a subordinate on behalf of Aršāma – the only one to be included in this archive – and concerns his authorisation of the disbursement of materials needed for the repair of a boat.[602] Key words such as 'shipmaster' (OP **nāupati*-, spelled *nwpt*) describing materials – such as coating and whitening – as well as the reckoning of necessary materials (OP **hmārakara*-) and assessment report (OP **upakrta*-) made by professionals have all been identified as Old Persian loanwords by Shaked and Porten.[603] It is worth noting that the two officials responsible for drawing up the letter are not Persian but a Jewish and an Aramaean scribe, respectively called Anani and Nabuakab.

Regarding the transcription of Old Persian terms in the Aramaic documents of the Khalili archive, Shaked and Naveh note that it is not entirely consistent, although as they also point out that this is the case of some spellings in Old Persian inscriptions.[604] In terms of the phonetic adaptation of the Aramaic alphabet, certain recurring features can be highlighted: the Old Persian phoneme *θ* is rendered by Aramaic *t* and perhaps also *s* while the Old Persian cluster *θr* (*ç*) is alternatively transcribed *s* and *tr*. Furthermore, there is apparently no distinction between Old Persian *š* and *č*, and both are given as Aramaic *š*; finally, Old Persian *j* is represented by Aramaic *g*.

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[600] Naveh and Shaked 2012, 35, 56.

[601] Naveh and Shaked 2012, 55; for a full lexicon of Iranica in non-Iranian text, see Tavernier 2007.

[602] Porten B11, see Porten 1996, 115-118.

[603] Porten 1996, 116-117; for a full list of Iranian loanwords (and personal names) in the Aršāma letters, see Tavernier 2020, 77-83; for a study of Iranica in Aramaic texts known up to 2007, see Tavernier 2007, for an extensive lexicon of Old Iranian (proper names and) loanwords in non-Iranian texts.

[604] Naveh and Shaked 2012, 54.

The distinctly Old Persian flavour of some Aramaic documents.

The systematic borrowing of Iranian terminology in the Aramaic documents was accompanied by the imprint of Old Persian itself on Official Aramaic. This is particularly true of the Khalili archive:[605] whereas the scribes responsible for the Elephantine papyri have been deemed to be native speakers of Aramaic by Porten (although some indications of Hebraisms have also been identified)[606] this was presumably not the case in Bactria. Although it remains remarkably homogeneous, Shaked and Naveh observe that the language of the parchments of the Khalili archive is characterised by a number of grammatical 'corruptions' when compared to either the Elephantine papyri or the Aršāma letters. Although this could in part be due to the fact that the Khalili documents were drafts intended for an internal use rather than for diplomatic purposes and are later in date, it is also significant that they were redacted 'far from the main centers of Aramaic learning': onomastics suggest that Aramaic was not the first language of those who ordered, wrote and read the documents; in fact, as the editors point out, there is no indication that Aramaic was used in Bactria as an oral living language at all.[607] Although this may indeed explain the grammatical slips briefly described below, it is worth noting that it also shows just how steadfast the Aramaic scribal tradition – and its transmission – was: the Iranian scribes of Bactria were rigorously trained in a language that was entirely foreign to them and that they probably did not encounter save in written form. For Shaked and Naveh, the Khalili documents thus illustrate the use of written official Aramaic as a purely administrative language,[608] on its way to becoming an exclusively written system used to transcribe Iranian languages.

The Aramaic documents from the Khalili archive typically illustrate a lack of agreement between a demonstrative pronoun and its predicate, which Shaked and Naveh observe is a feature of Official Aramaic more generally from the 5th century onwards.[609] As we shall see, this is also characteristic of the earliest Parthian texts and the demonstrative pronoun, which became progressively less grammaticised, led to the fossilised form of the heterogram ZNH rendering Persian *ēn* 'this'. Lack of agreement in number between subject and verb as well as

[605] But not only, see Folmer 2012, 585-586.

[606] Driver 1954, 19.

[607] Naveh and Shaked 2012, 51-52.

[608] See similarly Gzella 2015, 157-211, as well as Tavernier 2017 and Gzella 2021, 159-193.

[609] Naveh and Shaked 2012, 125; on linguistic characteristics of Aramaic in the Achaemenid period, see Folmer 1995 and 2012, Gzella 2015, 157-211 and Gzella 2021, 159-193.

between nouns is another recurring feature.[610] This is particularly true in the case of nouns that are Iranian loanwords: as Shaked and Naveh note, these terms are not always properly 'grammatically integrated' into the sentence. Thus, in the phrase the "camel-keepers, my servants", while the first term, an Iranian loanword as mentioned above, appears in the plural in the emphatic state – behaving therefore like an Aramaic noun – the noun in apposition to it, also an Iranian loanword, is unmarked. Examples of the imprint of Old Persian include displaying a peculiar use of the preposition *byn* in phrases like *byn bgy' zyly* 'in my domain' and *byn ywmn 2* 'in two days': one would expect in such cases the more natural Aramaic *b-* – *bywm* for example 'on the day X' is typical of dating formulae – and this use of the independent preposition seems to calque that of Iranian *andar*.[611] Once again, the preposition BYN was later fossilised into an aramaeogram rendering Iranian *andar*. Another telling iranism is the use of Aramaic *'bd* 'to do' in a near predicate position which appears to calque the typically Iranian construction X *kardan*, such as in the recurring phrase – which in fact includes an Iranian loanword – *hndrz' 'bd* 'to instruct', where another Aramaic verb meaning 'to command' might have been expected. Tavernier has similarly identified an extensive series of phrases and idioms that appear to be direct calques of typically Old Persian expressions in Achaemenid Aramaic administrative documents.[612]

Henkelman and Tavernier also note the influence of Iranian phraseology in both the Elamite and Aramaic documents of the Persepolis Fortification archive. A construction thought to stem from Persian is the set formula by which people are introduced, corresponding to 'Personal Name *šmh*' ('PN his name') in Aramaic and 'Personal Name *hiše*' ('PN his name') in Elamite: this seems to follow the Old Persian construction 'Personal Name *nāma*'.[613] At Persepolis, there are also elements of interference from Elamite into Aramaic, including indications of the loss of a voiced/voiceless distinction, probably induced by trilingual scribes who were used to writing in Elamite.

The Hellenistic period: traces of the survival of Aramaic.

It is difficult to pinpoint when Aramaic as an administrative language was replaced by Greek under the Seleucids and, furthermore, to what extent or in what contexts it was. In Bactria, the

[610] Naveh and Shaked 2012, 52-53.

[611] Naveh and Shaked 2012, 51.

[612] Tavernier 2017, esp. 343-347.

[613] Henkelman 2008, 90; Tavernier 2017, 343-347.

last known documents to be redacted in Aramaic from the Khalili archive date to the 320s BCE, while the first preserved administrative documents in Greek date to the late 3rd/early 2nd centuries BCE, presenting a gap of over a century in our documentation.[614] The Elephantine archive similarly attests to the use of Greek with the beginning of the Hellenistic period: the first Greek documents date from the very end of the 4th century BCE; Porten and Farber have ascribed this material to the new movement of Greeks in the Near East in the wake of Alexander's conquests.[615] Yet, among the late 3rd century finds at the Bactrian site Ai Khanum there are indications that Aramaic had not been entirely abandoned. Among the many Greek texts written in ink on skin and on ceramic vessels brought to light in the treasury building of the Administrative Quarter, a potsherd with a badly damaged Aramaic text was recovered; based on the style of ceramic it is written on, it can be dated to the second half of the 3rd century BCE.[616] Harmatta was able to decipher enough of it to determine that it recorded the delivery of grain: it thus contains administrative information closely comparable to the Greek texts found on the site.[617] Mairs concludes that it is possible to assume that Aramaic was still being used alongside Greek at some level of the administration, although it is impossible to decide which: was it reserved for local transactions or on the contrary used in the context of empire-wide correspondence?

Other media testify to the permanence of the use of Aramaic in the early Hellenistic period. In the same way that the Aramaic documents from Bactria record 'business as usual' in the first years of Alexander's reign, at the western end of the empire, Mazaios, who was satrap of Babylon between 331 and 328 BCE, continued to mint coins inscribed with legends in the Aramaic alphabet **[Fig. 5.6]**.[618] Mazaios had been the satrap of Cilicia under the Achaemenids and then sided with Alexander, allowing him to conserve the satrapy of Babylon. On the reverse, the Aramaic inscriptions identify the issuer as *mzdy* and bear the image of a lion walking. The obverse represents a seated divinity identified as the Semitic god *b'ltrz* (the Ba'al of Tarsus) **[Fig. 5.6]**. Some of Mazaios' coins bear the motif of the lion pouncing on a bull, well-known from Achaemenid imagery and a recurring scene of the iconographic program at

[614] Mairs 2016, 2043.

[615] Porten 1996, 386.

[616] Mairs 2016, 2044-2045.

[617] Harmatta 1994, 390, cited in Mairs 2016, 2044.

[618] On the person of Mazaios see Badian 2015 and on the satrap's coins see Hill 1922, cxli-cxliii, 180-181, pl. XX.14,15 and Mørkholm 1991, 48. Some coins inscribed in Greek were attributed to Mazaios but this was refuted, Howorth 1992.

Persepolis **[Fig. 5.6]**. The Aramaic letters of Mazaios' legends are legible and proportionate. Certain letter-shapes firmly place the script, as expected, in the 4th century, such as the *'ayin*, which has become a simple crescent (facing upward) without a downward stroke, a form inexistent before this period. Similarly, the *dalet* displays a distinctively concave head allowing its differentiation with the *bet*: these two graphemes were virtually indistinguishable in the 7th and 6th centuries BCE. Other letters by contrast present the archaising tendency of lapidary scripts: the *mem* for instance, engraved in an angular manner, retains the shape familiar from the 7th and 6th centuries, with a three-pronged head, while the slightly left curving stem of the *bet* takes the shape of a right angle.

Back in northeastern Iran, two unusual coins presenting similarly elegant Aramaic legends were brought to light, acquired as part of the Oxus find. Henning identified in these the term *wḥšw* and read the name 'Oxus'.[619] More recently, Alram and Olbrycht retain the readings *wḥšw* and *wḥšwwr,* spelling the name Waxšwar: Olbrycht argues in favour of an identification of this personage with Andragoras, the Iranian[620] Seleucid satrap of Parthia and Hyrcania;[621] in his portrait he wears the distinctive satrapal headdress known as the *kyrbasia* **[Fig. 5.7]**. Based on their comparison with other coins from the same hoard they were dated by Hill to the end of the 4th century BCE/early 3rd century;[622] the *terminus ante quem* for the Oxus treasure is considered to be 200 BCE.[623] Based on the possible identification of Waxšwar with Andragoras, Olbrycht prefers a date in the middle of the 3rd century BCE.[624] Hill notes the firmness and regularity of the Aramaic lettering, which he ascribes to the care put into engraving the gold objects and their relatively early date. The ductus is certainly very clear: the angular, 'lapidary' *waw* – the head is straight rather than concave – give the grapheme an archaic style, but the shape of the *shin* – exactly like a reversed and diagonally drawn F **[Fig. 5.7]**, a form that does not exist before the 5th-4th centuries according to Naveh's tables – and the square *het* firmly place the inscription in the late/post-Achaemenid period.

It is possible to infer from this meagre evidence that Aramaic remained in use at a local level and retained some of its former prestige in the early Hellenistic period. Still, Mairs' argument that the transition from an Aramaic-dominated administration to one using primarily

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[619] Henning 1958, 24.

[620] Although see Olbrycht 2021, 99-100.

[621] Alram 1986; Olbrycht 2021, 96-99.

[622] Hill 1922, cliii-clx, 194, pl. XXVIII.4-6.

[623] For the Oxus treasure see Dalton 1964 and more recently Curtis 2012.

[624] Olbrycht 2021, 97.

Greek was probably a gradual one remains to be verified.[625] After centuries of a monolithic Aramaic scribal tradition, the switch to Greek, at least in the political or representational sphere – coin-legends, monumental inscriptions – was complete. Indeed, whether Seleucid coins were minted in the western provinces of Mesopotamia, Lydia, at Seleucia on the Tigris, Babylon, Susa, in the Persian empire's former heartland Persepolis or in the easternmost provinces, these invariably bear inscriptions on the model ΣΕΛΕΥΚΟΥ/ ΑΝΤΙΟΧΟΥ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ and display a stable and repetitive catalogue of distinctively Hellenistic motifs, such as representations of Athena wearing her helmet, the winged Nike, sometimes held by a throned Zeus **[Fig. 5.8]** and the nude Apollo seated on the omphalos.[626] Apart from a badly damaged and enigmatic Aramaic inscription on the tomb of Darius at Naqš-e Rostam – discussed below – and a short bilingual Greek-Aramaic votive inscription at Bīsotūn,[627] the Aramaic-inscribed potsherd from Ai Khanum is the only administrative non-numismatic document in Aramaic that has survived from the Seleucid period.

Furthermore, under the Kushan dynasty that ruled Bactria from the 1st century AD onwards, the Greek alphabet was adapted to write the Iranian language spoken in Bactria: the change from Greek to Bactrian written in Greek script was rather sudden and took place under the Kushan king Kanishka I (r. 124-151 CE).[628] The Greek script thus eventually took over from Aramaic in this province, unlike in the former Achaemenid heartland for example, where it was the Aramaic script that was retained. Bactrian, it should be stressed, does not present the use of heterographic writing.[629] Indeed, its adaptation to an Iranian language follows a very different model when compared to the Aramaic-derived Middle Iranian writing systems: it was a much more sudden and centralised affair. Key spelling conventions were apparently established from the outset, such as the use of the Greek grapheme upsilon – unnecessary for Iranian phonetics – to transcribe the Iranian *h*, for which there was no letter in Greek. Nevertheless, as Mairs points out, what is perhaps most telling about the adaptation of the Greek alphabet to Bactrian is in fact the rejection of the Greek language itself: this may indicate that Greek was never extensively spoken; it certainly did not influence in Bactrian in any major way, even through the use of loanwords.[630]

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[625] Mairs 2016, 2043-2044.

[626] On Arsacid coinage, see Newell 1938; Sellwood 1971; Simonetta 2009; Sinisi 2012; Alram 2016.

[627] On this short votive inscription dedicated by a Seleucid official, see most recently Canepa 2018, 61.

[628] Gholami 2009, 3.

[629] On Bactrian language and script see Gholami 2009.

[630] Mairs 2016, 2057-2061.

The Aramaic inscriptions of Aśoka: hints of heterography?

That the use of Aramaic did survive the fall of the Achaemenids in the east and continued to evolve after the introduction of Greek as the dominant administrative language is evident from the inscriptions of Aśoka.[631] The territories south of the Hindukush previously under Achaemenid control were ceded by Seleukos I to Chandragupta (350-295 BCE), founder of the Maurya empire, in exchange, namely, of 500 war elephants.[632] Chandragupta's grand-son, Aśoka, who's rule over the Maurya empire began a decade after Seleukos I's death (Aśoka reigned from 269/8 and 235 BCE), converted in his eighth regnal year to a pacifist form of Buddhism and pursued it with a missionary zeal. His devotion namely triggered an unprecedented "epigraphic habit":[633] he had fourteen major edicts engraved in stone promulgating the basic principles of the Dharma and his political ideology. Now, these were written in different languages and scripts: Greek, Aramaic and Prakrit – strictly speaking a cluster of languages – written in both the South Asian Brāhmī script, and, in northwest India, in Kharoṣṭhī. Aśoka's edicts are the oldest attestation of this latter Aramaic-derived script, which was adapted to the transcription of Middle Indian by the addition of diacritics (subscripts) – namely to indicate vowel values – inspired by Brāhmī.[634] Because of a documentary gap it is difficult to trace the evolution from Aramaic to Kharoṣṭhī (was it a gradual transformation or invented *ad hoc*?) but that it stemmed from the introduction of Aramaic in the area by the Achaemenid chancery is clear, while Aśoka's 3rd century edicts provide us with a *terminus ante quem*.

Traces of the Aramaic scribal tradition further survive in Aśoka's decision to have versions of his edicts engraved in the Aramaic script. Now, Henning demonstrated that the inscription at the site of Laghmān (Lampāka) is written in Aramaic language and script with sections in Middle Indian (in the northwestern dialect of Prakrit) *using* the Aramaic script.[635]

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[631] For a detailed study of the impact of the Achaemenid chanceries in the East more generally, see Henkelman 2017.

[632] On the construction of the Seleucid empire's political boundary in the east and on the relations between the Seleucid and Maurya empires, see Kosmin 2014, esp. 32-58.

[633] Kosmin 2014, 54-58.

[634] On the Brāhmī and Kharoṣṭhī scripts see Falk 1993, Salomon 1995, Salomon 1996, 373-383 and Salomon 1998; Skjærvø 1995, 284-285; Glass 2000, 11-20: "a multi-stage development of the script seems to be the most reasonable explanation" (Glass 2000, 19-20).

[635] Henning 1949.

The edict of Kandahar II is similarly inscribed in Aramaic (script and language) and in Middle Indian *in* Aramaic script, in alternating lines.[636] For our purposes it is important to highlight the use of the Official Aramaic script in a former Achaemenid satrapy to phonetically transcribe a local – Indo-European but not Iranian – language. In terms of adapting the Semitic script to Middle Indian, Henning notes certain transcription conventions at Laghmān: the system 'consonant + h' is used to note Middle Indian aspirated consonants while r + dental render Middle Indian linguals.[637]

At the site of Taxila, Aśoka had his edict inscribed in Aramaic – language and script – while the bilingual text of Kandahar I is in Aramaic and Greek **[Fig. 5.9]**.[638] Now, the language of the Aramaic versions of these inscriptions have been described as Aramaeo-Iranian, and even thought to possibly 'stand in' for Iranian. Indeed, for Humbach, Aśoka's Aramaic inscriptions throw new light on the history of the emergence of the Middle Iranian heterographic writing system and suggest that the transformation from Late Imperial Aramaic to 'Pahlavi' was already taking place by the middle of the 3rd century BCE.[639] As we will see, Henning, by contrast, believed this process to be underway only a century later, based on the legends of the early coins from Persis. Humbach judges the Aramaic of the Taxila inscription as being 'to a considerable degree barbarized' and concludes that "this sort of Aramaic does not seem to have been a spoken idiom, but merely a written medium of communication, which was exclusively employed by professional scribes, whose mother-tongue was one of the numerous Iranian dialects".[640] Beyond the use of Iranian loanwords – such as a number of compounds in *hw*- and *pty*- – as well as orthographic slips – like a certain confusion between the Aramaic graphemes *t* and *ṭ* – Humbach draws attention to the misuse of the possessive suffix in words describing family relations. In most cases the possessive does not correspond to a grammatical reality and the suffix would be a sort of "petrified element":[641] Aramaic *'bwhy* and *'mwhy*, 'his father, his mother', were "graphic substitutes" and probably already being read as Iranian *pid* and *mād*, in other words, like heterograms, although Humbach does not use the term. Humbach further suggests a possible heterographic use of the Aramaic demonstrative pronoun *zk* (far deictic, corresponding to Iranian *ān*), because it was used to write the quasi-

[636] Benveniste, Dupont-Sommer and Caillat 1967; Shaked 1969.

[637] Henning 1949, 85.

[638] Humbach 1976; Carratelli and Garbini 1964.

[639] Humbach 1972, Humbach 1974.

[640] Humbach 1976, 118.

[641] Humbach 1976, 128-129.

homophonous Iranian '*an*', 'other'. He also highlights the seemingly 'hybrid' nature of the dating formula at Laghmān where Aramaic *šnt* (year) is used in conjunction with the 'phonetic' form *m'h* (month).[642] Similarly, the alternation in the use of the Aramaic bare root for 'generic' terms and phonetically spelled out forms when the same term is inserted in a compound would suggest that the Aramaic bare root was 'thought of' as its Iranian equivalent. This however, as we have seen, is a recurring feature of Achaemenid Aramaic documents from Bactria and does not 'emerge' with Aśoka's Aramaic inscriptions. Other features put forward by Humbach as heralding a heterographic system is the apparent tendency, particularly in the inscription of Laghmān, to use the Aramaic bare verbal root to render the Perfect Passive Participle, a (much-discussed) convention of the later Middle Persian heterographic writing system.[643]

Aśoka's bilingual Aramaic-Greek edict of Kandahar I is the easternmost known Greek inscription and a direct instance of the introduction of this language in administration by the Seleucids.[644] The translators employed to compose this version have been described as native Greek speakers and educated: they had recourse to technical terminology taken from contemporary Greek philosophy to convey Aśoka's Buddhist concepts without slavishly translating the Prakrit versions.[645] Another instance of an idiomatic translation is for example the inversion of the pair 'mother and father' (Aram. *l'mwhy wl'bwhy*) to 'father and mother' (Gk. πατρὶ καὶ μητρί) to produce a more natural Greek expression.[646] On the other hand, the scribe(s) had more difficulty translating a number of key Aśokan precepts into Aramaic: interestingly, this led him (them) to have recourse to Iranian terminology. Thus, 'good obedience' (Gk. ἐνήκοοι) is given as *hwptysty*, a term that is also found at Taxila, along with numerous other compounds of *hw*- and *pty*-; similarly, 'happiness' is translated by the phonetically transcribed Iranian term *šty*.[647] The Iranian forms are typically not 'integrated' in the Aramaic text, often remaining unmarked, although there are some examples of loanwords presenting grammatical suffixes.[648] More generally, Garbini and Carratelli note an 'awkward' use of Aramaic, with the presence of archaic spellings as well as the faulty construction of Aramaic forms modeled on more commonly occurring ones: these are erroneously treated as

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[642] Humbach 1974, 242.

[643] Humbach 1974, 241-242.

[644] Carratelli and Garbini 1964, 5.

[645] Benveniste, cited in Garbini and Carratelli 1964, 36.

[646] Carratelli and Garbini 1964, 33.

[647] Carratelli and Garbini 1964, 50; Humbach 1976, 123, 129.

[648] Carratelli and Garbini 1964, 59-60.

paradigmatic.[649] Garbini and Carratelli concur with Humbach that the iranising Aramaic recorded in Aśoka's edicts is best seen as a scribal tradition which did not necessarily represent any form of spoken language.[650] As we have seen above, however, Imperial Aramaic had probably been an exclusively written means of communication and was not 'read' as such – unless by direct translation – by the Iranophone scribes of Bactria since the Achaemenid period.

Aśoka's Aramaic inscriptions illustrate the difficulty in deciding to what extent an 'iranising' text ought to be considered as presenting a form of heterographic writing. Holger Gzella has remarked in his study of Arsacid-period Aramaic that although some clearly Iranian constructions – typically, *mlkyn mlk'*, which presents Iranian word-order – suggest an Iranian reading of the text, it is also impossible to prove non-heterographic writing.[651] Indeed, what written words would have been read as is very difficult to determine while "the absence of ungrammatical elements does not formally demonstrate that a particular text is meant to be read in the idiom which it seems to represent".[652] In this respect, we can observe against Humbach that what he terms the Aramaeo-Iranian inscriptions of Aśoka, although they present many Iranian loanwords and iranising features as well as grammatical and orthographical mistakes, do not for instance display the alternative use of an Aramaic fixed form and a phonetically spelled Iranian equivalent – this, as we saw, is limited to 'generic terms' in Aramaic form as well as compounds written in the *plene*, as in Achaemenid texts – or, most tellingly, any trace of a phonetic complements: these are probably the surest indication that the Aramaic forms were being read by their Iranian equivalent. The adaptation of the Aramaic script to vernacular idioms, and the problem of determining at what point the writing system can properly be termed heterographic, are core aspects of the study of the many Aramaic-derived scripts that emerged in the later Arsacid period.

In terms of palaeography, the Aramaic script of the different Aśokan inscriptions present some differences, although they all exhibit most of the characteristic traits documented in 4th-3rd century Egyptian papyri. Naveh observes that the script used at Laghmān displays the most formal style while Kandahar II the most cursive, with the *dalet*, *waw*, *nun* and *resh* all resembling each other strongly and the heavily simplified head of the *bet*.[653] The inscriptions

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[649] Carratelli and Garbini 1964, 60.

[650] Carratelli and Garbini 1964, 61-62; Humbach 1976, 118.

[651] Gzella 2008, 108.

[652] Gzella 2008, 108.

[653] Naveh in Shaked 1969, 118.

at Taxila and Kandahar I would represent an intermediary form. This accords with Carratelli and Garbini's remark that the inscription at Laghmān presents a distinctive archaising script in comparison with that of Kandahar II:[654] the highly angular *shin*, *mem* and *nun* – the latter two almost harkening back to 6th century forms – are examples of this inscription's lapidary/archaising tendency and show that (knowledge of) much more 'formal' styles remained in circulation at this late date; still the cross-shaped *alef*, and the developed tick at the base of the *lamed*, the hooked head of the *samekh* and the tendency of the *bet*'s tail to curve strongly to the left definitely indicate that this is a later hand. Kandahar I displays all the standard forms identified by Naveh for the 4th-3rd century style, and Carratelli and Garbini note the tendency of the downward stroke of the *bet* to be very elongated, even joining following letters in some cases, displaying a marked cursive tendency. The 'tick' of the *lamed* in this inscription is also at times rounded into a hook, 'heralding' the Middle Persian shape.

The mysterious Aramaic inscription on the tomb of Darius at Naqš-e Rostam.

In his major essay on the Middle Persian language, Walter Henning deemed the inscription engraved in Aramaic script on the tomb of Darius I at Naqš-e Rostam the oldest vestige of Imperial Aramaic in post-Achaemenid Persia. The history of research surrounding this enigmatic and badly damaged rock-cut text is unfortunately problematic. A drawing of it was made by Ernst Herzfeld and published in his *Altpersische Inschriften* **[Fig. 5.10]**.[655] He did not attempt a reading of it then, however, but does mention it briefly in his *Archaeological History of Iran*: he states that he was confidently able to decipher a few words, including *xšāyaθiya vazarka* 'Great King', and *māhyā* 'month'.[656] Based on these readings he concluded that the inscription illustrated the use of the Aramaic alphabet to phonetically transcribe Old Persian. Unfortunately, it is impossible to determine from Herzfeld's sketch where he read those words. It is particularly remarkable that the scribe in charge of the inscription chose to spell out phonetically the Persian terms for 'month' as well as 'king' when these appear so systematically under their Aramaic form in date formulae in papyri and parchments from the Achaemenid period – so systematically in fact that they eventually froze into heterograms. The fully phonetic spelling of an Iranian language with the Aramaic alphabet at this early period would mark a truly radical departure from scribal practice, and it is somewhat difficult to place such

[654] Carratelli and Garbini 1964, 59.

[655] Herzfeld 1938, 12, Fig. 6.

[656] Herzfeld 1935, 47-48.

a use of Aramaic in this scribal tradition's 'trajectory'. Henning followed the German archaeologist in identifying the inscription as presenting the use of Aramaic to transcribe either Late Old Persian (*Spätaltpersisch*) or early Middle Persian (*Frühmittelpersisch*).[657] He went much further also, describing it as a daring venture on the part of the author/scribe to 'free' himself from the domination of Aramaic and to write his own language: a 'bold attempt' that ought to be ascribed to the 'invigorating influence of the Greek spirit'. Henning was able to examine the inscription *in situ* and although he does not confirm Herzfeld's readings of the terms 'great king' and 'month', assured that he was able to identify the letters *slwk*. Now, he interpreted these letters as spelling the name Seleukos, on the basis of which he ventured a date for the inscription: he placed it after 280 BCE, the date of the accession of Seleukos Nikator, although he conceded that a later date, in the reign of the Seleukos' son Antiochus Soter, was possible.[658] Humbach, by contrast, disagreed with Herzfeld and Henning's interpretation of the inscription as presenting a unique example of an 'experimental' use of the Aramaic script to phonetically write an Iranian language.[659] Rather, the inscription would be further proof of the existence in the 3rd century of a written form of Archaic Pahlavi, which, as in the case of the Aśokan inscriptions, he proposed to call Aramaeo-Iranian.

Richard Frye was also able to examine the inscription *in situ* and after several failed attempts at making squeezes of the rock-cut text, asked the photographer of the Asia Institute of Shiraz to take pictures of it **[Fig. 5.11]**.[660] From the images he published, we can see a clear and regular Aramaic script, much more angular than Herzfeld had made it out to be in his drawing; carved grooves separate each line of text. Although the highly damaged state of the inscription did not allow Frye to put forward any improved readings, he was nevertheless able to point out the unreliability of Herzfeld drawings in key places and also to call into question some of the tentative readings which Franz Altheim put forward based on Herzfeld's copy. Indeed, Altheim not only read the words *xšāyaθiya vazarka* and *māhyā* as Herzfeld had done, but also the phrase *māhyā Sandarmat θakata* and identified the names of the Achaemenid monarchs Darius – *Dārayavahuš*, four times – and Artaxerxes, along with several other phrases and terms such as *astiy pārsaiy*, *hauv*, *šiyāta*, *stūnā* and, most importantly, the name *slwk*, in

[657] Henning 1958, 24-25.

[658] Henning 1958, 24.

[659] Humbach 1974, 237.

[660] Frye 1982.

the fourth line.[661] Based on the latter, he decided that the inscription should not only be dated to the late 4th century BCE but very precisely between 312 and 306, after Seleukos' rise to power but before he took the title of King, since the letters *slwk* are not followed by anything resembling *xšāyaθiya*. Now, with the help of the photographs, Frye was able to show that the letters *slwk* in the fourth line do not stand alone and are part of a word, making it very unlikely that they spell the name of the eponymous Seleucid ruler.[662] He could not support the numerous readings of the name Darius, either because the photographs show that Altheim's readings/Herzfeld's drawings are erroneous or because the lines in the stone have disappeared.[663] On the other hand, he tentatively confirmed the decipherment of the name [']*rtḥšs*, although he notes that the word following it cannot be *xšāyaθiya,* for lack of space. Similarly, only the letters *spnd*- after the term *māhyā* can be seen, throwing doubt on Altheim's *Spandarmat*. Other few readings in different lines on the rock that Frye is willing to support after studying the pictures are *taiy*, *hauv*, *xšāyaθiya* (spelled *ḥšyty*) and *vazṛka*.

Remarkably, Frye's findings seem to give further weight to previous scholars' statements that the inscription records a phonetic transcription of Old Persian in the Aramaic alphabet: although, as we have seen, the transcription of names and loanwords was common in Achaemenid administrative documents, the spelling out of pronouns and particles such as *hauv* and *taiy*, as well as the term 'month', usually rendered by its Aramaic equivalent, is exceptional. Given the extreme tentativeness of these readings however, the possibility that this inscription simply presents the same use of Aramaic as that known from Achaemenid archives cannot be completely disregarded. Concerning dating, Frye prefers to assign its commission to the very end of the Achaemenid period by a late Achaemenid sovereign, arguing that it is unlikely that any Seleucid ruler would have had such a prominent inscription engraved in Aramaic rather than Greek.[664] Frye's conclusion certainly tallies with what we know of epigraphic practice under the Seleucids: although, as we shall see, Aramaic no doubt remained in use at a local level for administration, Seleucid monumental inscriptions and coin legends were all engraved in Greek.

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[661] For a summary of Altheim's readings, put forward in different publications, see Frye 1982, 86-87.

[662] Frye 1982, 88.

[663] Frye 1982, 88-89.

[664] Frye 1982, 90.

This Aramaic inscription of Darius' tomb has not been studied since and is in too lacunary a state to allow any further conclusions concerning its subject matter and date.[665] In terms of palaeography, the letters are deeply carved, well-spaced and proportioned. Based on Herzfeld's drawing, which unfortunately remains much more legible than the photographs of the rock-cut text published by Frye, the script displays a distinctly cursive style – in fact close to that corresponding to the 'extremely cursive' of Naveh's classification – that is at odds for instance with the archaising and angular style of the few examples of Aramaic-engraved coins from the early Hellenistic period described above.[666] Thus, although the *shin* presents the upside down F-shape known from the 5th century onwards and found on the coin from the Oxus hoard, it is much more curved and less angular while the *alef* presents the later, cursive cross-shape: this cross-shape of the *alef* is confirmed by Frye's photographic publication of the inscription, where the grapheme can be seen clearly in several lines.[667] The right leg of the *taw* is elongated, a feature that appears in the cursive style of the 4th century: here again, Herzfeld's drawing of this letter is confirmed by the photographs **[Fig. 5.11]**. Based on the images, the right leg of the *mem* is similarly very elongated, and according to Herzfled hand-drawing it even curves in slightly: the angular, three-pronged head of this grapheme on Mazaios' coins is far off. According to Herzfeld's copy, the *qof* is now completely open towards the bottom, a feature entirely unknown before the 4th-3rd centuries; similarly, the head of the *samekh* is curved to form two hooks rather than a cross, another distinctly later feature and confirmed by Frye's photographs.[668] Naveh mentions Herzfeld's drawing of this inscription in a footnote.[669] He dates the script to the 5th century BCE, describing it as a 'formal cursive' from that period, but as the brief palaeographic overview above shows, this is somewhat at odds both with his tables of Aramaic script-styles as well as with the later date for the rock-cut text put forward by Herzfeld, Henning and Frye. Still, it is striking that this monumental, Aramaic inscription, engraved on Darius' tomb, does not present any sign of an archaising 'lapidary' script that one might expect would have been used for such an occasion: the inscription may be seen as an

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[665] See nevertheless Bae 2003, esp. 7 and 22-23 who accepts the reading of the text as Old Persian (phonetically) written in Aramaic script.

[666] Note however that the distinctively cursive style of the Aramaic inscription from Persepolis maybe exaggerated by Herzfeld's hand-drawn copy.

[667] Naveh 1970, 46.

[668] Compare Naveh 1970, 28 and 48.

[669] Naveh 1970, 42, n. 97.

instance of Naveh's observation that the Achaemenid period saw the generalisation of the cursive style, including on hard materials.

II. The Aramaic-derived Parthian script.

Parthian numismatics: from Aramaic to Greek to Parthian

It becomes much more difficult to follow the trajectory of the Aramaic script in the former Achaemenid heartland in the following centuries because of an important documentary gap. The most significant evidence of the continued use of the Aramaic alphabet at a local level is the emergence, in the course of the Hellenistic period, of a rich mosaic of Aramaic-derived scripts. The first that will be addressed is the Parthian script, primarily because it is under the Parthians that we can observe the gradual transition from the use of Greek to the re-introduction – in the political and representational sphere – of an Aramaic-derived script used to write an Iranian language.

Because of the same documentary gap, it is difficult to pinpoint the benchmark events that led the Parthians to overcome Seleucid rule.[670] The chronology of the succession of early Parthian kings is particularly difficult to reconstruct as the early coins minted by the dynasty only mention one ruler in their legends, the eponymous Arsakes, with each king differentiating himself from his predecessor by his portrait.[671] The first turning point came in the reign of Seleukos (r. 246-225 BCE): Andragoras, the satrap of the former Achaemenid province of Parthava, declared his independence from Seleucid rule;[672] in his step, Diodotus, the satrap of Bactria, also decided to secede, in 239 BCE. Based on classical historiography, it appears that the Iranian nomadic tribe of the Parnoi/Aparnoi – the most powerful tribe in the Dahan Confederacy[673] – who had been putting pressure on the Seleucids' eastern frontier perhaps as early as the end of the fourth century, took advantage of the secession of these two eastern satrapies: led by their king Arsakes I, they defeated Andragoras in 244/243 BCE and invaded

[670] For a recent history of early Arsakid Parthia, see Olbrycht 2021.

[671] For Parthian coinage see Sellwood 1971; Alram 2016; for Parthian history see Bivar 1983 and 1986, Frye 1984, 205-247, Schippmann 1986.

[672] Most likely in the 250s, possibly in 256, see Olbrycht 2021, 99.

[673] Olbrycht 2021, 119.

Parthava, hence their appellation.[674] It is worth noting that the secession of these provinces from Seleucid rule, as well as the full-blown 'invasion' of Parthia by the Parni has been called into question. Thus, Frye notes that Bactria's break away from Seleucid control was probably much more gradual; similarly, the Parnoi's move south may have been closer to a 'migration' than to an invasion.[675] It is also worth stressing that the Parthian dynasts dated the beginning of their era in 247 BCE, a date which remains difficult to explain but is clearly anterior to the Parnoi move on Parthava. Be that as it may, the Parthians consolidated their influence and began extending their control eastwards. Between the reigns of the Parthian kings Mithradates I (ca. 171-39/8) to Mithradates II (ca. 124/3-88/7 BCE) a series of successful military campaigns against the Seleucids established the Parthians as the dominating power in the Near East up until early 3rd century CE when the Sasanians put an end to their rule.[676]

In the first two centuries of their rule, the Parthians followed their predecessors in using Greek not only on their coin legends but also in monumental inscriptions:[677] as mentioned in the first part of this work, early travelers to Persia documented a Greek inscription at Bīsotūn apparently mentioning the name Mithradates.[678] Herzfeld later restored the text as reading 'Gotarzes, satrap of satraps, the great king Mithradates";[679] it is has been suggested that this Gotarzes is the same one mentioned in Babylonian tablets as the Parthian king who reigned for a brief period in 91/90 BC and was described as the son of Mithradates II.[680] The inscription certainly shows that Greek was used by the Parthians as a language and script of prestige in the 1st century BCE, worthy of a rock-cut inscription accompanying a bas-relief at the ancient Achaemenid site of Bīsotūn. Similarly, the typology of Parthian coins presents a linear continuity with Hellenistic models.[681] As mentioned above, at first only the name ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ – invariably in the genitive – appears, to which are gradually added various combinations of

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[674] Olbrycht 2021, 99. For a discussion of the accounts of classical authors on this subject, see Frye 1984, 206-207 and Shahbazi 1986.

[675] Frye 1984, 178-180 and 206.

[676] On early Parthian history see Olbrycht 2021 and Boyce and de Jong (forthcoming); on Greek and Aramaic inscriptions of the Arsacid period, see Huyse (forthcoming, b).

[677] At least, in the one that is extant, at Bīsotūn.

[678] The inscription was first copied by Grélot when travelling through Persia with Bembo, see above Chapter 2; and see most recently, Luther 2018a as well as Huyse (forthcoming, b).

[679] Herzfeld 1920, 35-39.

[680] Frye 1984, 215; Simonetta 2009, 170, n. 39; on the inscription and the identification of the king mentioned in it, see most recently Luther 2018a.

[681] See also Sinisi 2012 and Rezakhani 2013; on the use of Greek on Parthian coinage, see Sinisi 2012, 278-279.

epithets including ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ, ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ, ΝΙΚΑΤΩΡ, ΘΕΟΠΑΤΩR, ΦΙΛΕLLΗΝΟΣ, ΝΙΚΗΦΟΡΟΥ, ΔΙΚΑΙΟΥ, ΑΥΤΟΚΡΑΤΟΡΟΣ etc **[Fig. 5.12]**.[682] Only much later on is the name of the Parthian king who issued the coin added in the legend, beginning with Mithridates III in the second half of the 1st century BCE. The legend is typically inscribed in a square, with each epithet making up one of the four sides of the square, around the motif in the centre **[Fig. 5.12]**. Concerning the epithet *philhellene*, which first appears on the coins of Mithradates struck in Seleucia on the Tigris, Frye has commented that it probably ought to be understood as a gesture towards the local Greek(-speaking) populations, a 'sign of conciliation', rather than exactly translating a pro-Greek feeling.[683] On the other hand, the omission of the epithet *philhellene* on some issues under Artabanus III may have reflected a wave of anti-Roman sentiment among the Parthian nobility after the short reign of the Rome-educated Vonones, eventually ousted by Artabanus.[684]

Although Greek dominated numismatics for most of the Parthian period, there are some telling exceptions, dating from the very early and from the later Parthian period. Early Parthian coins bearing Aramaic legends were included in a hoard discovered in a small village in northeastern Iran and published by Abgarians and Sellwood.[685] The Parthian coins were found among other drachms struck by different Seleucid kings. The publishers note that the Parthian coins follow the weight standard that was employed by the Seleucids for their drachms. Continuity with Seleucid precedent is further indicated by the minting technique, with the coins presenting a hammered edge, as well as style, with the dotted border, typical of the obverse of Seleucid issues.[686] The choice of depicting a head rather than bust on the obverse also picks up on Seleucid minting conventions from Mesopotamia and Iran. Based on the condition of the coins and their comparison with other coin hoards, Abgarians and Sellwood estimate a date between 225 BCE and 150 BCE and organise the Parthian coins chronologically into six types. The first and second types, deemed to be the earliest, bear the legend ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ sometimes augmented with the title ΑΥΤΟΚΡΑΤΟΡΟΣ; the direction of the head on the obverse – to the right – and of the figure of the archer on the reverse – to the left – follow Seleucid precedent. Type 3 and 4 present a similar iconography but depict the head facing left and (in type 4) the

[682] For a discussion of some of these epithets, see Simonetta 2009, 150-151 as well as Sinisi 2012, 281-286.

[683] Frye 1984, 211.

[684] Frye 1984, 237 and Sinisi 2012, 286.

[685] Abgarians and Sellwood 1971.

[686] Abgarians and Sellwood 1971, 108.

archer facing right, a change of direction which is interpreted as expressing the nascent dynasty's intention to distinguish itself from Seleucid predecessors. Most importantly, types 3 and 4 bear short legends that are, although difficult to read and interpret, undoubtedly in Aramaic script. It should be noted, however, that whether the script on these legends was already on its way to becoming a form of early Parthian is impossible to tell, as the graphemes could belong to either alphabet; the earliest dated evidence for the distinctly Parthian script is 100 BCE (see below). The legends include two letters resembling the *kaf*/*resh*/*dalet* Aramaic/Parthian graphemes; one representing either the Aramaic *nun* or Parthian *yod/zain* (although admittedly a little bit wavy) and what could either be an Aramaic *yod* or Parthian *waw* **[Fig. 5.13]**. Abgarians and Sellwood propose to decipher the word *krny*: the Kārins were an important contingent of the Parthian nobility.[687] They also note that according to classical sources the Kārin was said to be a type of general: thus, the term would be a direct translation of the Greek "Autokratos" which, in the context of Macedonian-Seleucid protocol, designated an 'elected general'. In a dedicated article, Marek Jan Olbrycht has recently discussed Arsakes' dual Greek-Iranian titulature, and rejects the association of the title *krny* on his coins with the Parthian Kārin clan.[688] While the Greek title ΑΥΤΟΚΡΑΤΟΡΟΣ derived from Hellenistic tradition, where it had come to designate in a general sense a potentate who had come to rule through a military success, the one of *krny* derived from Achaemenid tradition.[689] Indeed, although it does not appear as such in Old Persian textual vestiges, it is mentioned by Greek historiographers and, significantly, compared by them to the function of autokrator. The function of *krny* also occurs, written in Aramaic, in the Khalili archive: the term would derive from the Old Persian *kāra*- 'army' and would designate a high-ranking military commander.[690] For Olbrycht, with this dual titualture, Arsakes I was thus explicitly establishing a connection with both the Greek and Persian ruling cultures.

Significantly, the same title *krny* reappears on the coin legends of the Persid *frataraka* king Wahbarz, suggesting the widespread use of this Achaemenid military function as a title by sub-Seleucid, local kings across the empire – perhaps it is also indicative of a similar political situation at both ends of the empire.[691]

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[687] Abgarians and Sellwood 1971, 113.

[688] Olbrycht 2013.

[689] Olbrycht 2013, 63-65.

[690] Olbrycht 2013, 65-68.

[691] David Engels seems to have been the first to make a link between the occurrences of the title *krny* on the coins of Arsakes and those of the Persid king, see Engels 2013, 55-60 and Engels 2018, 178-183. Although the

It is worth stressing that the Aramaic legends on these examples systematically appear in association with the ubiquitous ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ spelled out in Greek letters **[Fig. 5.13]**. It is therefore difficult to see the use of the Aramaic script as necessarily expressing a "desire to emphasise the anti-Seleucid nature of the young kingdom".[692] Similarly, Jozef Wolski also firmly interpreted the Aramaic legends as incarnating the Parthians' new-found independence from their Greek overlords: "les Parthes, dès le moment de leur apparition sur la plate-forme historique comme État, ont adopté, évidemment pour s'opposer à la pression de la langue grecque, l'araméen, et cela dans les légendes des monnaies des premiers Arsacides".[693] As we saw, Greek would become the sole script of Parthian coin legends for centuries. The Aramaic and Greek legends on these examples are both engraved on the reverse of the coin, which represents the figure of a seated archer on a four-legged stool; Mithradates would later take up this iconographic motif for his own issues, but hellenising it, by representing the archer seated on the omphalos rather than a stool, in a clear nod towards the Greek seated Apollo with bow. Types 3 and 4 are also distinctive in that they bear a specific monogram resembling a stylised Greek letter M, which is thought to be a mintmark: the publishers suggest it may stand for Mithradatkert, the name of the citadel of the Parthian capital Nisa.[694] The limited number of dies which the Parthian coins present further suggests that the issues were minted and intended for circulation within the province of Parthia proper. Following this, it is also possible to see the few Aramaic letters engraved on the coins as a mint-master's mark, rather than a Parthian military title.

Abgarians and Sellwood conclude from their study that the Parthian coins from the hoard were minted in the province of Parthia at the very end of the 3rd century BCE, before Antiochus III's 209 BCE expedition from Ecbatana to reconquer the lost easternmost satrapies.[695] What the few Aramaic/Aramaic-derived letters of the Parthian coin legends certainly testify to is the continued use of that alphabet at a local level in the former Achaemenid province of Parthava, 'surviving' the Seleucid period and spilling into the early Arsacid period: it shows that the Parni encountered Aramaic in the very early stages of their rise to power and included it on some of the first issues of their coins.

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date and succession of the Persid *frataraka* kings remains much debated (see following chapter), it is probably safe to say that Wahbarz would have roughly been a contemporary of Arsakes I.

[692] Abgarians and Sellwood 1971, 113.

[693] Wolski 1976, 284.

[694] Abgarians and Sellwood 1971, 114.

[695] Abgarians and Sellwood 1971, 117.

Now, Aramaic letters disappear from Parthian coinage for two centuries only to rematerialise in the later Parthian period. Indeed, from the reign of Vologeses I (ca. 51-78 CE) additional legends in Parthian script begin to make their appearance, at first sporadically and only on the drachms, and then more frequently.[696] These instances have again been interpreted as expressing anti-Greek sentiment and embodying the Parthians' affirmation of their Iranian identity. Similarly, the reemergence around this time of the title 'king of kings' as well as the choice by Gotarzes to have a monumental inscription engraved at Bīsotūn – which, as was noted, is in Greek however – would illustrate a symbolic return to Achaemenid traditions.[697] Thus, Wolski, who interpreted the epithet philhellene as a mark of the early Parthians' 'dependence' towards Seleucid rule, judged the 'Aramean legends' of the later Parthian coins as representing a sudden break in political ideology: "L'apparition sur les monnaies parthes, dès le milieu du 1er siècle de notre ère, de la légende araméenne, et cela d'une manière stable, et la disparition des légendes grecques, du reste de plus en plus barbarisées, confirment visiblement ce revirement complet des Parthes … Il est aisé de voir dans ces phénomènes l'expression d'une action voulue, d'une tendance anti-grecque, ce qui équivaut à la tendance anti-romaine en ce temps-là."[698]

Frye called Wolski's assertions into question, rightly noting that the legends in Greek do not disappear from Parthian coinage and were maintained until the very end of the dynasty;[699] in fact, the use of Greek for official inscriptions is a practice continued by the first Sasanian kings. Frye further argues that the coin legends in Parthian script were in fact nothing more than mint or mint masters' marks and have therefore been given too much importance: their appearance ought to be attributed to the gradual decline in the knowledge and use of Greek.[700] This interpretation ought to be discarded. Although the Parthian legends at first only consist in a few letters, reminiscent of the abbreviations of mint names, it is quite easy to see that they are actually abbreviations of the name of the Parthian king responsible for issuing the coin. They correspond to a new trend in coinage which sees the addition of the king's name to the legend, alongside the usual Greek epithets and the ubiquitous ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ. The first instance of letters in Parthian script is on the issues Vologeses I: on the reverse, this king's coins bear

[696] Sellwood 1971, 225.

[697] On the Arsacids' efforts to link their dynasty to the Achaemenids and Achaemenids traditions, see Olbrycht 2013 and Olbrycht 2019.

[698] Wolski 1976, 285.

[699] Frye 1984, 228-229. It should also be noted that the title 'king of kings' does occur on Seleucid coinage.

[700] Frye 1984, 229.

the familiar Greek square legend – ΒΑΣΙΛΕwΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕwΝ (*sic*) at the top, ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥΣ ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟΣ on the left and ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ ΕΥΕΡΓΕΤΟΥ on the right; the square is closed at the bottom by ΔΙΚΑΙΟΥ – engraved more or less schematically around the motif of the king seated on his throne with Tyche handing him a palm-branch or that of the seated archer with bow.[701] On the obverse, the two Parthian letters WL are engraved behind the king's head. This king's successor Vologeses II (ca. 77-80 CE) continues the convention on some of his coins **[Fig. 5.14]**, and in one case the letters read WLM. It would have been possible to mistake these short abbreviations for mint marks were it not for the two Parthian letters PK engraved on the coins of Vologeses II's successor Pacorus II (ca. 78-105 CE) – these take the schematic form of a triangle and a curvy reverse gamma – as well as the two letters AR similarly positioned next to the king's portrait on the coins of the last Parthian king Artabanus V (216-224 CE).[702] In having the first letters of his name engraved behind his portrait, Vologeses I was actually following the example of his predecessor Gotarzes II, who had a capital Greek gamma engraved next to his portrait: the novelty consisted in using the Parthian alphabet. Now, the coins of Vologeses IV (147-191 CE) mark a new turning point and bear the king's *full* title in Parthian *wlgšy mlk'*:[703] this serves to prove that the three letters WLM on some of Vologeses II's issues was an abbreviation for the full title *WLgšy Mlk'*. On Vologeses IV's coins, the Parthian words are inserted in the usual square Greek formula made up of the familiar epithets: it forms the top side of the square, thereby blending in but also 'crowning' the Greek legend. In one coin type the legend is only in Parthian and presents the full formula *wlgšy 'ršk mlkyn mlk'*, each word forming the side of the square legend.[704] By then, a number of Parthian kings had begun to add their full titulature in Parthian script, often in conjunction with Greek epithets, a practice that was continued up until the end of the Parthian dynasty.

Palaeographically speaking, the w*aw* in these legends takes the shape of a crescent moon open to the left **[Fig. 5.14]**, and the *lamed* is a long, more or less hooked wavy line; the *shin* is remarkably close to its Aramaic precursor – it leans towards the left rather than standing upright – and does not resemble monumental Parthian as we know if from the Sasanian period. The coins also adopt the convention of representing the *mem* of MLK' schematically as a cross, a cursive shape which in Imperial Aramaic is usually reserved for the *alef*, showing that

[701] Sellwood 1971, 215-216.

[702] Sellwood 1971, 231, 297.

[703] Sellwood 1971, 275.

[704] Sellwood 1971, 279.

Parthian had resolutely moved on from that alphabet **[Fig. 5.15]**; the Parthian *alef* on coins takes the form of an open-topped square, while the *resh*, *kaf* and *bet* are virtually indistinguishable. Certain Parthian legends are more schematically engraved than others, thus the *nun* on Artabanus V (ca. 216-224 CE)'s coins is a single vertical line and the *taw* a square open at the bottom. By contrast, Mithradates IV (140 CE)'s legends display an elegant monumental style, with the *mem* and *taw* retaining all the details of the graphemes' complex features; similarly, the lamed in Vologeses II's coins is a fork rather than only a wavy line **[Fig. 5.16]**.[705]

As mentioned, Frye believed that it is possible to witness a gradual loss of the knowledge of Greek. Beyond cases of extremely schematic and abbreviated epithets, some issues certainly present what Sellwood calls "barbarous legends" **[Fig. 5.17]**.[706] These consist in an arrangement of Greek-looking graphemes that do not correspond to any real meaning, although the epithets they are supposed to spell out can sometimes just about be guessed, as if the engraver had copied Greek prototypes but without having any knowledge of the Greek alphabet: in such examples the 'Greek' graphemes seem to have an 'aesthetic purpose', to recall the Greek square legends. Against Frye's proposal, however, it should be stressed that these 'barbarous' legends do occur relatively early on, for example on certain issues of 'debased silver' struck under Phraataces (ca. 2 BCE-4 CE), Artabanus III (ca. 10-38 CE) and Vardanes I (40-45 CE).[707] Other relatively early coin legends show spelling mistakes in the well-known formulae: thus, coins of Gotarzes II (40-51 CE) read ΑΡΣΑΝΟ rather than the expected ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ, some issues of his successor Vonones II read ΒΛΣΙΛΕΛS ΒΛΣΙΛΕΛΝ (*sic*), with a retrograde N) while certain legends of Vologeses II include a garbled spelling of the ubiquitous epithet *philhellene* as ΦΙΛΗΛΧΟΙΣ.[708] This suggests that 'bad Greek' may be regarded more as symptomatic of low-quality coinage or local minting rather than a decline in knowledge of Greek in favour of Parthian: many other issues struck under Vardanes I for example show perfect Greek legends, as do the coins of some of the last Parthian kings like Vologeses VI (c. 208-228 CE).[709]

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[705] Compare Sellwood 1971, 263, 279 and 297.

[706] Sellwood 1971, 174.

[707] Sellwood 1971, 174, 188, 193, 201.

[708] Sellwood 1971, 210, 212, 228.

[709] Sellwood 1971, 291.

What the Parthian coins show above all is a concomitant use of Parthian and Greek. The Greek alphabet is evidently kept as a language of prestige on coins: the fact that it is at times schematic and almost purely 'aesthetic' actually emphasises this. As such, it is probably a mistake to view the appearance of Parthian as incarnating an anti-Greek reaction. Sellwood has also suggested that it may have reflected political infighting within the tight circle of the Parthian pretenders to the throne.[710] Mainly, it was probably symptomatic of an administrative reality 'on the ground': as the different Parthian archives discussed below show, the Aramaic-derived Parthian script was a – the? – core script of administration, in some cases/areas used along-side Greek, in others not.[711] As affairs were being increasingly conducted in Parthian only, Greek 'froze' into a – quasi-aesthetic – language of prestige: it was maintained on coinage for this very reason, but the living, Parthian scribal tradition eventually began to spill over into the political and representational sphere.

The Parthian parchments of Avroman.

Other instances of the co-existence of Greek and Parthian in administration are attested. Three parchments were discovered together in a cave in the mountains of Persian Kurdistan and acquired by the British Museum in the early twentieth century.[712] Two are inscribed in Greek with one bearing an endorsement in Parthian script at the back, while the third is entirely written in Parthian script. The endorsement, although badly damaged, seems to contain a repetition of the main points developed in the Greek contract; in this regard, the document mirrors the articulation of the use of Elamite and Aramaic in some bilingual texts from the Achaemenid period. All three documents concern the sale of a vineyard, the same vineyard at least in the case of the two Greek documents. It was long assumed that the Greek documents were dated

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[710] Sellwood 1971, 220.

[711] In this respect, an interesting case is the hesitant Greek transcription of the name of Vonones. The first Parthian king of this name reigned at the very turn of the 1st century CE: his coin-legends show his name variously spelled as EWNOWNHΣ and ONWNEΣ before the standard transcription convention settles for the latter transcription, although ONONEΣ occurs too; similarly, Gotarzes is alternately spelled ΓWTAPZEΣ and ΓWTEPZEΣ. Both the examples actually betray problems belonging to the adaptation of Aramaic-derived scripts to Iranian phonetics, with the oscillation between the short vowel 'a' and 'e' – unmarked in Parthian/Middle Persian script – and the ambiguity of the value of *waw*, which can both render the semi-vowel 'w' and the long vowel 'o': it is as if the scribes had been working from a *Parthian* spelling of the name and more or less successfully transliterated it into Greek.

[712] Minns 1915, Nyberg 1923.

to the Seleucid era – 225 and 291 of the Seleucid era – which would place them in 88/87 and 22/21 BCE respectively. The document in Parthian script bears the date *šnt 300*, although the numeral is extremely difficult to read. It is generally agreed that this dating formula refers to the Arsacid era: the parchment would thus date somewhat later than the two Greek ones, to 33 CE.[713] In a recent article, Andreas Luther convincingly argued that the dating formula of the two *Greek* documents ought to be seen as referring to the *Arsacid* era rather than the Seleucid one: this shifts forward the date of the two texts, to November 24 BCE and 43/44 CE respectively and reduces the time gap between all three manuscripts significantly.[714] Luther's emendation also makes sense with respect to the context of the find: all three documents are likely to be part of a coherent archive relating to a given vineyard. The three documents were described as "evidence of the change in the use of language for notarial proceedings" between the end of the 1st century BCE and the early 1st century CE, with the abandonment of Greek as an administrative language.[715] However, Luther's new dating complexifies the picture and suggests that Greek and Parthian were used concurrently in local administration in the Arsacid period. In this regard, it is particularly interesting to note that the parchment with the endorsement in Parthian script is the older of the two Greek-inscribed documents. For our purposes, the Parthian texts from Avroman most importantly confirm the use of the Parthian script in the context of local administration in the 1st century BCE – in conjunction with Greek – at a time when Greek was the dominant language on coins and in monumental commissions.

Palaeographically speaking, the Parthian script of the later Avroman parchment displays a regular, legible – if very difficult to decipher – cursive hand **[Fig. 5.18]**.[716] The words themselves are spaced out but the letters within them stick closely together and lean to the left with many cases of touching, but no ligatures. Their position in the word does not modify their shape apart from a few stylised finals elongated either towards the left or backwards, towards the right. A good example of this is the *alef* at the end of the word for 'month' in the first line: the head is more V-like than square, exhibiting the tendency of the second stroke to slant as in late Parthian monumental script (but not coins), while the lower horizontal stroke is stretched all the way to the beginning of the next work, ending in a stylised curved finish; it has thus

[713] Nyberg 1923, 188-189; on the dating of the Greek parchments from Avroman, see most recently Luther 2018b, 161-169, as well as Huyse (forthcoming, b).

[714] Luther 2018b as well as Huyse (forthcoming, b).

[715] Wiesehöfer 2006.

[716] See Minns 1915, pl. III.

very much lost any resemblance to its Aramaic ancestor. Similarly, the *het* exhibits the characteristic Parthian 'zigzag' rather than the Aramaic square open at the bottom, while the *qof* has reached its monumental Parthian shape. The *yod* is heavily curved when in word-final position, with a rounded head like a comma, resembling its Middle Persian counterpart more than monumental Parthian and certainly more than Aramaic. Similarly, the *bet* is almost Middle Persian: it has lost its head entirely and is shaped more like a right angle, although the lower stroke is not as elongated as in Middle Persian, often making it look like *gimel*; it certainly does not have the reversed C-shape of Parthian inscriptions. On the other hand, the *shin* still very much resembles its Aramaic precursor and leans towards the left; similarly, the *mem* is still closer to the Aramaic form, with a long curving right leg. In this text the graphemes are well formed: the head of *resh* for example retains its concave shape, something which is completely lost in the Parthian endorsement from the same archive, which presents a much more cursive style. Nyberg notes concerning this text that the words are not separated from each other, rendering its decipherment particularly difficult; the graphemes also show a marked tendency to resemble each other.[717] While the *bet* still looks quite Aramaic – the grapheme retains its concave head – it is also possible to identify a distinctly Parthian *pe* – triangular-shaped – in the second line. What these documents show is that Parthian was essentially reaching its 'final' form – as we know it from the Parthian inscriptions of the Sasanian period – around the turn of the 1st century CE, albeit with some archaising graphemes; they also testify to the existence of a developed cursive style which presented marked simplifications and a lack of differentiation between certain grapheme groups as well as an absence of ligatures.

Now, it was not immediately clear to scholars who worked on these Parthian documents whether the text was meant to be read as Aramaic or Parthian. The Avroman parchments exhibit orthographical mistakes and suggest the beginning of a confusion between Aramaic *h* and *ḥ*, apparently used interchangeably, both in Iranian spellings and in Aramaic words.[718] This would suggest that certain letters did not represent a phonetic/spoken reality anymore. Other un-Aramaic features of this text that have been noted include 'iranisms' such as a peculiar use of the verb 'to eat' with the meaning 'to swear', recognised as being a calque of the Iranian

[717] Nyberg 1923, 208-209.

[718] Henning 1958, 29; Skjærvø 1995, 290. The '*plene*' spelling of Parthian *hamē* 'always/together' is *ḥmy* in line 4, see Nyberg 1923, 202-204.

expression *sōgand xwardan*, 'to take an oath, to swear'.[719] The spelling of family terms with an apparently ungrammatical possessive suffix, characteristic, as we saw, from the Aśokan Aramaic inscriptions, occurs here too; because these spellings correspond to the later heterographic forms of these words, Henning deemed that the Avroman texts were written ideographically.[720] However, Skjærvø – like Gzella (see above) – argued that misspellings and iranisms were probably not enough to prove that a text is fully ideographic:[721] the transition from Aramaic to fully heterographic texts was gradual and the Avroman documents, which contain much more Aramaic than later Parthian texts, probably illustrate only a stage of that process.[722] Still, it is worth observing here that the text did not have to be "fully ideographic" (with the use of fixed 'frozen' forms and phonemic complements) to be *read* as Parthian by those who wrote it/handled it.

Most of the vocabulary in the Parthian document from Avroman have been explained as Aramaic forms, with only names of persons and places being recognisably Iranian although Nyberg has identified some 'phonetically spelled' conjunctions and adverbs like *kaδ* or *hamē* as well as possibly a verbal form, *ahē*, in the fourth line.[723] It is worth pointing out that the word *puhr* 'son' appears both in the Aramaic form BRY and also fully 'spelled out' when in the plural as *puhrān*.[724] Interestingly some names have been identified as possible compound forms, with an Aramaic element used heterographically.[725] Nyberg has also tentatively identified potential 'phonetic complements': thus the final *-t* at the end of the Aramaic form ZBN, the perfect stem of the verb 'to buy', would render Iranian *xrīt*.[726]

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[719] Skjærvø 1995, 290 but for a different interpretation of the passage see Nyberg 1923, 204-205. On the expression *sōgand xwardan* as meaning 'to swear', 'take an oath', see Schwartz 1989.

[720] Henning 1958, 29-30.

[721] Skjærvø 1995, 295.

[722] For a description of the gradual "erosion" of Aramaic over the Parthian period, see most recently Gzella 2021, 319-326.

[723] 3rd person singular of the verb 'to be', Nyberg 1923, 198-199.

[724] It is unsure whether the form *āpuhrān* is a compound form however: Nyberg prefers to view the initial *ā* as separate and rendering *apāk,* Nyberg 1923, 204.

[725] Nyberg 1923, 207; It must be said that based both on pre- and post-Parthian documents this is unusual.

[726] Nyberg 1923, 208; Henning 1958, 30; see also Skjærvø's slightly different interpretation of this form however, Skjærvø 1995, 299.

The Parthian ostraca of Nisa.

The first century BCE yielded another, much richer archive of Parthian documents. On the other side of the Caspian sea, in the Parthian capital of Nisa, a hoard of nearly three thousand potsherds inscribed in ink in Parthian script and recording transactions relating to vineyards and wine shipments was recovered; these documents are dated between 151/150 BCE and 13/12 BCE but with the vast majority belonging to the years between 80-50 BCE **[Fig. 5.19]**.[727] In arguing for an ideographic reading of the Nisa ostraca, Henning notes the apparent interchangeability between the Iranian, phonetic spelling *ḥštrp* and Aramaic *pḥt'* (already encountered in Achaemenid Aramaic documents) in set phrases like 'at the hands of the satrap'.[728] Examples of grammatically awkward phrases such as the use of masculine pronouns – in particular the demonstrative *znh*, which, as we saw 'froze' into an aramaeogram – with feminine nouns, is further suggestive of a fixed or heterographic use of some forms. Coxon similarly described the Parthian ostraca as 'ur-ideographic' texts,[729] highlighting after Henning the widespread use of absolute or unmarked Aramaic forms which do not seem to be 'integrated' in an Aramaic syntax.[730] Coxon also remarked after Diakonoff and Livshits that the phrase which systematically does display correct Aramaic syntax is the introductory formula which heads most ostraca, *bḥwth znh* "in this vessel", with the demonstrative following the noun: he describes it as behaving almost like a 'phrase ideogram', used as a whole in a stereotyped form.[731] It is worth noting that this formulaic construction would survive well after the Parthian period and introduce all Sasanian Middle Persian label inscriptions with 'this is the image of', 'this is the bowshot of', etc. As Coxon observes, there are other such examples illustrating the perennity of set formulae. In a later Parthian parchment discovered at Dura Europos and dating from the end of the Parthian period/early Sasanian period,[732] at a stage where the Parthian writing system is doubtlessly 'ideographic', Henning has noted that the long introductory greeting formula which makes up the first few lines of the text directly corresponds to the lengthy *politesses* which customarily open Aramaic missives – including a

[727] Henning 1958, 27-28; Diakonoff and Livshits 1976-1979; Bader 1996; Livshits and Pilipko 2004; (Weber in) Hackl, Jacobs and Weber 2010, II, 492-561; Huyse (forthcoming, b).

[728] Henning 1958, 27.

[729] Coxon 1973.

[730] See similarly Bader 1996, esp. 252-253 who describes the Iranian syntax and flections of the inscriptions on the ostraca.

[731] Coxon 1973, 186-187.

[732] This document, like other later Parthian inscriptions, will be further discussed in the following chapter.

letter of Aršāma – in the Achaemenid period.[733] Thus, whereas in the rest of the Dura-Europos document the verbs bear phonetic complements, they are devoid of it within the greeting formula 'block', which ends up behaving very much like a sentence-ideograph. Now, Coxon proposes to explain the survival of archaising orthography in certain terms – like the preposition QDM – to their presence within such fixed address formulae.[734] In line with this, would it not be possible to understand the early 'freezing' of family terms such as Son, Mother, Brother in the possessive by their constant use in this form in Aramaic greeting formulae?[735] It is worth noting after Gzella that the addition of a first-person singular suffix to certain terms to form a particular title[736] – a sort of 'hypocoristic' form perhaps – is known in other languages: French Monsieur, Madame, English Milady and so on. Thus, My Brother/Sister/Mother would become 'frozen' under forms they typically appeared in address formulae.[737]

The confusion between the *h* and *ḥ*, characteristic of the Avroman texts, is not found at Nisa. This would seem to point to a more conservative scribal tradition: the Nisa and Avroman texts have been taken to illustrate two stages of the evolution of Parthian, with the latter exhibiting a 'later', more confirmed stage of the heterographic writing system.[738] Still, the Parthian ostraca are relatively close in date to the Avroman parchments, the later, Parthian text from Avroman being only a few decades later than the last ostraca from Nisa. We may also remark, however, that the Nisa ostraca were produced in the Parthian capital, which probably concentrated the empire's best-trained scribes, while the Avroman texts were found in a peripheral region of the former Parthian empire and concern more local affairs. The Parthian ostraca are also extremely concise, technical and repetitive texts which could further contribute to their relatively 'uncorrupted' use of Aramaic and the tendency towards historical spellings.

In terms of palaeography, the Nisa ostraca **[Fig. 5.19]** and the Parthian parchment from Avroman **[Fig. 5.18]** are essentially identical, which in itself is remarkable given the many different hands involved, the fact that the documents came from different regions and contexts and that they are not exactly contemporaneous. As such, they certainly testify to a centralised and strongly homogenising administration and scribal tradition. The ostraca perhaps display a slightly more cursive style, with several graphemes presenting a tendency to look alike or

[733] Henning 1954; Coxon 1973, 198-199.

[734] Coxon 1973, 199.

[735] On this use of the possessive in Achaemenid Aramaic epistolary conventions, see Folmer 2017, 420, 423.

[736] Gzella 2008, 113.

[737] But not necessarily point to heterographic usage as such.

[738] Henning 1958, 28.

become simplified and less angular, which is unsurprising considering the highly repetitive and formulaic nature of these texts and the sheer volume they were produced in. Still, the graphemes in the ostraca remain more legible than the Parthian endorsement on the back of the older of the two Greek documents from Avroman, confirming that the tendency towards cursive writing and simplification is in this case a matter of style rather than diachronic evolution. Remarkable stylistic features shared by the Nisa ostraca and the Parthian parchment from Avroman include the elongation of certain graphemes, typically finals, either towards the bottom – sometimes crossing several lines of script – or backwards towards the right occasionally in an elegant, laced flourish. Apart from some graphemes like the *bet* – which like at Avroman retains its concave head – or *shin* that remain close to their Aramaic prototypes, most of the letters in the ostraca present their 'final' shape: the triangular *pe*, V-like *alef*, long, hooked *lamed*, zigzag *ḥet*, open *qof* or again the short, curving right leg of the *mem* are all firmly Parthian and remain stable all the way to the Sasanian period.

The curious case of Armazi.

In discussing the language and palaeography of the earliest Parthian inscriptions, it is worth considering the peculiar case of the Armazi bilingual Greek and Aramaic (Parthian?) inscription, discovered in a tomb in modern day Georgia **[Fig. 5.20]**. The version in Aramaic script, engraved beneath the Greek text, has crystallised debates concerning the language it represents: a form of corrupt Aramaic or an ideographic text in Middle Iranian.[739] Nyberg and Frye respectively saw it as representing Parthian and Middle Persian – the latter retracting his initial proposition that the inscription was in a form of Old Georgian – while Henning, who notes that the word for king appears as MLK rather than MLK' – which is the spelling of this heterogram in Middle Persian and Parthian – believed it is neither and represents another Iranian idiom.[740] That the text is at least heavily iranised is suggested by the word order, which follows Middle Iranian syntax; it even presents the use of the enclitic 3rd person singular pronoun *-š*.[741] Other arguments include the erroneous (and by now familiar) use of the oblique case for family terms such as 'daughter' *brty* when the latter is the subject of the sentence. Similarly, Metzger points to the fact that the feminine gender of the subject, the deceased

[739] On Aramazic, see Rapp 2014; Shapira 1999; for a recent overview of Aramaic inscriptional material from Georgia see Preud'homme 2022.

[740] For a history of research concerning this inscription, see Metzger 1956, 20-21.

[741] Metzger 1956, 20.

Serapit whom the inscription commemorates, is entirely ignored in the passage which describes her beauty and laments her untimely death.

Palaeographically, the Armazi inscription is extremely interesting. Based on the Roman names it records and certain aspects of the terminology, in particular the titles of dignitaries, editors have dated this inscription to the first half of the 2nd century CE.[742] On the one hand it exhibits archaising forms of Aramaic graphemes, such as the *taw* which present a very short right leg, a *shin* leaning heavily towards the left and a *ṭet* which looks exactly like that in Imperial Aramaic; the letters are angular and stylised with several 'ticks' embellishing the end of the strokes, which is probably to be attributed to the monumental, formal context and the engraver's creativity. On the other, the *resh* displays the (uncrossed) 'seven' shape of monumental and numismatic Parthian and does not bear the curved head of the older Aramaic form, while the *yod* is exactly the same short, slightly wavy, line as Parthian. Other graphemes are altogether unusual, like the *bet* which is often elongated far towards the left, reminiscent of the Middle Persian shape, while the *lamed* is extremely elongated and left-leaning, like an inverted Middle Persian *bet*. Curiously, the *pe* is drawn in two parts/strokes, with a vertical downward line capped by an unconnected curve. The *samekh* has a peculiar wavy shape unrecorded in Naveh's study of the evolution of the Aramaic script and unlike either Parthian or Middle Persian monumental or cursive examples.[743]

III. The Aramaic-derived scripts of the Arsacid period.

A mosaic of different Aramaic-derived scripts in the Arsacid period.

The difficulty of identifying the language of the Armazi inscription and explaining the local, innovative script which it displays is illustrative of the study of a number of inscriptions in Aramaic-derived alphabets from the Arsacid period.[744] Indeed, the Parthian script was part of a mosaic of scripts that emerged in this turning-point period (2nd century BCE - 1st century CE) in the former Achaemenid territories: these recorded both non-Aramaic languages (like Middle Iranian but possibly also Neo-Elamite) as well as different Aramaic dialects. Gzella has highlighted the diversity of Aramaic vernaculars that crystallised into different branches after the fall of the Achaemenid empire and which were progressively 'promoted' to writing in

[742] Metzger 1956, 25; see also Gzella 2021, 325-326.

[743] Metzger 1956, 20, pl. XV.

[744] For an overview of the Aramaic inscriptional material at Hatra and Palmyra, see also Huyse (forthcoming, b).

variant scripts in this period.[745] Thus, Hatra, in modern day Syria, has yielded over 600 inscriptions dating from the second half of the 1st century BCE to the early 3rd century CE; Gzella has identified the language they record as an 'Eastern Mesopotamian Aramaic'.[746] In terms of palaeography, a look at an inscription such as that recently published by Adil Hamil al-Jadir confirms a direct relationship with Imperial Aramaic **[Fig. 5.21]**.[747] It presents some innovations, such as the perfectly triangular-shaped *shin*, a very Parthian looking *bet* in one instance and more Middle-Persian one in another as well as a distinctly Parthian *aleph* and *het*.[748] Another Aramaic dialect written in its own script was Palmyrene, known from a series of inscriptions – both rock-cut and ink – ranging from the very end of the 1st century BCE to the 7th century AD **[Fig. 5.22]**. Linguistically speaking, Gzella has described Palmyrene as much more conservative than Eastern Aramaic – much closer to Official Aramaic.[749] It also presents an important number of Greek loanwords, however, and many Palmyrene inscriptions are bilingual Palmyrene-Greek:[750] historically, the oasis and trading city of Palmyra was under Seleucid control, which can account for the widespread use of Greek. As Gzella notes, the 'epigraphic habit' at Palmyra – and Hatra – also betrays important Hellenistic influences, with the "boom" of private funerary and dedicatory inscriptions, unattested beforehand. Chabot has identified three styles of Palmyrene script, a monumental, a cursive and an intermediary one.[751] In rock-cut inscriptions, both the monumental and the semi-monumental are attested, sometimes together, while the cursive hand is recorded in different media, in vertical ink inscriptions traced with a brush or reed on stucco. In contrast to cursive Parthian, the vertical ink inscriptions of Palmyra are heavily ligatured and resemble the oldest forms of cursive Syriac. In monumental Palmyrene, however, the letters are perfectly detached and there is a marked effort to calibrate the graphemes so that they are perfectly proportionate to one another, very much like Greek capitals **[Fig. 5.22]**; in the semi-cursive style the letters are markedly

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[745] Gzella 2008, 108, 127 and most recently Gzella 2021, 271-319.

[746] Gzella 2008, 109-110.

[747] Hamil al-Jadir 2006, Fig. 1 and 2; see further Gzella 2021, 271-319.

[748] After Rosenthal (Rosenthal 1978, 84) Gzella notes that the local script at Hatra may illustrate a transitional stage of the evolution from Official Aramaic to Middle Iranian scripts. Considering that most of the Parthian material is older than the inscriptions from Hatra this seems to be unlikely.

[749] Gzella 2008, 109.

[750] Even the extremely important fiscal law of Palmyra which detailed all the taxes that were to be paid on an impressive number of different goods was bilingual Palmyrene-Greek.

[751] Chabot 1922, 11-12.

less proportioned and present rare instances of ligatures. The 'conservative' nature of the Palmyrene dialect is reflected in the palaeography of its monumental script, which presents fewer innovations than the local script of Hatra: such letters as the *bet* and *kaf*, carefully made distinguishable with the more angular shape of the former, have retained their curved heads, quite lost in Parthian as well as at Hatra (and certainly at Armazi). On the other hand, the *qof* and *ṣade* have moved on from Imperial Aramaic and resemble the evolution that these graphemes underwent in Parthian. Similarly, the *'ayin* bears the addition of the leg to the right of the crescent shape as in Parthian, although this grapheme becomes much more angular in that script. In general, the monumental Palmyrene letters are markedly ornate and tend to emphasise the curves and intersections of the strokes that make up the graphemes in a deliberate flourish, where other scripts have on the contrary tended to reduce or do away with complicated junctures completely. That this was a deliberately elegant graphic register is indicated by the more cursive hand of the ink inscriptions which show much more angular and simplified strokes.

The extraordinarily wealthy trading city of Palmyra may have exercised some influence on the epigraphic conventions of its neighbours. Thus, Metzger identified in the Armazi inscription a term that frequently recurs in Palmyrene funerary inscriptions to express woe *ḥbl* 'alas!'.[752] Furthermore, the dedicatory formula which begins a great majority of Palmyrene inscriptions and which follows the structure 'this image is the one of' is a fixed expression that pervades label inscriptions in both Arsacid and Sasanian Iran.[753]

The Elymaean script(s).

A much more obscure script derived from Imperial Aramaic that emerged in this period in a former central province of the Achaemenid empire is Elymaic. It is much harder to determine what language was spoken at Elymais – whether it was a variety of vernacular Aramaic, an Iranian dialect or a late form of Elamite – and the nature of the language represented in the monumental inscriptions and coin legends of this small client kingdom of the Parthians is debated.[754] The territory of Elymais roughly corresponded to Khūzestān – Achaemenid Susiana

[752] Metzger 1956, 24; Coxon 1973, 196.

[753] Gzella 2008, 116.

[754] For a recent overview of "Elymaic and Arsacid Aramaic", see Huyse (forthcoming, b).

– and its inhabitants are thought to have been descendants of the Elamites.[755] Sporadic mentions in Classical sources record that contingents of Elymaeans and particularly Elymaean archers joined the rebellion of the Seleucid satrap of Media Molon in 220/219 BCE, fought in Antiochus III's army in 190 BCE and in 140 BCE joined Demetrius II's failed attempt at regaining Mesopotamia from the Parthians, which led to the invasion of Elymais by Mithradates I – to what extent this indicates that Elymais was subject to either the Seleucids or the Parthians is difficult to decide; most scholars agree that Elymais was a semi-independent vassal kingdom of the Parthian empire that enjoyed some spells of independence. Thus, the fact that Elymaean coins were minted at Susa in the second half of the 2nd century BCE under Kamnaskires I and then again under Kamnaskires II in 82/81 BCE has been taken as evidence that the Elymaean kings were able to take control of this major city at least at some points in their history.[756] Furthermore, Le Rider has remarked that no Parthian coins were minted at Susa after 45 CE whereas numerous bronze drachms of Elymaean kings dated from 75 CE onwards were found in that city, again suggesting Elymaean management of the mint there.[757] The possibility remains that the vassal Elymaean kings were granted the right to mint their own coins by their Parthian overlords; as we shall see, deciding to what extent a local (vassal) king was independent because he minted his own coinage is a problem that pervades the study of the coins issued by the local kings of Persis. Nevertheless, for our purposes, it is particularly interesting to note that it is from this period onwards (second half of the 1st century CE) that legends in the Elymaean variant of the Aramaic script make their appearance on coins, to the gradual detriment of Greek. This change seems to have gone had in hand with the disappearance of the throne name Kamnaskires, which carried a notable Elymaean pedigree, to recognisably Parthian royal names.

The first Elymaean coins are inscribed in Greek and bear the legend ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΚΑΜΝΑΣΚΙΡΟΥ, following Seleucid and Parthian precedent in presenting the king's name in the genitive **[Fig. 5.23]**.[758] The Greek legends soon become corrupt, however. Orodes I's coins read ΥΡwΔΗΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ (*sic*): beyond the erroneous spelling ΒΑΣΙLEVS (*sic*), it is also

[755] On the history of Elymais, see Hansman 1998 and Frye 1984, 273-275; on the language of Elymais, see the recent article by van Bladel 2021.

[756] Hansman 1998; on Elymaean coins and mints see Hansman 1990 and Hill 1922, 245-288; for a catalogue of Elymaean coinage, see most recently van't Haaff 2007.

[757] Le Rider 1965, 426-428.

[758] Hansman 1990, 1; Hill 1922, 245-247.

interesting to note the use of upsilon for the initial short vowel O.[759] The Elymaean legends first appear under Orodes I's successor, Orodes II, in the second half of the 1st century: these read *wrwd mlk'*, sometimes augmented with the title/name *kmns*(?)*kyr*; as in Parthian coin legends the *mem* takes the shape of a cross, so that Hill's reading *kabnah*(*z*)*kir* for coin n. 62 can be discarded.[760] Curiously, the legends of the coins of Orodes II's successor, Phraates I, minted at the turn of the 2nd century CE, present, alongside issues in Elymaean script, a return to Greek – but these are written in retrograde: not only are the words spelled backwards but the letters themselves are reversed, as if the engravers had adapted the Greek alphabet to write it from left to right like Semitic scripts.[761] This marks the end of the use of Greek on Elymaean coinage. Now, the Elymaean legends are particularly interesting in that they display two types of Elymaean, Aramaic-derived scripts. François-Maurice Allotte de la Fuÿe who first studied them, observed that the distribution of the two variant alphabets seemed to correspond to the size – the denomination – of the coins, although it is not absolutely systematic. Thus, one variant appears more frequently on the (copper) 'drachms' and 'tetradrachms' and the other on the smaller copper denominations.[762] Allotte de la Fuÿe's initial hypothesis for this difference in script was that it was due to local minting conditions/traditions: the coins with the first type of script were struck in a different mint from those bearing the second script-style. This is somewhat supported by Hansman's more recent study of the mint marks on Elymaean coinage. He identifies two mints on the issues, the cosmopolitan city of Susa and possibly (the more provincial town of) Seleucia-on-the-Hedyphon: the early Greek-inscribed coins and most of the drachms were minted at Susa.[763] Furthermore, the variety of Elymaean script that we meet in the legends of the larger denominations corresponds to the alphabet used in the rock inscriptions at Tang-e Sarvak and Tang-e Butān (Shīmbār), suggesting the existence of a 'monumental' or inscriptional Elymaean script and a more (cursive/local?) one.

At Tang-e Sarvak, the inscriptions are accompanied by reliefs in thirteen panels which apparently show the investiture of a king by a divine being.[764] In many aspects, the sculptures are reminiscent of Parthian art, such as the presence of the figure of Herakles holding a club –

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[759] Hill 1922, 253.

[760] Hill 1922, 266.

[761] Of course, retrograde writing exists in Greece also, typically in alternating lines of *boustrophedon*, but is completely absent from Seleucid or Parthian coinage or monumental inscriptions.

[762] Allotte de la Fuÿe 1905, 41-42.

[763] Hansman 1990, 9.

[764] On the rock-reliefs of Tang-e Sravak, see Henning 1952a; Haerinck 2005; Kawami 2013.

in hellenising nudity – as well as the strict frontality of most of the figures. Other features seem to herald Sasanian iconography, such as the two bunches of hair on either side of the king's head as well as the ring of investiture; the fight on horseback showing the king riding a richly caparisoned horse, his quiver full of arrows at his side; the royal hunt scene, and the motif of the king slaying the lion, also known from Achaemenid art.[765] At Shīmbār, in the gorge known as Tang-e Butān or Gorge of the Idols, the reliefs are carved in a single panel separated into four blocks and represent variations of the same scene: to the left a nude figure with a club, again probably representing Herakles and to the right a figure in Iranian dress.[766] Between them in the first group is an altar; in the second group the figure in Iranian dress appears to be pounding something with a pestle in a long conical mortar, suggestive of the *haoma* ceremony. At the very least, these details seem to place the cult scene in an Iranian context.[767]

Henning was the first to attempt a decipherment of the inscriptions at Tang-e Sarvak and to relate their script to that of the Elymaean coin-legends **[Fig. 5.24]**.[768] He was able to identify the formula "this is the image of" and noted the proper spelling of Aramaic *br* 'son' (as opposed to *bry*).[769] This correct use of Aramaic is also characteristic of the larger Elymaean coinage, which shares with the inscriptions the first variant of Elymaean script. By contrast, the smaller denominations of Elymaean coinage, inscribed in the second variant of Elymaean script, present the faulty spelling *bry*. This led Henning to posit that the legends of the larger denominations, like the monumental inscriptions from Tang-e Sarvak, were written in 'pure Aramaic', while the smaller coins were written heterographically: "Now, as the tetradrachm shows pure Aramaic, while the cited coins with legends in faulty Aramaic belong to the 'small copper' class it is tempting to assume that the difference in language goes parallel with the difference in script".[770] The language of the smaller Elymaean coppers would be either an Iranian dialect or a surviving form of Elamite. After Henning's decipherment of the Elymaean script, Bivar and Shaked worked on the inscriptions at Tang-e Butān and showed that these provided the names and titles of the portrayed Elymaean king/dignitaries; they did not however conclude as to the nature of the language recorded.[771]

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[765] Henning 1952a, 155-163; Kawami 2013, 757-761.

[766] Bivar and Shaked 1964; Kawami 2013, 763-764.

[767] Bivar and Shaked 1964, 268-271.

[768] Henning 1952a, 166.

[769] Henning 1952a, 169-171.

[770] Henning 1952a, 166.

[771] Bivar and Shaked 1964, 271-279.

Gzella, who improved Henning's as well as Bivar and Shaked's readings in a recent article, deems the dialect recorded in the Elymaean inscriptions at Tang-e Sarvak and Tang-e Butān (Shīmbār) to be one of the more conservative examples of Aramaic in the Arsacid period.[772] It presents more traditional verbal forms and orthography: for instance, the spelling *z* for the interdental *ḏ* is maintained whereas even Palmyrene which, as we have seen, was one of the more conservative Arsacid Aramaic dialects, notes it *d*.[773] Gzella does highlight certain innovations that contrast with the 'extremely traditional garb of morphology', such as the use of *yod* for short e and *waw* for short o as well as aleph for word-medial long *ā*, a practice that is attested, as we have seen, in Achaemenid Aramaic in the transcription of Old Persian loanwords but not in a systematic way:[774] this advanced vowel letter system may point to an Iranian (Parthian) or Greek influence (see below). For Gzella, the spelling BRY in the legends of the lower denominations cannot alone point to a heterographic spelling, although he concedes that there is no evidence that an Aramaic dialect was spoken in Elymais. He concludes that a conservative, 'moribund' form of Official Aramaic at Elymais must have been used at least as a royal language for representative purposes in official commissions.[775]

In his recent and comprehensive study of the Mandaic script, Häberl describes the Elymaean script as a "historical curiosity" and an "evolutionary dead end".[776] He argues that features of the Elymaean alphabet point to a strong influence of the Parthian chancery script and even suggests that Elymaean may have derived from the latter. He highlights the fact that the appearance of coin-legends in Elymaean script corresponds to the appearance of the Parthian script on Arsacid coinage (under Vologeses I).[777] He also observes that the Elymaean legends first occur on the coins of Elymaean kings who have Parthian names (Orodes and Phraates): the possibility that these rulers were a minor branch of the Arsacid family had already been raised – and been rejected – by Allotte de la Fuÿe.[778] It is worth noting, however, that the king who first had Elymaean legends engraved on his issues, Orodes II, also used the title Kamnaskires Orodes: the name Kamnaskires, which was evidently used as a dynastic title here, at the very least confirms his (claim to a) direct connection with the earlier line of

[772] Gzella 2008, 112.

[773] Gzella 2008, 117.

[774] Gzella 2008, 112.

[775] Gzella 2008, 121, 127.

[776] Häberl 2006, 54-55; on the Mandaic script, see also Burtea 2008.

[777] Häberl 2006, 55.

[778] Häberl 2006, 55, n.10; Allotte de la Fuÿe 1905, 42-44.

Elymaean kings. Häberl argues that the majority of Elymaean graphemes are either identical to their Parthian counterparts – namely *w*, *z*, *ḥ*, *l* and *r* – or are developments of Parthian letters that follow the cursive trend of other scripts from the region/period.[779] This observation is slightly misleading in that the Parthian *waw*, *zain*, *lamed* and *resh* – to which we could also add *kaf* – present a clear resemblance to their Aramaic precursors so that it is hard to decide whether the Elymaean shapes derived from one or the other. Furthermore, some Elymaean graphemes appear to descend directly from Aramaic without passing through a Parthian 'stage'. Thus, the *bet* of Elymaean monumental inscriptions is clearly a conservative Aramaic *bet* to which a 'diacritic' – a stroke; this makes the grapheme look like a Z – was appended to the main vertical line to distinguish it from other Aramaic graphemes like *dalet* and *resh*, which tended to resemble it in cursive writing **[Fig. 5.24]**; as such, it evolves in the opposite direction to the Parthian grapheme, which curved in towards the left. Similarly, the Elymaean *pe* is close to its Aramaic prototype, only presenting a curved continuation of the lower stroke, quite distinct from the triangle-shaped Parthian *pe*. Perhaps Häberl's study also does not distinguish sufficiently between the two variant Elymaean scripts: thus, the script on the drachm (n. 65) of Kamnaskires Orodes is indeed essentially Parthian, even monumental Parthian – with the distinctive reversed C-shape of the *bet*, the open-topped square of the *alef* etc. – whereas the legends of his tetradrachms present characteristic Elymaean features.[780] Curiously, the Elymaean *dalet* of coins (and not inscriptions) underwent exactly the same evolution – a diacritic was appended at the bottom, just as in the Parthian *dalet* – as the Elymaean *bet* of inscriptions so that the Elymaean *bet* of monumental inscriptions and the Elymaean *dalet* of coins are identical.[781] The Elymaean *dalet* of inscriptions has a wavy lower stroke at times making it look like a reverse three, analogous to the Middle Persian shape. I would also disagree with Häberl that the Elyamain *ṭet* is a ligatured version of the Parthian two-stroke grapheme:[782] it looks rather like an angular Aramaic *ṭet* and may in fact help to explain the strange Parthian evolution towards a two-stroke composition. More generally, Häberl himself notes that Elymaean, like Mandaic, Characenean and Middle Persian, is much more cursive and rounded than Parthian and Aramaic, devoid of most of the sharp angles characteristic of these two scripts

[779] Häberl 2006, 58.

[780] Compare Hill 1922, 267 and 261 with 260 and 266.

[781] Compare Bivar and Shaked 1964, 270 and Hill 1922, 267. There is some crossover in these shapes however.

[782] Häberl 2006, 56.

and with a marked tendency towards ligatures:[783] as we have seen, even on ostraca and parchments Parthian letters remain unconnected. Nevertheless, some Elymaean graphemes do seem to be cursive evolutions of Parthian precursors: the very strange Elymaean *alef* is probably, as Häberl argues, the Parthian square *alef* with a ligature to the left. We might also add to Häberl's study that the *mem*, which takes the form of a simple cross, is exactly like the Parthian *mem* of the Arsacid coin legends, suggesting a direct influence of Parthian numismatics. The inscriptional Elymaean *nun* is a Parthian *nun* but with an additional stroke at the top, probably to differentiate it from the *lamed* which took on a very similar shape, curving in towards the left at the bottom. It is also interesting to note that the Elymaean *taw* has taken the peculiar and distinctive shape of the monumental Parthian *he*, although the simpler shape of the *taw* on Elymaean coins as well as at Tang-e Sarvak does give an idea of how this Elymaean grapheme evolved from its Aramaic ancestor.

The Characenean script.

For Häberl, the Parthian chancery script similarly either heavily influenced or was the direct parent of the Characenean script.[784] This local Aramaic-derived alphabet is documented in a very limited corpus of coins from the region of Characene or Mesene in southernmost Mesopotamia, west of Elymais. Like Elymais, Characene was a semi-independent vassal kingdom caught in the wars between the Seleucids and Parthians, which allowed it to enjoy spells of independence.[785] Similarly to Elymaean coinage, early Characenean issues – dating from the second half of the 2nd century BCE – were struck in Greek, on the model of Seleucid coinage and dated to the Seleucid era; however, there are no examples of retrograde Greek script as at Elymais, nor are there any spelling mistakes.[786] The first Characenean coin legends engraved in a local variant of Official Aramaic make their appearance from the second half of the 2nd century CE onwards, about a century after the appearance of legends in Aramaic-derived scripts on Parthian and Elymaean issues. Some of the Characenean graphemes are, however, remarkably conservative. Thus, the *he* is extremely close to its Aramaic prototype – in fact, Characenean is the most conservative of this whole series of alphabets for this grapheme **[Fig.**

[783] Häberl 2006, 58.

[784] Häberl 2006, 53-55.

[785] Frye 1984, 275-278; Hansman 1998; for a recent, comprehensive history of Characene, see Schuol 2000.

[786] Hill 1922, 289-309.

5.25].[787] Similarly, the *mem*, although somewhat simplified is recognisably Aramaic or at the very least monumental/archaising Parthian. Three Characenean graphemes are indistinguishable from each other, the *bet*, *kaf* and *resh*: they have all become reversed C-shapes, analogous to monumental Parthian *bet* albeit a little more angular. Interestingly, these same three letters in late cursive Official Aramaic were also difficult to distinguish – often taking the simplified shape of a 7 – suggesting that the Characenean graphemes evolved uniformly from the cursive Aramaic forms; as mentioned, only the *bet* followed that evolution in Parthian, the *kaf* and *resh* taking a different route. Similarly, the Characenean *shin*, which has become a sort of horizontal eight, is probably the cursive Aramaic/early Parthian *shin* – the later Parthian *shin* is much more upright – with two ligatures at the top. The Charcenean *ṣade* and *alef*, which both become quite rounded – the *alef* is a perfect circle – are on the other hand more clearly ligatured versions of cursive Parthian counterparts.

The Mandaic script.

Before Häberl's study, it was thought that the much later Mandaic script derived from other scripts recording Aramaic dialects such as Elymaean, Palmyrene or Nabatean, with which it shares several features.[788] However, Häberl points to the fact that Mandaic uses the Aramaic *matres lectionis* as vowels in a fully developed vowel letter system which is not the case for other scripts representing Aramaic dialects – where, as we have seen, only cases of *plene* writing can be observed – strongly suggesting the influence of Parthian.[789] By contrast to Mandaic, Elymaean and Characenean present a much more 'etymologising' orthography. The early Mandaic material – which mainly consists in incantation bowls belonging to the 7th century, although some earlier inscribed amulets are also known – is quite a lot later than Parthian and other Arsacid Aramaic-derived scripts, making it difficult to identify when the script arose.[790] Nevertheless, it is possible to recognise Parthian graphemes as the precursors of most Mandaic letters, although because of their tendency to be ligatured this is not always immediately evident **[Fig. 5.25]**. The *alef* for instance is – as in Characenean – a circle, in which we may recognise the Parthian two-stemmed *alef* with a ligature at the top; the same can be said for the *samekh* and perhaps the *he*, this time with ligatures towards the bottom.

[787] See Häberl 2006, Fig. 1 and compare Naveh 1970, 26.

[788] Häberl 2006, 54.

[789] Häberl 2006, 60-61.

[790] Häberl 2006, 53-54.

Similarly, the *shin*, which, as in Characenean, becomes a horizontal 8-shape, appears to be a heavily ligatured Aramaic/early Parthian *shin*. The *mem* is quite conservative resembling both the Aramaic and Parthian – and, again, Characenean – shapes, while the *taw* is closer to the Parthian – and Elymaean – box-shape. On the other hand, the *bet* of inscriptional Mandaic remains closer to the Aramaic original and the same could be said for the *dalet* which retains the concave head of the Aramaic prototype. The *pe* has followed a trajectory much closer to that of Middle Persian, becoming rounded (like a whorl), rather than triangular as in Parthian.

The Aramaic-derived scripts from the Arsacid period: preliminary conclusions.

The case of Mandaic apart, as this comparative overview shows, it is often hard to decide whether the local alphabets that emerged in the Arsacid period derived from Aramaic or from Parthian, since these two scripts themselves have a direct genealogical relationship: there is much overlap between late cursive Aramaic and early cursive Parthian, so that the exact prototype that inspired a given grapheme in a local script is not easy to identify. Parthian certainly exerted a strong influence. The very fact that the Elymaean script appeared on coins in the same decades as the Parthian script began to be used on Arsacid issues, as well as the very Parthian-looking graphemes of some of the earlier Elymaean larger denominations, is one illustration of this influence. Similarly, the direct borrowing of certain graphemes particular to Parthian numismatics, such as the cross-shaped *mem* in Elymaean monumental inscriptions and coins, suggests that the Parthian coins that circulated were a direct source of inspiration. Other Parthian-inspired scribal features include devices used to differentiate graphemes that had become too similar, like the 'tick' appended to the Elymaean *bet*, as well as the more systematic recourse to Aramaic *matres lectionis* to note vowels. On the other hand, the more conservative shapes maintained in local scripts, and the existence of cursive shapes that appear to have evolved from Aramaic prototypes without following the same trajectory as Parthian counterparts, suggest that these local chanceries were direct heirs of the Achaemenid Aramaic scribal tradition. In the same way that linguists speak of a dialect continuum, we may perhaps posit a sort of 'epigraphic continuum' in the former Achaemenid satrapies with more or less related scripts stemming from a common origin and presenting borrowings and analogous conventions alongside peculiar local innovations.

What this mosaic of scripts does illustrate is the rather sudden disappearance of the centralised, normalising influence of the monolithic Aramaic scribal tradition. The appearance of Greek as an important language of administration as well as the new language of prestige

for representational purposes certainly contributed to the fragmentation of this many centuries-old Aramaic scribal tradition. Greek itself, however, was uniformly abandoned as a language of administration in the course of the 1st century CE, with local mints showing a definite loss of command of Greek in the last stages of this process as well as some peculiar uses of the alphabet; Greek nevertheless did remain a language of prestige in the royal sphere at the level of empire until the end of the Parthian period, and even beyond.

Coins from Persis.

It is against this background that the emergence of the Middle Persian script in the former Achaemenid heartland of Persis ought to be understood. A series of silver coins found in excavations at key dynastic sites in Fārs – and on the markets of Shiraz – have been ascribed, based on the location of the finds, on iconography and on the legends, to a series of kings of Persis who reigned in that province as semi-independent rulers under the Seleucids and Parthians.[791] Because not a single example of this coin type was found in the many thousands of coins excavated at Susa, the coinage of Persis is believed to have been issued locally and primarily intended for local circulation.[792] As with other hoards, the first difficulty has been to assign a date for the beginning of the series and to understand the articulation between the issues. Because the Persepolis hoard contains only one issue of Seleukos I with many coins from Persis, it was suggested that the 'kings of Persis' began minting their coins immediately following the reign of Seleukos I, in the first quarter of the 3rd century BCE.[793] Methodologically, dating a hoard based on the presence or absence of single issues is exceedingly problematic; beyond the fact that the coin hoards are chance finds, Wiesehöfer has observed that certain coins, typically of important denominations, can remain in circulation/be kept for long periods of time.[794] Followed by other scholars, Wiesehöfer has therefore ventured a later date for the beginning of the Persis coinage, placing it at the turn of the second century BCE. The argument for this later dating is based on the principle that the kings of Persis must have enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy to have been entitled to strike their own coinage, and only the crumbling Seleucid rule at the end of the reign of Antiochos III could have

[791] Hill 1922, 195-244; Alram 1986, 162-186; Wiesehöfer 1994, 91-96, 103-115; de Jong 2003; Callieri 2007, 118-132.

[792] Frye 1984, 159; Wiesehöfer 1994, 118-119.

[793] Hill 1922, clx-clxi, clxx; Frye 1984, 158-162; Wiesehöfer 1994, 115-116.

[794] Wiesehöfer 1994, 120; on this problem see also Frye 1984, 159.

provided this window of opportunity.[795] The independence of the province of Persis, which had enjoyed a special status under the Achaemenids – it was exempt from tax – as well as a considerable autonomy, is more difficult to assess for the Seleucid and Parthian periods. Furthermore, the degree to which local kings had to be independent from their overlords to mint their own coinage is a thorny issue, already touched upon above with the case of Elymais.

The Persepolis hoard was found in the ruins of the so-called 'frataraka' temple.[796] Just about 300 metres northwest of the Persepolis Terrace is a building that Herzfeld excavated in the early twentieth century and that was named the 'frataraka' temple precisely because the Aramaic legends on the first series of coins from the hoard identify the rulers who issued them as *frataraka*. The site brought to light a number of re-used architectural elements from the Persepolis terrace, namely column-bases but also inscribed windowpanes as well as ritual utensils made of the green stone typical of the mortar and pestles described above. Among the finds were also five votive inscriptions in Greek bearing the names ΔΙΟΣ ΜΕΓΙΣΤΟΥ, ΑΘΗΝΑΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΙΑΣ, ΑΠΟΛΛΟ, ΑΡΤΕΜΙΔΟΣ and ΗΛΙΟΥ.[797] Based on paleography the inscriptions have been ascribed to the reign of Alexander or just after, when the province was governed by Peukestas, a general of Alexander appointed as satrap of Persis.[798] Either way, the inscriptions are a rare testimony to the use of Greek in the heartland of the Achaemenid empire in the period following its fall.[799] The excavations at the 'frataraka' temple also revealed a pair of reliefs depicting a male and female figure respectively and which probably formed the jambs of a stone window. The figures raise their hands, and in the case of the male figure also seem to hold a bundle of barsom: this has led them to be variously identified as a *frataraka* king and queen, Mazdean priests or again gods (Anahita for the female figure).[800] Based on

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[795] Wiesehöfer 1994, 119-122.

[796] On the 'frataraka temple', see Wieshöfer 1994, 91-93; Callieri 2007, 51-68 and 144-145.

[797] Herzfeld 1935, 44; Frye 1984, 158-159, n. 58; Wiesehöfer 1994, 70-73; Callieri 2007; Rougemont 2012, 125-129. Herzfeld assumed that these inscriptions equated Iranian deities with Greek gods, but there is no evidence for this, see Callieri 2007, 67-68.

[798] On Persis under Peukestas, see Wiesehöfer 1994, 50-56.

[799] A bilingual Greek-Aramaic inscription was found at Pasargadae, engraved on a reused Achaemenid architectural element. It bears the name Pasargadae and is thought to have been set as a milestone. See Stronach, 1978, 160-161; Wiesehöfer 1994, 89-90; (P. Bernard in) Callieri 1995, 75-77: "on ne peut exclure une date dans le dernier quart du IVe siècle et plus précisément sous le gouvernorat de Peucestas (324-printemps 316 av. J.-C.)"; Callieri 2007, 34-35; Rougemont 2012, 129-132.

[800] Herzfeld 1926, 249; Herzfeld 1935, 46-47; Ghirshman 1976, 202-203; Boyce 1979, 89; Wiesehöfer 1994, 70-72, 74-76; see also Callieri 2007, 144-145.

style, the reliefs were dated by Herzfeld to the late 3rd century BCE and by Ghirshman to the late 2nd century BCE: be that as it may, they may help push the date of the coin hoard back somewhat, towards the end rather than the beginning of the 3rd century. The site of the 'frataraka temple', as well as other apparently not unimportant building works carried out next to the Palace of Darius and which use rubble from the destroyed Achaemenid buildings as foundations, certainly indicate a relatively important reinvestment of the terrace by local lords of Persis in the post-Achaemenid period.[801] This is further illustrated as we shall see by pre-Sasanian graffiti engraved on the ruins of Darius' *tačara*.

The Persis coinage, unlike other Arsacid coinage such as Elymaean, Characenean and of course Parthian, does not present a 'Greek' stage. The analysis of the coin legends, which have been described as Aramaic 'degenerating'[802] into Middle Persian, is the subject of the next chapter.

[801] Wiesehöfer 1994, 68-70.

[802] Hill 1922, clxi.

Chapter 6

Pre-Sasanian Middle Persian inscriptions: investigating the local scribal tradition(s) of Persis

I. Pre-Sasanian Persis: elements of its history and presentation of its corpus of coins.

Investigating the 'Dark Ages' of Persis.

So scant are the sources concerning the political and administrative history of Persis in the Hellenistic period[803] that this era is sometimes referred to as the 'Dark Ages' of the province.[804] Yet, during these five hundred and some years,[805] when Persis was under Seleucid and then Parthian rule, the writing system evolved from Imperial Aramaic – widely used, as we saw, within the Achaemenid administration – to a 'new', fixed and standardised alphabet, as displayed in the very first inscriptions of the Sasanian kings. This alphabet recorded the mother-tongue of the Sasanian kings, known as Middle Persian, and made a significant recourse to aramaeograms (see the diachronic study in Chapter 5 for the different theories as well as some suggestions concerning the gradual formation of these word-masks). Archaeological campaigns carried out at the foot of the Persepolis terrace in the 1930s – which unfortunately, as Pierfranceso Callieri has remarked,[806] were not as methodologically rigorous as one could have hoped, making the analysis of the different post-Achaemenid strata particularly difficult – as well as rare anecdotes concerning Persis in classical historiography are of some help in reconstituting the political history of the province under the Seleucids and Parthians. Mainly, however, our understanding of Hellenistic Persis, and certainly our appreciation of the use of Aramaic in Persis and the evolution of this alphabet until the beginning of the Sasanian period, rests on a corpus of locally struck coins, to which we may add two inscribed silver vessels.

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[803] The Hellenistic period is here understood, as it is more generally when discussing the history of ancient Iran, to comprise the time between the fall of the Achaemenids and the rise of the Sasanian dynasty in the 3rd c. CE.

[804] After the title of Wiesehöfer's 1994 work *Die 'dunkle Jahrhunderte' der Persis*.

[805] Depending on whether we consider that Alexander, with his 'persophile' satrap Peukestas, actually only really continued Achaemenid policy with regards to this province; as we saw in the previous chapter, the archives from Bactria certainly did seem to record 'business as usual' under Alexander.

[806] Callieri 2007, 85.

The coins of Persis were found in different hoards from the province of Fārs (in particular Persepolis, Staxr and Naqš-e Rostam) and on markets in Iran and abroad.[807] They were most probably struck at or in the vicinity of Persepolis: Staxr, a city located just a little further into the gorge to the East of Naqš-e Rostam, is known to have been an important mint in the Sasanian period.[808] However, some scholars like Callieri, have suggested the coins could have been minted in Susa[809], which as we saw in the previous chapter was an active mint in the Hellenistic period and used by sub-Seleucid kings of Elymais. The Persid coins were issued by a series of local (likely vassal) kings and probably only intended for local circulation: no examples of the coins have been found outside Fārs, not even in near-by Pasargadae or Susa.[810] The coinage mainly consists of overstrikes – 'reused' denominations from the time of Alexander – and Michael Alram, whose exhaustive publication of the series is the main reference for this material, has described it as a "Prestigeprägung", or 'prestige' coinage:[811] the minting of the coins did not reflect an 'economic necessity' and these were used in parallel to the imperial currency issued by the Parthian overlords of Persis.[812]

One of the main problems with the coinage as a source for history concerns its dating; another difficulty, as with other 'provincial' issues minted by sub-Seleucid and sub-Parthian kings, is deciding to what extent the coinage is an indication of the political autonomy of its local rulers. In so far as the dating of the coins has some incidence on the study of the evolution of the script recorded in the legends, it seems relevant to briefly sum up the latest conclusions – even though there is no absolute consensus – concerning the chronology of the issues. Similarly, it will be helpful to touch upon the main debates concerning the interpretation both of legends and the iconography on the Persis issues and draw out what these may tell us about the way in which the kings of Persis presented and viewed themselves, in what capacity they ruled the province and how this may have affected their choice of writing system.

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[807] See Wiesehöfer 1994, 91-96 for an overview of the finds and the contents of the different hoards.

[808] Bivar and Boyce 1998.

[809] Or rather Seleucia of the Eulaios as it then became known, Callieri 2007, 128.

[810] Wiesehöfer 1994, 18-19, see also Frye 1984, 159.

[811] Alram 1986, 162.

[812] See similarly Engels 2013, 37.

Dating the coins series of Persis.

The coins of Persis are classified into four separate series based on the legends as well as iconographic and typological details. Where scholars disagree is on the beginning date of the minting and whether there was a (significant) hiatus or not between the different series. Traditionally, the local coinage of Persis was regarded as beginning immediately after Seleukos I, because the hoard from the Persepolis Terrace unearthed by Herzfeld in the early twentieth century contained a tetradrachm of Seleukos I in relatively good condition along with the earliest issues of Persis coinage.[813] According to this theory, the Persis kings started minting their coins in 280 BCE (Newell)[814] – a date which corresponds to just after the death of Seleukos I, when unrest in the kingdom would have provided the local lords of Persis an opportunity to vie for their independence – or even earlier, in 300 BCE (Herzfeld). Because of the close typological links between the later Persis issues and Parthian coinage, this early dating also implied an important hiatus between the first and second series, in which no coins would have been minted by the local kings.

However, Wiesehöfer has rightly argued that the fact that a coin of Seleukos I was found in the same hoard as Persis issues does not prove that the coins were contemporaneous with each other, nor that they followed each other in a seamless succession – the Seleukos coin could well have been kept over time and it is more generally delicate to draw chronological conclusions based on the presence or absence of coins in a hoard.[815] Furthermore, Alram demonstrated that even though there are some iconographic and stylistic differences between the first and second series, there is no typological break, suggesting a relatively continuous series of issues.[816] Instead, Alram proposed to consider the typological proximity between the later Persis series and Parthian coinage as the most important dating criterion. In other words, based on the assumption that the Persis coins constituted a continuous series, he preferred to 'work back' in time from the point when Persis coins begin to show a marked affinity with Parthian coinage, rather than 'forwards' from Seleukos I on.[817] Evidence of Parthian influence occurs as early as the coins of Dārēw I and those of his unnamed predecessor (respectively, the sixth and fifth kings of Persis according to numismatists), when the tetradrachm, which was the

[813] Wiesehöfer 1994, 91-93 and 115-116.

[814] This 'high dating' has been recently supported by Engels 2013, esp. 42-49 and 74-79.

[815] Wiesehöfer 1994, 120.

[816] Alram 1986, 163.

[817] Alram 1986, 162-163.

main denomination in Persis based on the Seleucid model, is dropped in favour of the Attic drachm after Parthian numismatic practice.[818] Alram thus placed the reign of the first king of Persis (Baydād)[819] and the beginning of local minting activity in the early second century BCE; Wiesehöfer favoured a slightly earlier date, around 220 BCE, corresponding to the revolt of the Seleucid general and satrap Molon, after which there was a reorganization in the governing of the provinces.[820] It is their dating that will be retained in this study.

Elements for the political history of Hellenistic Persis.

Closely related to the problem of dating the Persis coins is that of determining the degree of autonomy suggested by local kings' minting activity and how this may relate to events from the broader and much better documented history of the Seleucid empire. Wiesehöfer, Alram and Engels have argued that the first Persis coins were minted by the local dynasts with the approval of their Seleucid overlords: it is not necessarily suggestive of the province's full independence in the second century BCE.[821] For Alram, the fact that the early coinage mainly consists in overstrikes suggests limited minting autonomy/initiative.[822] Some comments in classical historiography concerning the administrative organisation of Persis can also help flesh out the 'dark ages' of the province. Wiesehöfer has observed that in the reign of Antiochus III (222-187 BCE), Persis was under full Seleucid control, governed by a satrap called Alexandros, with bowmen from both Persis and Elymais serving in the Seleucid army.[823] Furthermore, there is a consensus among scholars to identify the Persid king named Wahbarz in his coin legends with

[818] Alram 1986, 163, 171-172.

[819] Note that the exact order of succession of the *fratarka* kings is debated and that David Engels has recently argued against beginning this dynasty with Baydād, see Engels 2013, esp. 37-42.

[820] Wiesehöfer 1994, 120-121 and 128-129.

[821] Engels argues for a "pacifist" and "loyalist" interpretation of the iconography on *frataraka* coinage, Engels 2013, esp. 49-74. Frye and Callieri, who agree in the main with Alram and Wiesehöfer's chronology are on the other hand more convinced about the independence of the early kings of Persis, Frye 1984, 160 and Callieri 2007, 117. On the difficulty in applying the modern concepts of 'independence' and 'autonomy' to the ancient World in general and the ancient Iranian world in particular, see de Jong 2013, esp. 148-152: in classical Greece, the notion of *autonomia* was an instrument of empire, rather than a sign of independence, and described the (limited) rights of cities to pass their own laws, while in the Hellenistic period it was a dignity actually dispensed by the king.

[822] Alram 1986, 162.

[823] Wiesehöfer 1994, 120-121.

a personage called Oborzos, mentioned by the second century CE Greek historian Polyaenus.[824] The latter records in his *Stratagems* (VII, 40) that Oborzos was at the head of a contingent of 3000 'colonists' or *katoikoi* which he then conspired to massacre – by getting them drunk – with the help of fellow Persians. As Wiesehöfer has pointed out, any local king who commanded a contingent of Macedonian forces must have done so under the aegis of the Seleucids. On the other hand, the organised murder of the colonists may indeed have been an attempt to gain complete autonomy.[825] The Greek historian Strabo (XV, 3, 24) provides a further hint of the vassal status of the Persis dynasts when he reports that in the time of Augustus (63 BCE – 14 CE), the kings of the Persians were subordinate to the Parthians, as they had been earlier to the Macedonians:[826] in other words, the Parthians reinstated the Seleucid status quo when they took Persis from the Seleucids and appointed local vassal kings. Finally, the earliest kings of Persis are depicted on their coins wearing a headgear closely resembling that of Achaemenid satraps: this iconographic detail may be an indication of their perceived status.[827]

In this way, all indicators point to the early Persid rulers being loyal sub-Seleucid kings; kings of Persis and Elymais even supported the Seleucid king in the face of the Parthian onslaught on their province.[828] Hints at a full independence of Persis in the hiatus between Seleucid and Parthian rule of this province is provided again by a combination of allusions in classical historiography and iconographic details from the coins. Pliny the Elder (VI, 152) records that following the battle of Numenios (named after the Seleucid governor of Characene of that name) under Antiochus IV in 186 BCE a successful uprising undertaken by the Persians against Seleucid rule won them the freedom of Persis.[829] Alram, followed by Wiesehöfer, has proposed to see a reflection of this victory in the coins of Wādfradād I, the fourth Persis king: using Hellenistic imagery, this ruler depicts himself on his reverses being crowned with a ribboned wreath by a winged figure of Nike.[830] The political autonomy of Persis may have

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[824] Wiesehöfer 1994, 126: "Der in dieser Quelle genannte Oborzos, ohne Zweifel identisch mit dem dritten Frataraka Vahbars", Callieri 2007, 117.

[825] Wiesehöfer 1994, 127.

[826] Wiesehöfer 1994, 102, 126-127.

[827] Wiesehöfer 1994, 128.

[828] Wiesehöfer 2001, 109-110.

[829] Wiesehöfer 1994, 128-129. For a full discussion of the Classical sources concerning Persis, see Engels 2013, 33-36 and esp. 34 for the passage in Pliny on the battle of Numenios. On the battle of Numenios, see further Schuol 2000; Shayegan 2011, 155-161.

[830] Alram 1986, 163 and Wiesehöfer 1994, 128.

lasted for his reign, and possibly that also of his successor Wādfradād II. From then on however, the influence of Parthian numismatics – such as the switch to the Attic drachm as the main denomination – becomes too tangible to support full independence (from the Parthians). This switch is dated by Alram to the defeat of the Seleucid king Demetrios Nikator – supported by Elymaean and Persian contingents – in 140 BCE by Mithridates I.[831] The ruler portraits on Persis coins take on an increasingly Parthian style, culminating in the coins of Wādfradād III, which do away with the traditional depiction of the king's head and represent him instead in full bust, wearing a torc and accompanied by a ceremonial guard on the Parthian model. The close affinity of later Persis issues with Parthian coin typology and style has led scholars to conclude that there was no attempt on the part of the local Persis kings to distance themselves from their overlords – or at least no blatant rejection – pointing once again to the peaceful vassal relationship described by Strabo.

The dates put forward in the above summary are the main historical markers that allow us to organise the coins of Persis, their iconography and their legends, in a relative chronology. Before turning to the alphabet used on the Persis coin series,[832] a few words must be said about the different legends they bear. Their interpretation is clouded by several problems relating to the palaeography and language of the inscriptions, as well as to the meaning of the titles they record. As such, the legends have joined the scholarly debates concerning the political and administrative role held by the kings of Persis in the framework of their vassal rule.

Frataraka of the Gods.

The title that appears on the earliest two series of Persis coins is systematically recorded under the fixed formula [King's name] *prtrk' zy 'lhy'*: [King's name] *prtrk'* of the gods. Because of the palaeographic ambiguity of several Aramaic letters, the title *prtrk'* has been variously deciphered *prtkr'*, *prtdr'*, and *prtrk'* and thereby respectively translated as 'fire-maker', 'first among the people/army', 'fire-holder/keeper', 'governor'.[833] The readings which interpret the first element as deriving from Armenian *hrat* 'fire' and which translate the term *prtkr'*/*prtdr'* as 'fire-maker/holder/keeper' imply that the function was heavily laden with religious connotations. This is somewhat supported by the Aramaic term which makes up the second part of the syntagm, *'lhy'*, 'god', in the plural. According to this interpretation, the local kings of

[831] Alram 1986, 163.

[832] On the subject of which see Rezakhani 2016; his study will be discussed at length below.

[833] See Naster 1968 for a sum up of the different readings and interpretations by scholars.

Persis would have filled a mainly religious role, with some scholars even proposing to see in the vassal kings representatives of a 'religious-nationalistic party' or a 'priestly-dynasty'.[834] This hypothesis is now generally rejected for both linguistic and historical reasons: the first element is very unlikely to derive from the unusual Armenian word *hrat* and there is no evidence for a line of 'priestly-princes' in Persis; the function of the sub-Seleucid and sub-Parthian rulers of this province was evidently a mainly political, administrative and military one.

On his earliest coins the first king of Persis depicted himself wearing the royal tiara; he later switches to the 'satrapal tiara', which as mentioned above was the headdress chosen by all his successors: by contrast, the priestly headdress never appears in the portraits of Persis rulers. Wiesehöfer has noted that the coins also portray the Persis kings with specific attributes, such as the scepter, as well as certain weapons like the bow, sword and spear that are more at home in the royal, political and military sphere than the religious one.[835] Another important consideration in this respect is the fact that in the later numismatic legends of Persis, the entire phrase *prtrk'zy 'lhy'* is replaced by the term *mlk'*, the Aramaic for 'king' – [King's name] *mlk'* instead of [King's name] *prtrk'zy 'lhy'* – a title which is an unambiguously political designation. For these reasons, and probably above all because it echoes the well-known and ubiquitous title *frataraka* of Achaemenid administrative documents, the last reading, *prtrk'*, is the one generally retained by scholars. Wiesehöfer has observed that only about 100 years separate the use of this term in Achaemenid archives and its appearance on the coins of Persis.[836] As we saw in the preceding chapter, under the Achaemenids it designated an office just below that of the satrap and involved important administrative, judicial and military responsibilities and authority; this would fit nicely with the picture of a vassal rule of the Persis kings under the Seleucids and later under the Parthians suggested by the historical and numismatic data.

Nevertheless, some doubts have been raised concerning the somewhat surprising juxtaposition of the apparently political-administrative title *prtrk*' with the outright religious *'lhy'* and scholars are still divided on what exactly the function of a "*frataraka* of the gods" would have implied. The second element of the phrase has therefore equally received much attention. Several scholars have envisaged a more secular role of the *prtrk'zy 'lhy'* than the title might suggest at first sight by observing that the *'lhy'* or 'gods' may be a reference to the

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[834] Herzfeld 1932, 69, n. 1; Wikander 1946, 15-16 as well as Chaumont 1958 and Naster 1968.

[835] Wiesehöfer 1994, 134. Although as we will see below, Albert de Jong has pointed out that all arms were not necessarily at odds in a religious context and that priests bore their own weapons, de Jong 2003.

[836] Wiesehöfer 1994, 2009.

Seleucid cult of deified kings: the syntagm would be following Hellenistic pattern in describing the kings of Persis as governors of the (deified) Seleucid overlords.[837] Antonio Panaino has highlighted several problems with this interpretation: the administrative and political function of 'governor' is not attested in connection with a divine royal cult; the use of the plural to refer to the overlord in a title describing a vassal relationship ('*frataraka* of the gods/lords/kings'), although there have been attempts to explain it as a *pluralis maiestatis*, is also somewhat surprising.[838] Finally, the complete subordination to Hellenistic royal ideology that this reading would imply does not tally with the coins' evident display of local semi-independence.

Other scholars, such as Callieri, prefer to understand *'lhy'* as referring to the 'Achaemenid ancestors' of the kings of Persis:[839] as we shall see, the Achaemenid past of Persis is clearly celebrated on the reverses of the Persis coins, with the display of old Persian imagery and possibly monuments also. He also draws attention to the strange patronym *dārāyānagān* inscribed with the more usual *dārāyān* on a silver cup dated to the pre-Sasanian period by Prods Oktor Skjærvø (see below on this object). Because both terms occur in the same inscription, Skjærvø concludes they must mean something different: the name *dārāyānagān* appears to be a patronym based on *dārāyān*, which is itself a patronym, 'son of Darius'; *dārāyānagān* could refer in a wider sense to the "descendants of earlier *dārāyān*'s".[840] For Callieri, the existence of the patronym *dārāyānagān* on the silver cup is an important element in understanding how the kings of Persis viewed their relationship to their Achaemenid predecessors and expressed "la pleine conscience de leur héritage politique".[841] However, this possibility still does not explain the description of the Achaemenid kings as 'gods'. Panaino observes that in the Old Persian inscriptions the Achaemenids monarchs were never called *baga-* 'god', and although they reigned under the aegis of Ahura Mazda, were never endowed with divine prerogatives.[842] Most tellingly perhaps, in the Babylonian versions of the trilingual cuneiform inscriptions, the names of the Achaemenid kings are not marked with the divine determinative, which helps distinguish between divine and human/other homonyms. Finally, there is no indication whatsoever that the Achaemenid kings were deified after their death.

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[837] Wiesehöfer 1994.

[838] Panaino 2003, 266.

[839] Callieri 2007, 129.

[840] Skjaevø 1997, 94.

[841] Callieri 2007, 131.

[842] Panaino 2003, 267-269.

Alternately, another 'non-religious' interpretation of *'lhy'* may be possible based on the later Sasanian inscriptions.[843] In the Middle Persian versions of these, the Sasanian royal titulature gives the name of the king according to the set formula *mazdēsn bay* [king's name] *šāhān šāh ērān ud anērān kē čihr az yazdān*, generally translated as "the mazdean Lord [king's name] king of kings of Ērān and non-Ērān whose seed is from the gods". Although the Middle Persian term *bay* is rendered in the Parthian versions of the same inscriptions (and sometimes in the Middle Persian ones too) by the aramaeogram ALHYA/ORHYA – here we have the Aramaic *'lhy'* 'god' – and by *ΘΕΟΣ* in the Greek translations, scholars have demonstrated that when it is in anteposition to the king's name, *bay* is better understood as 'lord' than by 'god'.[844] This epithet was certainly the exclusive prerogative of the Sasanian monarchs but did not describe them as divine beings as such.[845] In this respect, Panaino has highlighted the careful distinction in Middle Persian between the terms *bay*/*bayān* and *yazad*/*yazadān* even though this subtlety is not translated – perhaps intentionally, perhaps not – in the Greek: the Sasanian king is never described as a *yazad* and by the third century the term *bay* had evidently come to be used in a general sense as 'Lord'.

Returning to the coins of Persis, it remains possible that *'lhy'* is being used heterographically in the sense of *bay*. Nevertheless, in the phrase *prtrk'zy 'lhy',* the term stands alone and occurs in the plural which is inconsistent as we have seen with the Sasanian use of the term as an epithet to signify 'Lord'. Panaino therefore prefers to overlook the unusual juxtaposition between the administrative Achaemenid function of *frataraka* and the religious *'lhy'*, and understand *prtrk'zy 'lhy'* literally as meaning 'governor of the gods': the gods in this case would neither be the deified overlords or the deified Achaemenid ancestors, but more simply the ancient gods of Persis. The vassal kings derived their authority "from the divine powers of their land".[846] This reading is supported as we shall see below by Albert de Jong who highlights the religious connotations of certain iconographic elements of the Persis coin reverses.[847]

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[843] Panaino 2003, 274-280.

[844] Boyce 1981, 64-65.

[845] Panaino 2003, 274-278.

[846] Panaino 2003, 283.

[847] De Jong 2003.

The title "krny" of the coins of the Persid kings Wahbarz.

Recently, the historian David Engels highlighted the occurrence of the title *krny* on the issues of the Persid *frataraka* king Wahbarz; he appears to have been the first to link it to the dual Greek-Iranian titulature of the eponymous founder of the Parthian empire Arsakes I, who is described as autokator-*krny* on his coins.[848] As mentioned in the previous chapter, the title *krny* probably derives from an Achaemenid military function (Old Persian *kāra-* 'army') and would designate a high-ranking military commander. The occurrence of the designation *krny* in both Persis and early Parthian numismatics suggests the widespread use of this Achaemenid military function as a title by sub-Seleucid, local kings across the empire; perhaps it should be taken as a hint of a similar political situation at both ends of the empire. Indeed, although the date and succession of the *frataraka* kings of Persis remains much debated, it is probably safe to assume that the *frataraka* Wahbarz and Arsakes I were roughly contemporaries of one another.

Achaemenid symbols, insignia and monuments on the coins of Persis.

At this point, a few comments concerning the iconography of Persis numismatics may be helpful. The reverses of the early coins issued by the first *frataraka* king Baydād depict the ruler facing left, sitting on a high throne and holding a scepter in his right hand; his left hand holds a flower (?) and rests on his lap **[Fig. 6.1]**.[849] Directly in front of him at (his) eye level is a (roughly) square banner or standard mounted on a pole or spear; tassels, which terminate in small round ornaments or 'pompons', hang from the bottom side of the banner; the banner itself sports an X-shaped cross or saltire, with a small dot or circle in each of the four sections created by the cross. In the later coins of the same ruler, the typology of the reverses changes. The king is now presented facing right and standing with his hands raised in a gesture of worship; directly facing him, right in the middle of the field, is a tall square structure/building with what appears to be a stepped base and three crenelations on its parapet; the centre of the structure is divided length-wise into two rectangles that could be the two panels of a door, each panel is decorated with three rectangular recesses; to the right of the structure we find the banner that was depicted on the earlier coins **[Fig. 6.2]**. This second reverse type is the one that will be maintained by the next seven successors of Baydād, albeit with some 'augmentations'. From the reign of Wādfradād I on for instance, the representation of a winged disk is added hovering directly above the square structure; from the disk emerges the bust of a bearded man – facing left,

[848] See Engels 2013, 55-60 and Engels 2018, 178-183

[849] Alram 1986, Table 17.

towards, but above, the ruler – wearing a crenelated crown, with his right hand raised and clasped together in a gesture of prayer (or blessing?). A double curved bow now also rests on the right foot of the standing king; he holds it with his left hand. As we have seen, a later coin of this king further includes the figure of Tyche placing a wreath on the ruler's head, although this addition does not continue beyond a special issue. His successor, Wādfradād II, further complexifies the scene by introducing the representation of a bird – probably an eagle or falcon – perched on top of the banner to the right **[Fig. 6.3]**. The tall square structure undergoes some changes and simplifications – the three crenellations of the parapet are reduced to a single, three-stepped and V-shaped merlon or battlement – but remains immediately recognizable.

Only much later, under Dārēw II, is the ruler-structure-banner triad modified to represent the king standing in front of an open fire altar with the flames schematically represented as three or some vertical, more or less wavy, lines; he holds a bundle of barsom in the direction of the fire in the manner of one officiating a ritual **[Fig. 6.4]**. The tall structure, banner, winged disk and bird have all disappeared in this new typology. Then on, the iconography of the Persis coins gradually becomes more and more simplified: the standing figure of the king is increasingly replaced by his portrait (identical to the one on the coins' obverse), and the fire altar with simpler elements such as a crescent moon and star or even non-figural motifs like the *triskelion* **[Fig. 6.5]**.[850] A much more elaborate and grander version of the open fire altar reappears on the reverses of the coins of the first Sasanian kings.[851]

Key elements of the iconography of Persis numismatics have been recognised as directly stemming from Achaemenid imagery. The figure of the ruler seated in profile on the high-backed throne with his scepter, or standing with hand(s) raised in a gesture of worship; the flower he holds in some scenes; the bow balanced on the standing king's foot (even though in the Achaemenid period it is a straight longbow and in the Persis coins a shorter double curved bow); the winged-disk from which emerges the bearded, crowned man, generally thought to be a representation of the Iranian concept of *xwarrah* (divine glory) or the supreme god of Mazdeism, Ahura Mazda; the square banner mounted on a high pole (although see more on this below)[852] – all these unmistakably Achaemenid insignia and symbols of royal power would

[850] Alram 1986, Tables 20 and 21.

[851] Alram 1986, Table 22.

[852] In the context of the coins of Persis however, de Jong has observed that the bird appears around the same time as the winged disk is added; this would encourage the interpretation of it as symbolising the standard's meaning by incarnating a "visible sign of the divine glory", de Jong 2003, 192-193.

have been readily available to the local kings of Persis as motifs engraved on the sumptuous ruins of their homeland, on the monuments and rock-cut tombs of Persepolis and Naqš-e Rostam.

More difficult to identify is the ubiquitous tall structure of the early coins. Based on the scene repeatedly depicted on the Achaemenid tombs, which represents the king in a gesture of worship facing a three-stepped altar with the winged-disk hovering above, the structure has sometimes been interpreted as a fire-temple or fire-altar – some scholars have even suggested that the three elements crowning the structure's parapet could be schematisations of flames.[853] The later unambiguous representations of the open fire altar surmounted by wavy flames make this hypothesis unlikely, however. Most scholars agree that the structure was probably at least inspired by – if not a direct representation of – the great box-like tower colloquially known as the Ka'ba of Zoroaster (the 'cube' of Zoroaster) at Naqš-e Rostam **[Fig. 6.6]**, and its sister-structure, the Zendān-e Soleymān (the Prison of Solomon) at Pasargadae.[854] In addition to the tower-like shape of the monument, the rectangular recesses which adorn its facades find an exact parallel in the structure depicted on the Persis coin reverses. Unfortunately, the nature of these two monumental towers – be it their original function in the Achaemenid period or the (probably) new purpose they filled when they were reinvested with several important inscriptions in the Sasanian period – is still not clear. It is therefore difficult to grasp the

[853] For a thorough examination of the different interpretations of this structure that have been put forth, see Potts 2007.

[854] For an exhaustive study of the possible links between the stepped towers in Achaemenid iconography, the actual monumental towers of Pasargadae and Naqš-e Rostam and the iconography of the Persid coins, see Garrison 2017, esp. 319-321. Mark Garrison concludes that: "Formally, the structure on the reverses of the *frataraka* coinage thus include the stepped structure (on the late coins) and both versions of the tower structure as documented in Persepolitan glyptic. The appearance of the three types of Persepolitan structures on *frataraka* coinage seems rather more than fortuitous. […] Structurally and iconographically, the scenes on the frataraka coinage and Persepolitan glyptic are linked. One striking difference between the visual corpora is the incorporation of the bow into some of the scenes on the coins […], a phenomenon that must certainly be a direct quotation of the tomb façades at Naqš-e Rostam and Persepolis. This mash of syntax and iconography suggests that the scenes on *frataraka* coinage may be appropriating and reformulating various syntactical and iconographic elements of Achaemenid imperial art without any sense of the significance of the original context of the imagery and, perhaps, without the intent to depict any true lived experience of the *frataraka* period. The importance of the evidence from the *frataraka* coinage would appear to be its testimonial to the strength of the Achaemenid visual tradition, not its documentation of the continuation of actual ritual behavior or the presence of specific types of buildings in Fārs in the early Hellenistic period", Garrison 2017, 321.

significance that this structure had for the Persis kings and the reason for its representation on their coins. The Pasargadae and Naqš-e Rostam monuments, which harbour a small blind *cella* in the top part of the tower – accessible by a flight of stairs on the north façade – have variously been interpreted as tombs, coronation towers, fire-temples, fire-repositories (*ātašgāh*), royal treasuries and repositories of royal regalia and state archives/annals. Some more "all inclusive"[855] studies have argued that the towers fulfilled a combination of these functions[856] and as Daniel Potts has demonstrated there is generally a lack of clear distinction between the (probably different) function of the buildings in the Achaemenid and Sasanian periods.[857]

It is also true however, as Potts has pointed out, that it was not necessary for the kings of Persis to have any knowledge of the buildings' original function to recognise them as architectural masterpieces; whatever their use was, they no doubt had acquired a "mythical if not mystical" quality.[858] The two monumental towers – and particularly the Ka'ba of Naqš-e Rostam, located only a couple of kilometers from Staxr, and planted at the foot of the Achaemenid royal tombs – were iconic ruins and more generally immediately recognisable landmarks of the local kings' homeland. It should be mentioned that Callieri categorically refuses to identify the box-like monument with the towers of Pasargadae and Naqš-e Rostam because the archaeologists who examined the parapets of the buildings concluded that these did not have crenellated battlements.[859] The merlons crowning the structure in the coins is certainly a constant and immediately recognizable feature of the iconographic motif. For Potts, the divergences between the structure on Persis numismatics and the actual monumental towers should not be an argument to dismiss their evident relationship: in the same way that the Achaemenid kings on the tomb reliefs sport a straight long bow balanced on their foot while the rulers depicted on the Persis coins balance a double-curved one on their, the iconographic choices made by the Persis kings are a display of the reappropriation of an ancient royal ethos. Furthermore, Callieri does agree that the structure on the coins of Persis likely represents an Achaemenid monument – either the Persepolis terrace itself, which does present a crenellated parapet, or another, low lost building. For the purposes of this study therefore, and whatever the tower-structure on the coins meant to the kings of Persis, it is enough to conclude that with this

[855] As Daniel Potts called Sancisi-Weerdenburg's article, Potts 2007, 283.

[856] Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1983.

[857] Potts 2007, 290-291.

[858] Potts 2007, 296.

[859] Callieri 2007, 119-123.

motif they were making an ostentatious allusion to the Achaemenid ruins which were a distinctive and iconic landmark of their homeland.

The prestige of the kings of Persis.

Based on the brief overview of the iconography of the Persis coins, we may safely maintain with Wiesehöfer and Callieri that echoing Achaemenid imagery and symbols evidently helped the vassal kings to assert their political power and cast themselves as successors of the Achaemenids – although without the claim to a world-empire, for as Wiesehöfer has argued, this would not have met with the approval of their Seleucid and later Parthian overlords[860]– and probably even more importantly as legitimate *local* rulers of Persis, as opposed to powerful but alien overlords. Although this was no doubt one of the pillars their legitimacy rested on, Albert de Jong has observed that attention ought to be given to some of the more religious aspects of the coins' imagery for a clue to the foundations of the vassal kings' 'prestige'.[861] He points out that because the iconography on the Persis coins has been identified as deriving from Achaemenid imagery it has been traditionally classified as royal insignia. Yet, several 'kingly' objects found on the coin reverses like the scepter, and more specifically the banner, are kept in the main centers of religious activity among modern Zoroastrians, and may be viewed as religious symbols also: Parsi fire-temples for instance host 'cultic banners'.[862] In other religious traditions that show a marked influence of Zoroastrianism, such as the Mandaeans and certain community religions from the mountains of Georgia, the cultic banner – respectively *drabša* and *droša*, compare Middle Persian *drafš*, 'flag, banner' – is planted beside the cultic hut; it is adorned, blessed, touched and praised, and plays an important role in rituals and ceremonies such as the swearing of oaths.[863]

Drawing out the religious aspects of their numismatic imagery does not mean casting the kings of Persis as a priestly dynasty; rather, it suggests that cultic activity and authority was one of the keys to the local political legitimacy of these vassal rulers.[864] The cultic banner which

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[860] Wiesehöfer 1994 and 2009. Furthermore, whether this entailed a clear, historical memory of these glorious predecessors as Callieri claims is less evident to me, but this debate will not be picked up here, see Callieri 2007, 129, 132.

[861] Taking up Alram's description of the Persis coin series as *Prestigeprägung*, de Jong 2003, 192.

[862] De Jong 2003, 193

[863] De Jong 2003, 196-200.

[864] In fact, insisting at all on the separation between political rule and religious authority – just like the separation between religion and legal practice – is not relevant to either ancient Persis or ancient Iran.

appears on the reverses of the first eight kings furthermore implies that they were the guardians of an important shrine, "'governors of the gods' in a very literal sense."[865] As de Jong observes, their guardianship is probably what provided them with the means to strike coins in the first place[866]. This joins Panaino's interpretation of the term *bayān*, and his conclusion that the legitimacy for the vassal kings' rule was paradoxically not of royal derivation, even though it staged a direction connection with the Achaemenid vestiges, but stemmed from religious authority.[867] It is worth highlighting that in the reign of Dārēw II, when the banner disappears from the Persis coin reverses – along with the square structure and the winged disk – it is replaced by the motif of an open fire altar being officiated by the king himself (he holds a bundle of barsom in the direction of the flames). As de Jong notes, the dynasty that would follow the Persis kings, the Sasanians, were themselves known to have been the guardians of the Fire of Anahīd before rising to power and seizing the crown from the Parthians.[868]

Khodadad Rezakhani and the eastern origins of the Middle Persian inscriptional alphabet.

As we move on to the analysis of the Persis coin legends and their relationship with the Sasanian Middle Persian alphabet(s), we should note that the possible palaeographical link between inscriptional Middle Persian and the script on late Persis numismatics has recently been questioned. In a recent article, Khodadad Rezakhani has studied the evolution of the Aramaic(-derived) script in the legends engraved on the coins of Persis.[869] His brief overview spans the very first coins of Baydād to the very first coins of Ardašīr V who was to be the founder of the Sasanian dynasty – the Sasanian king Ardašīr I – as well as those of his elder brother Šābuhr. Rezakhani's aim is to identify the roots of the Middle Persian *inscriptional* alphabet as it is recorded in the very first royal inscriptions of the Sasanian kings and decide whether it can be regarded as descending from the script used on Persis coins. Based on his diachronic study, he concludes that the alphabet used in the legends of Šābuhr and Ardašīr V/I make too drastic a departure from the letter shapes on the later Persis coins: inscriptional Middle Persian cannot be regarded as a natural outcome of the Persis script. It is therefore necessary to

[865] De Jong 2003, 201-202.

[866] De Jong 2003, 202.

[867] Panaino 2003, 283-284.

[868] De Jong 2003, 201-202; see also Chaumont for the list of Arabic chroniclers who record the link between the cult of Anahita at Staxr and the family of the (future) Sasanian dynasts, Chaumont 1958, 155-156.

[869] Rezakhani 2016.

"look for an alternate path" to explain the emergence of "Pahlavi".[870] He therefore turns to the coins and inscriptions of Elymais and Characene, and although his comparison reveals some crossover and parallel innovations, he concludes that the script on the terminal coins of Persis is too dissimilar to that recorded in Elymais and Characene: these local alphabets cannot be regarded as a source for the innovations specific to the Sasanian inscriptional script; the evolution of these three Aramaic-derived scripts must have been independent from one another. Rezakhani then considers the coins of the eastern Indo-Sāka dynasty. He notes the very similar shapes of the letters *alef* and *taw* on the coins of Ardašīr and Šābuhr and that of the Indo-Sāka kings from the two first centuries CE; the later Sasanian coins also display a similar *samekh* to that in Indo-Sāka numismatics.[871] Rezakhani also observes that the reverses of Indo-Sāka coins depict a fire altar, offering a further point of similarity with the late-Persis coins/early-Sasanian issues.[872] Rezakhani puts forward other, historical arguments to further justify the possible influence of the Indo-Sākan dynasty on the early Sasanian kings. Several rulers of the Indo-Sāka line bear names which include the compound Sāsān – the last of the Indo-Sākan kings, in fact defeated by Ardashir during the latter's eastern campaigns, was called Farn-Sāsān, and his father, Adur-Sāsān.[873] Sāsān is of course also the name of the eponymous hero and ancestor of the Sasanian dynasty, whose origins remain a mystery.[874] For Rezakhani, the presence of the element Sāsān in Indo-Sāka royal nomenclature and the parallels between certain letter-shapes in Indo-Sāka and late-Persis/early-Sasanian issues should encourage scholars' investigations into the eastern origins of the Sasanian dynasty.[875] In other terms, Persis would not be the ancestral cradle of the Sasanian dynasty as it is portrayed to be by the kings of this dynasty in their inscriptions: their family line would have originated much further east.[876] Alram had argued that Ardašīr V/I's campaigns in Indo-Sāka territory were carried out after his western conquests and after the issuing of his first coins; the numismatist thus considered the presence of the fire-altar on Indo-Sāka coinage as a sign of Ardašīr V/I's influence on eastern numismatic tradition.[877] Rezakhani by contrast, based on his comparison of Indo-Sāka and (pre-)Sasanian

[870] Rezakhani 2016, 72.

[871] Rezakhani 2016, 73.

[872] Rezakhani 2016, 73-74.

[873] For the Parthian origins of the name Sāsān, see Olbrycht 2016, 25-26.

[874] See however Olbrycht 2016, 25: Sāsān is likely to be a regional Zoroastrian deity worshipped in eastern Parthia.

[875] Rezakhani 2016, 73-74.

[876] On the Eastern Parthian ancestry of the Sasanians, see Olbrycht 2016.

[877] Alram 2007 and Rezakhani 2016, 73.

legends as well as royal onomastics, proposes the influence took place in the opposite direction: he suggests that Ardašīr's eastern campaigns were in fact carried out before his western conquests and that the Middle Persian inscriptional script exhibits the imprint of an eastern, local, Aramaic-derived alphabet.[878]

The problem with comparing two bodies of evidence and drawing out (possible) parallels between them is indeed deciding which corpus exercised an influence on which. Furthermore, apparent correlations, particularly when there are very few of them, may not be connected at all, or at least not in a direct manner: as we saw when studying the Elymaean, Characenean and Parthian scripts, innovations such as the introduction of similar diacritics to differentiate letters that had become indistinguishable, occurred around the same time but were not necessarily applied to the same letter. We will be returning to Rezakhani's arguments and his comparison of the Indo-Sāka and pre-Sasanian scripts in more detail after carrying out our own overview of the legends on Persid coinage. Meanwhile, it is worth making a short remark concerning the appearance of the fire altar on the Persis coin reverses. Rezakhani states himself at the end of his article that a study of the evolution of this religious symbol could help throw some light on the relationship between Indo-Sāka and pre-Sasanian coins.[879] The open fire altar with officiating king holding a bundle of barsom – which replaced the earlier triad consisting of the praying-king, box-like monument with winged-disk hovering above and (cultic) banner – appears with the ninth Persis king, Dārēw II.[880] Important palaeographic modifications accompany the iconographic change on his issues – these will be addressed later in detail. Suffice it to say for the moment that Dārēw II's coins present the marked influence of Parthian numismatics, both in terms of palaeography and coin typology **[Fig. 6.4]**. The legend for instance is organised in a distinctively square manner around the motif of the fire altar, creating a box around it, rather than running along the edge of the reverse as in previous series as well as in later issues. The square-shaped legend immediately calls to mind Parthian numismatics which systematically arranged their (Greek) inscriptions in this angular manner on their reverses (see chapter 5). The reign of Dārēw II is dated by Alram and Wiesehöfer to the middle of the first century BCE, which is when Parthian influence would have become more and more tangible in Persis.

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[878] Rezakhani 2016, 74.

[879] Rezakhani 2016, 74.

[880] Alram 1986, Table 19.

The motif is taken up by Dārēw II's two sons and successors Ardašīr II and Wahšīr[881] (spelled *wḥwḥštr*): the fire altar with officiating king was thus struck on the reverses of the local Persis coinage up until the end of the first century CE. The representation of the fire-altar is then abandoned for a while, before appearing again under Ardašīr V/I. However, it is also interesting to note that although the fire altar disappears after Wahšīr, the representation of the officiating king holding a barsom is maintained on several coin series between Wahšīr and Ardašīr V/I; the space where one would have expected the fire altar to be, opposite the king whether he is looking left or right, is often filled by the representations of a crescent moon and star, with the star nestling in the concave curve offered by the crescent.[882] Now, in one of the more schematically engraved reverses of Dārēw II, the king is all but a stick-man and the fire altar is etched with only a few lines: a simple vertical line, the stand, rests on two short horizontal lines with the bottom one slightly longer, representing the stepped base; on top of the vertical stand is another horizontal line, the flat top of the altar, upon which rests a crescent moon-shaped bowl probably standing in for the fire-bowl; in the bowl is a star-shaped motif which evidently represents the fire itself with sparkling flames **[Fig. 6.4]**.[883] In this way, although the crescent moon and star have their own obvious (astronomical, astrological and by extension religious) significance, it seems to me that when both motifs are combined, especially opposite an officiating king with barsom, they may also have been standing in for a schematised, open fire altar – the crescent as the fire bowl and the star, nestled inside it as the blazing fire. The religious responsibility, authority and practice of the Persis kings may have been one of the (no doubt many) latent meanings behind the crescent moon and star pair; it could help explain its ubiquitous presence on Persis royal as well as later Sasanian imperial iconography.

Be that as it may, the motif certainly appears early on in the Persis coins series. Furthermore, the fire altar with officiating king was a constant of Achaemenid imagery and was engraved on the royal tombs cut into the rock face at Naqš-e Rostam. Both these elements would encourage the view that the motif was 'indigenous' to Persis; it would also have been a 'natural' choice for the local kings since, as we have seen, religious authority was an important pillar of their prestige and role as vassal rulers. In terms of style, it is true the altar struck on the early Sasanian coin reverses is very close to the one – much simplified – etched on the coins of the Indo-Sāka kings: both sets of altars present a thick main stand flanked with two more

[881] Alram 1986, 174-175.

[882] Alram 1986, Table 20.

[883] Alram 1986, Table 19, n° 565.

ornamental side-plinths (or decorative cordons hanging down to the floor?); the roaring fire is represented by several wavy lines, with the middle one soaring up above on either side.[884] It may well be that the comparable design indicates an iconographic affinity and therefore contact and exchange. The Sasanians however, whose prestige and local authority (and probably revenue), like the kings of Persis before them, rested on their role as guardians of an important local shrine, did not need the Indo-Sāka kings for the inspiration to represent a fire altar on their coin reverses.

II. Towards a palaeography of the Persis coin legends.

The legends of the Persis coins and their script.

The following description of the Persis coin legends will work chronologically through the numismatic series as it has been organised by Alram;[885] it proposes to highlight palaeographic changes and attempts, when these are striking or very sudden, to relate them (when relevant) to broader historical events. The corpus of Parthian, Elymaean and Characenean coins constitute an essential point of comparison: as the last chapter demonstrated, the Middle Persian script emerged among a mosaic of different local Aramaic-derived scripts heavily influenced by Parthian scribal tradition. Of course, our study of the Persis script is limited to the letters recorded by the coin legends, as well as two short pre-Sasanian inscriptions on silver vessels, which we will examine in conclusion. Until more written sources are rediscovered, we are left with a partial image of the script's different chronological strata. Nevertheless, the analysis below should help us decide whether Rezakhani's argument that eastern influences were fundamental to the emergence of the Sasanian Middle Persian ductus is realistic.

Probably one of the most striking characteristics of the Persid numismatic corpus is that the Greek alphabet apparently never made its way into the coin legends. This sets it starkly apart from the Parthian, Elymaean, and Characenean series. The coin hoards unearthed in Fārs indicate that Greek-engraved coins, be they Seleucid or Parthian, widely circulated in the province; as Alram has suggested, these were probably even used concurrently with local Persid issues.[886] Historical evidence suggests as we have seen that Persis was not spared Seleucid and Parthian domination: under both empires Greek was the main or a very important administrative

[884] See the reproductions in Rezakhani 2016, 73.

[885] Alram 1986.

[886] Alram 1986, 162.

language, as well as a script of prestige. Indeed, the previous chapter showed that later, local Parthian mints, where the use of Greek had long fallen into disuse, crudely mimicked Greek letter shapes to maintain this alphabet on their issues. In this way, whereas in the Parthian, Elymaean and Characenean contexts Greek legends preceded a later shift to a local Aramaic-derived script, on the basis of our information, this initial 'Greek phase' does not apply to Persid numismatics. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, it is delicate to conclude that the use of a local language or script necessarily expressed an act of resistance to 'foreign' overlords or a rejection of 'Hellenism'; typologically and stylistically – the figure of Nike placing a wreath on the king in the earlier series and the various heavily Parthianising representations of the Persid rulers in the later ones – the coins of Persis unmistakably bear the imprint of Hellenistic influences. Furthermore, Alram and Callieri both conclude that based on the high artistic quality of Baydād's issues, this very first semi-independent ruler of Persis turned to a Hellenistic workshop – and an excellent Hellenistic workshop, with engravers boasting a long experience in preparing dies – for the design of his prestige coinage. Incidentally, this indicates that commissioning the composition of a Greek legend would have been relatively straightforward. If the Persid kings had their legends engraved in Aramaic neither out of rejection of Greek nor out of lack of access to it, then it is probably simply because Aramaic was a natural choice for them: Persis, which had been the heart of the Achaemenid empire with a special administrative status at least up until Seleukos I and an old imperial administrative hub, likely hosted an important local chancery which had maintained a strong Aramaic scribal tradition.

The first series: a neat, lapidary Imperial Aramaic script.

On the first Persis coin series, the title 'governor of the gods' appears almost invariably underneath the box-like monument. The name of the king is engraved either to the left, behind the king who raises his arms, or to the right, typically between the monument and the cultic banner **[Fig. 6.2]**. On the opposite side (be it left or right) additional information is given: in the case of the first king, it is his patronymic *br bgwrt* 'son of Bagward', while on the coins of his successors a new phrase appears, *br prs* 'son of Pārs' or 'son of a Persian'. Because this expression is used by several generations of Persid kings it is unlikely to refer to an ancestor – it is not a patronymic as such – and probably yet another way for the vassal ruler to assert his local roots: these gave him his legitimacy as king of Persis and set him apart from the Seleucid overlords. The upper part of the coin has no inscription.

The first series displays a neat, imperial Aramaic script, somewhat more angular than the cursive ductus known from late Achaemenid manuscript archives, no doubt due to the numismatic medium **[Fig. 6.2]**.[887] As is the case with most lapidary-style scripts, this gives the ductus an overall archaising flavour and limits cursive features, such as ligatures. The downward strokes form straight, vertical lines which do not slant to the left in medial position as they do in manuscripts; the wavy *zain* is thus simplified to a simple downward stroke. The lower curves in letters such as the *bet* and the *lamed* are rendered by a right angle, creating an inverted L-shape; the normally rounded legs of the *samekh* are equally angular, making the grapheme look like a square with an open bottom and a shorter left leg. Similarly, the concave heads of certain letters like the *dalet*, *resh* and *kaf* are either simplified and flattened out into a horizontal bar, or present an exaggerated, box-like concave shape. The *resh* and *dalet* were already almost impossible to tell apart in the late Imperial Aramaic cursive ductus, but this lapidary feature makes all three graphemes as well as the *waw* virtually indistinguishable. In some of the coin issues, some efforts are made to differentiate them nonetheless, indicating a particular care in the engraving of the legend: the vertical leg of the *kaf* is longer than those of the *resh* and *dalet*, while the head of the *waw* is smaller, often slightly slanted, and never takes the concave box-shape (like a number one without the bottom horizontal bar). Similarly, the *yod* and *gimel*, which both take the shape of an open-bottomed triangle, can be told apart by their size, with the *gimel* being much larger.

It is worth noting that the title 'governor of the gods' is systematically written *prtrk' zy 'lhy'*: there are no 'mistakes' or variations in the spelling of the terms. In the same way that the spelling is consistent, so the letter shapes within this title remain perfectly steady throughout the coin legends of the kings who bear it, to the point of being almost frozen and 'oblivious' to palaeographical changes taking place in other words of the same coin legend. Thus, while in this phrase the *alef* typically takes the form of cross-shaped star – the lower right leg is sometimes very short making the grapheme look more like a trident – in the name of Ardašīr, the third '*frataraka*' ruler (spelled *'rtḥštry*), the initial *alef* has a completely different shape and resembles a Latin N, or a Hebrew *alef* **[Fig. 6.7]**. Similarly, the final *yod* in this same king's name is rounded and crescent-shape – like in Parthian and Middle Persian – whereas the *yod* of the particle *zy* in the formula (including on the same coin) is completely angular, like a bottom-less triangle, reminiscent of the Aramaic grapheme.

[887] Alram 1986, 165-170 and Tables 17-18.

A number of conjectures can be made based on this preliminary overview. The workshop which the first semi-independent kings of Persis turned to for the engraving of their prestige coinage was evidently highly skilled and experienced and the prototypes for the legends were drafted by highly trained scribes. The consistency in the spelling both of the kings' names and in the title formula, the efforts made to differentiate similar graphemes, as well as the clear, archaising Aramaic ductus all strongly support the view that it was a well-established mint working with official scribes trained in the Achaemenid scribal tradition. Nevertheless, there is also a hint of the existence of (the beginning of) a local cursive ductus: this is suggested by the variations in the shape of the *alef* and *yod*, which are archaising in the title formula but innovative in the names of later kings. Thus, although the scribes employed by the Persid rulers to compose the legends were evidently trained in the monolithic Achaemenid scribal tradition and kept a good knowledge of the 'classic' Imperial Aramaic alphabet and style, they were also evolving within a local scribal school from which a new ductus was gradually emerging.

Enter the Parthians.

After the fourth *frataraka* ruler Wādfradād I follow two Persid rulers whose coins are anepigraphic (Alram reads a rather defective rendering of the name 'Wādfradād' on the first set, which is what led him to call the first of the two kings Wādfradād II); it is their reverse type and portraits which place them firmly in the early period. The reigns of these two kings are placed in the second half of the second century BCE and thus fall into the short and only period of independence enjoyed by Persis, probably already started under Wādfradād I.

It is clear from the coins of their successor Dārēw I – dated to the turn of the first century BCE – that both the province and the local scribal tradition had undergone serious change in the intermediate period **[Fig. 6.8]**. Several features immediately recall Parthian numismatics, which tallies well with Wiesehöfer and Alram's suggestion – based on iconography and numismatic typology – that Dārēw I was the first sub-Parthian king.[888] The title 'governor of the gods' has disappeared from the legends and the local ruler is now described as a 'king', rendered by the Aramaic *mlk*/*mlk'* (see below). Scholars have also drawn attention to the fact that this period saw a 'revival' of the old Achaemenid name Darius.[889] How meaningful this revival is, however, is unclear, since Artaxerxes, the name of several early kings of Persis, was

[888] Alram 1986, 163.

[889] Callieri 2007, 124.

also an important Achaemenid name.[890] More directly relevant to our study is that the coin legends betray some hesitation in the spelling of 'Dārēw'. In the earliest coins the name ends in a letter which takes the shape of an open-topped square; Alram suggests it could be an *'ain*.[891] In later spellings the final grapheme is a wavy line, which was thought by Alram to represent a *waw* but is in all likelihood actually a *nun*.[892] This last spelling is the one maintained in later issues as well as under later kings of the same name. It is worth noting that the inter-consonantal *alef* (D**ā**rēw) is written, whereas in the names of previous Persis kings presenting a long *ā* it was not (such as Wādfradād).[893]

In terms of palaeography, the coin engravers adopted the Parthian convention of transcribing the *mem* by a cross **[Fig. 6.8]**. As we saw, this was a script-convention also followed by the local kings of Elymais under Parthian rule. Whereas in Parthian coins the *alef* has moved on from the older Aramaic cross-like grapheme and is going towards the squarer, cursive Parthian and Middle Persian shape, on the Persis coins this letter remains close to its Imperial Aramaic prototype. This makes the *alef* and the *mem* virtually indistinguishable in this series of Persid coins, even though the legs of the *mem* are often admittedly a little wavier.[894] The ductus in the coins of Dārēw I is also overall much sloppier – the letters do not have regular proportions and are engraved at strange angles giving them a 'jumbled' appearance – and is characterised by several highly simplified graphemes: the *dalet*, *resh* and *waw* have been reduced to a simple vertical line, and so has the *yod*, albeit a slightly shorter one, and even the *lamed*, even though a little wavier. It is probably to remedy the ensuing confusion that new grapheme shapes are introduced under Dārēw I's successor, Wādfradād III **[Fig. 6.9]**: the *waw* is decidedly wavier and takes the shape of an inverted 'S'; the *dalet* now resembles a '3'.[895] The previous chapter showed that the 3-like shape of the *dalet* probably resulted from the welding of the main grapheme – originally a reversed S-shape, like the *waw* and *resh* – with a dot or diacritic which was added underneath it to differentiate it from other very similar letters; this evolution has an

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[890] The name 'Darius' also took the form of a patronymic in this period, *dārāyān*.

[891] Alram 1986, 171.

[892] The correct spelling of the name Darayan will be clarified by a *pointillé* inscription on a silver vessel published by Skjærvø in 1997.

[893] Häberl highlights the use of (Aramaic-derived) *matres lectionis* as vowels as a specificity of the Parthian script: in Aramaic dialects from the Arsacid and Sasanian periods, *matres lectionis* are used only as such (apart from Mandaic, probably because of Iranian influence), see Häbel 2006, 60-61.

[894] Alram 1986, 171-174 and Table 19.

[895] Alram 1986, 172 and Table 19.

exact counterpart in Elymaean.[896] Most significantly, these two changes in the coins of Wādfradād III herald the Middle Persian inscriptional graphemes, where the *dalet* maintains this new 3-like while the *waw* and *resh* both take a more angular version of the reversed S-shape, resembling a number 2.

Indications of 'frozen' or heterographic spellings in the early first century BCE.

Also significant is the fact that the spelling MLK' for 'king' – rather than MLK – becomes the norm after Wādfradād III: the word appears to have become 'frozen' in the determinate or emphatic state – normally used to indicate the identifiability of the subject in a given context – rather than in its abstract or unmarked form.[897] Now, MLK' is the 'frozen' spelling of the aramaeogram for 'king' in Middle Persian: read *šāh* but written MLK'. Similarly, a new change is documented in the coin legends of Dārēw II, Wādfradād III's successor and son, where the word for 'son' is spelled BRE – until then it had consistently appeared on legends in its unmarked form BR.[898] BRE is, like MLK', the determinative state in Aramaic; it is the form in which this word will become fixed into an aramaeogram in Middle Persian. It is worth noting that the Parthian versions of Sasanian inscriptions spell the aramaeogram for son BRY, which is originally the possessive form in Aramaic.[899] Wādfradād III's coins thus indicate that in the early first century BCE already, a local scribal tradition was emerging in Persis, with its own palaeographic characteristics as well as distinctive morphological features. The word BRE is also remarkable for its peculiar palaeography: the *bet* has resolutely moved away from its Aramaic prototype and acquired the Middle Persian form, with a small vertical line and a long, extended lower horizontal line. The bend is curved rather than angular and the words present features of ligatures: the *resh*, reduced to a 'tick', and the *he*, much more elongated than its Imperial Aramaic prototype, are written 'within' the *bet*, resting on its lower horizontal stroke, with the lower leg of the *he* curling back to the right and merging with the long lower leg of the *bet*. We are far away with this word from the earlier angular, detached, and archaising lapidary ductus.

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[896] See Häberl 2006, 59 and the table on page 57.

[897] Gzella 2012, 578.

[898] Alram 1986, 173 and Table 19.

[899] See chapter 5 for and overview of the possible mechanisms which 'froze' nouns into the possessive and determinative forms.

Indications of an emerging local scribal tradition.

The striking changes in both title and palaeography which appear with the coins of Dārēw I call for some comment. The short period of independence – in which the anepigraphic coins of two vassal kings were struck – evidently witnessed important administrative upheaval as well as the disintegration of what had been the tail end of the monolithic, Achaemenid administrative and scribal – for both, as we argued previously, went hand in hand – tradition under the Seleucid rule of Persis. Spelling of names are inconsistent or at least 'experimented' with; certain words like 'king' and 'son' have become fixed in grammatically awkward forms; the engraving of the legend has nothing of the neatness of earlier inscriptions; the archaising, angular style of the earlier Aramaic ductus is completely abandoned. Parthian numismatics and palaeography have exercised a marked influence: Dārēw I is the Persid king who switched to the Attic drachm as the main denomination of his issues after the Parthian model; the cross-shaped *mem* on his coins stems directly from Parthian numismatics. We could even posit that the change in title from '*frataraka* of the gods' to 'king' was in step with Parthian numismatics/tradition: on their coins, the Parthian kings call themselves ΒΑΣΙLEΩΣ and ΒΑΣΙLEΩΣ ΒΑΣΙLEΩN, and then later (only from the middle of the second century on) MLK' and MLKyn MLK'. The coins of Dārēw I and his successors also betray the imprint of a more cursive local ductus which must have been used in the regional administration in parallel to the numismatic, semi-lapidary, alphabet. The simplified vertical lines of the *resh*, *waw* and *dalet*, which become very difficult to tell apart, are typical features of cursive Aramaic-derived scripts (including much later manuscript Middle Persian). The much more rounded hook of the *pe*, the vertical leg of which is decidedly slanting, curling towards the left – in the direction of writing – is also a typical manuscript feature. The introduction of diacritics on the coins of Wādfradād III and Dārēw II to distinguish graphemes which had become virtually identical suggests a conscious attempt to make the legends less ambiguous. Whether this was a special effort made for the king's titulature on their issues or whether it was a transposition on coins of an already existing palaeographic characteristic stemming from local manuscript tradition is difficult to tell. The former is perhaps more likely – numismatics may thus have been one ground of palaeographic 'experimentation' – since Dārēw I's do not present the use of diacritics and clearly reflect the simplified ductus of manuscript writing. The ligatures in the word BRE are another feature of cursive. It is of course delicate to decide whether the words MLK' and BRE had become aramaeograms by then and were being read for their Persian equivalents. The block-like, fixed spelling of this latter term certainly encourages it, and so does the grammatically awkward forms of these two nouns, apparently already firmly 'frozen' in the emphatic state. Finally, it should be noted that several

graphemes are heralding their 'ultimate' inscriptional Middle Persian forms: as mentioned above the 3-shaped *dalet* is the inscriptional Sasanian grapheme; so is the elongated bet (similar in both inscriptional and manuscript Middle Persian) and even the *he*, still slightly angular but definitely on its way to its Sasanian shape.

The palaeographic trend of this new phase of Persid numismatics can be described as combining Parthian numismatic and manuscript tradition with local manuscript characteristics; it continues with the coins of Dārēw II's successors and sons. The reigns of Ardašīr II and Wahšīr span the second half of the first century BCE; like Dārēw II they have abandoned the depiction of the praying king, tall square structure and banner on their reverses and replaced it with the motif of the king officiating before an open fire altar and holding a bundle of barsom.[900] With Ardašīr II, the cross-shaped Aramaic *alef* disappears and the Parthian manuscript grapheme – an opened-topped square with a 'tail' to the left – is adopted: this is the final shape of the *alef* in both inscriptional and cursive Middle Persian. The *ḥet* in the name of Ardašīr is also directly borrowed from Parthian, and takes the shape of an elongated Latin N. The legends on the coins of this king are much better engraved and legible, perhaps suggestive of a newfound administrative stability, already underway with Dārēw II. They also present some elegant, archaising features which further help distinguish the graphemes: the *lamed*, earlier reduced to a single vertical line, is given a little lower hook, which is the shape it will keep all the way into, and throughout, the Sasanian period, even making its way into Middle Persian manuscripts from the Islamic period via heterograms. Such 'archaising' shapes do not so much illustrate a 'return' to more classical Aramaic prototypes than derive directly from Parthian: like the *lamed*, the *shin* is closer to the Imperial Aramaic grapheme than in earlier Persid coins, but also much more upright, *à la Parthe*.

New cursive forms: the first century CE.

With Ardašīr II's successor Wahšīr, the above palaeographic evolutions are maintained and we are introduced to further innovations. The *mem* has shifted from the cross-shaped grapheme of Parthian numismatic to the Parthian manuscript letter – it is therefore paradoxically closer to its original Imperial Aramaic prototype. The most striking palaeographic change is the *shin*, which has abandoned the conservative Aramaeo-Parthian form to assume an entirely different shape, heralding the inscriptional Middle Persian grapheme: it is now a horizontal bar with two ticks

[900] Alram 1986, 173-175 and Table 19.

or comma-like strokes resting on it, in the middle **[Fig. 6.10]**. This sudden departure from Parthian ductus is probably best explained by the transposition of a local cursive style into the numismatic medium. We will come back to the evolution of this letter with the discussion of pre-Sasanian Middle Persian inscriptions on silver vessels, which may illustrate intermediary forms of this grapheme.

The rule of the next four kings, identified by their coins as Pakor I, Pakor II, Nāmbed and Napād spans the first century CE. The motif of the fire altar is abandoned on their coin reverses and replaced by the king's portrait, non-figurative motifs such as the triskeles, or again the figure of the officiating king facing a crescent moon and star (see above).[901] Their legends confirm the palaeographic evolutions described above for the *dalet*, *alef*, *ḥet*, *bet*, *he*, *lamed*, *yod*, *shin*, *waw* and *resh* – these have all either assumed their Middle Persian forms or firmly herald them. Other graphemes indicate that further change is underway. The *pe*, which had already become more hooked and left slanting in Dārēw II's issues, is now steadily curling in, almost becoming a semi-circle. The *nun*, which is here engraved for the first time since the 'Parthian' period began, displays a markedly Parthian shape (resembling a Latin L) – this is the form which will be carried into Sasanian Middle Persian inscriptions. An important palaeographic change is illustrated by the *kaf*, which is decidedly wavier and moving towards the Sasanian Middle Persian 3-shaped grapheme. It is worth noting that the name 'Pakor', spelled '*pkwr*', presents the juxtaposition of three graphemes that had become increasingly difficult to tell apart:[902] the *kaf*, *waw*, and *resh* all take the shape of a long, reversed Latin S (or an elongated number 2). It is possible that the palaeographic change introduced in Pakor I's coins results from a conscious effort to differentiate the *kaf* from the *waw* and *resh*. In this respect, the *kaf*'s evolution is comparable to that of the *dalet*, which had similarly been modified with a diacritic to look like a '3' to distinguish it from the *resh* and *waw*.

Napād is followed by an 'unknown' king – whose coins are anepigraphic – and with the latter's successor, Wādfradād IV, we enter the second century CE. A remarkable palaeographic evolution in this king's coin legends is the shape of the *taw*, which until then had remained relatively conservative (a straight vertical line with an upper right hook): the upper hook is now more rounded and the bottom of the main vertical stem curves towards the right.[903] Again, this development is independent from Parthian: in this script it is the upper hook which gradually

[901] Alram 1986, Tables 20-22.

[902] Alram 1986, 175-176 and Table 20.

[903] Alram 1986, 180 and Table 21.

becomes bigger, more rounded and curves back towards the main stem. The *taw* represented in Wādfradād IV's coins is therefore in all probability a local variant and heralds the inscriptional Middle Persian grapheme. With Wādfradād IV's successor, Mančihr I, the letter 'ch' makes its first appearance on Persis coinage.[904] It would appear, as Rezakhani has argued, that this letter is based on the Imperial Aramaic *ṣade*.[905] It is worth noting however that the shape of this letter in Mančihr's coins is very similar to the Parthian *shin*: as we have seen, the *shin* in Persid numismatics was by this time quite distinct from its Parthian counterpart and on its way to the inscriptional Middle Persian form. Follows Ardašīr III, whose legends confirm the decidedly Middle Persian shape of the *taw* with a short, rounded upper hook and right-curving main stem. It is with his successor however, Mančihr II, that an important palaeographic change occurs.[906] The *mem*, which had until then followed Parthian manuscript ductus, adopts a completely different shape. The curving right leg of the letter now curls right back towards its main stem, intersecting it to resemble a loop, crossed to the left **[Fig. 6.11]**. In the defective coins of Mančihr II's unnamed successor, the loop even rotates upwards, resembling a cursive Greek gamma. The new, much rounder shape of this grapheme, as well as the way the two strands of the loop intersect each other, is suggestive of a cursive ductus: we may once again posit the influence of a local manuscript tradition for this sudden palaeographic change. The intersection of graphemes, typical of cursive styles, is further illustrated in the legends of Mančihr III: in the word BRE 'son', the letter *resh* does not 'rest' on the long lower line of the *bet* as it had done in earlier coins, but crosses it vertically, turning back to the right beneath the *bet*. In this kings' coins, the *ch* is also becoming curvier, moving towards its monumental Middle Persian shape. With Mančihr III's successor Ardašīr IV, we enter the third century CE. No new palaeographic changes are introduced, but his legends contain eleven different letters, making it easier to appreciate the long evolution undergone by the Aramaic-derived graphemes.[907] Only the *kaf* is still conservative, displaying the reversed-S shape. Otherwise, in my opinion the script can firmly be described as proto-Middle Persian. The main difference is perhaps the overall ductus, which is more angular than Sasanian Middle Persian – the graphemes' individual shapes however (apart from the *kaf*) resolutely belong to this alphabet.

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[904] Alram 1986, 180-181 and Table 21.

[905] Rezakhani 2016, 72.

[906] Alram 1986, 182 and Table 21.

[907] Alram 1986, 184-185 and Table 22.

The pre-Sasanian kings and the 'curly style'.

Now, the overall style of the script undergoes a serious change with Ardašīr IV's successor Šābuhr **[Fig. 6.12]**.[908] A modification of legend-type accompanies this change, with the appearance of the epithet *bgy* in anteposition to the king's name (see above for the significance of this term in the context of royal titulature).[909] These two elements, which herald both Sasanian titulature and script style, suggests that there was a conscious effort to break with an older aesthetic tradition and embark into a new royal era.

In terms of palaeography, the *kaf* is back to the 3-shape earlier introduced by Pakor, with an additional tick at the bottom (like a cedilla), which it will keep in Sasanian inscriptions. As we saw, the 3-shaped *dalet* was probably the result of the welding between the original grapheme – a reversed S – and a diacritic, added below it to differentiate it from the *resh* and *waw*. The 'new' *kaf* was apparently the consequence of a two-step transformation: to the original reversed-S shape was added a lower tick to differentiate it from the *resh* and *waw* as we can see in Pakor I's coins, making it look like a 3; it was then given an extra tick under Šābuhr, probably to differentiate it from the *dalet* which kept the 3-shape. The epithet *bgy* 'Lord' now precedes the name of the king. It allows us to appreciate the shift in the shape of the gimel, which is still a triangle, but which has rotated 90° clockwise, and now looks a little like a very small *bet*. The *pe* has also completed its transformation, underway since Pakor, and become a full loop with a small tail to the right. Above all, it is the ductus – rather than the palaeography – that is remarkable in Šābuhr's coins. The letter shapes are – apart from the *kaf*, although again, the change it underwent is perfectly in line with the evolution of other graphemes in both Persis and other regional scripts like Elymaean – identical to those of his recent predecessors.

More strikingly, the writing style acquires a much more curved – even curly – ornate quality with this king's coins **[Fig. 6.12]**. To give an image, it was as if the letters were now traced with a soft paint brush rather than carved on metal with hard tools. All angles are softened, and straight vertical lines are wavier, often beginning and/or ending with a curl. Thus, the *ḥet*, which previously looked like an elongated Latin N has essentially become a wave; the *yod*, which was a little hook, is a crescent; the loops of the *pe* and *mem* are almost perfectly circular. This new trend in the ductus style carries on in the coin legends of his brother Ardašīr

[908] Alram 1986, 185 and Table 22.

[909] It is worth noting that this king describes himself as the 'son of Lord Pabag, King' in his legends, although no coinage of Pabag has survived.

V, the future Sasanian king Ardašīr I.[910] The upper hook of the *resh*, which had the reversed-S shape, is now accentuated, giving this grapheme its final inscriptional Middle Persian form (like a '2'). Similarly, the upper hook of the *taw* is more rounded and its main stem more arched than vertical, which is the shape it will keep in Sasanian inscriptions.

The shift in late Persis coinage towards the 'curly' ductus was not as sudden as might appear: legends on the reverses of the Sasanian king Ardašīr's coins distinctly belong to the older, more angular style.[911] Indeed, the obverses of the new monarch's coins present beautifully engraved and long legends in the new ornate style: these introduce the ubiquitous formula of Sasanian royal titulature 'mazdean Lord X king of kings of Ērān whose seed if of the gods',[912] carved all along the edge of the coin. The script on the obverses is Sasanian inscriptional Middle Persian; any divergence can be put down to the difference in medium: the numismatic style may present some more cursive or simplified strokes which are fully developed in full-scale rock inscriptions. However, on the reverses of the first Sasanian king's early coinage, a trace of the 'pre-curly ductus' survives. The legend on that side of the coins read NWR' ZY 'rtḥštr, or "fire of Ardašīr", thus identifying the flames blazing on the altar as this king's dynastic fire. The *waw* and *resh* are indistinguishable and take the reversed-S shape; the *taw* is angular and archaising; the *alef* much more box-like; the *ḥet* back to its elongated N-shape as opposed to the curvy wave of the same coin's obverse. This important detail shows that different ductus-styles were co-existing in Persis and could even make their way onto the same object. It also strongly suggests that the 'curly style' that was to become the mark of inscriptional Middle Persian was a *recherché* ornate style, evidently elaborated – along with a new titulature-type – to celebrate a new dynastic era in Persis.

Further thoughts on the relationship between the Persis and Sasanian scripts.

With this last observation we may return to Rezakhani's study of the Persis script. Indeed, one of the problems it presents is a lack of distinction between palaeography – the actual shape of the letters – and script style. The more rounded and curlier style is not a tendency that is exclusive to the pre-Sasanian Persis coin legends. As we saw in the previous chapter, the coins and inscriptions of Elymais and Characene display a similar tendency: in Elymais, the *alef* was

[910] Alram 1986, 186 and Table 22. For a palaeographic study of the early Sasanian coin legends, see Skjærvø 2003.

[911] Alram 1986, 187-188 and Table 22.

[912] Augmented under Šābuhr to king of kings of Ērān and non-Ērān.

ligatured making it look like an infinity symbol while the *samekh* was rounded into a full circle; in the coins of Characene it is the *shin* which resembles an infinity symbol. Similarly, these scripts display certain analogous or parallel innovations, such as the use of diacritics which take the form of ticks/cedillas to tell similar graphemes apart; all three bear the imprint of Parthian numismatics and manuscript tradition. The scripts of Elymais, Characene and Persis remain firmly distinct however, because their respective graphemes underwent separate evolutions. Furthermore, an important omission is made in Rezakhani's study: surprisingly, he does not take into consideration the palaeographic influence of Parthian. While he compares the pre-Sasanian Persis script to Elymaean, Characenean and even Manichaean, as well as Indo-Sāka numismatics, he entirely neglects Parthian, a major scribal tradition which had gradually replaced Greek in regional administration, coinage and monumental inscriptions. The rule of Parthian overlords spans the reign of eighteen local Persis kings – this omission can only be misleading.

The analysis of the Persid and early Sasanian numismatic corpus shows a gradual and smooth palaeographic evolution from Imperial Aramaic to inscriptional Middle Persian. New letter shapes usually are introduced progressively, appearing only every two or three reigns only; different styles may even co-exist, with some words maintaining older versions of the same grapheme. More sudden changes occur also, typically after a period of one or two anepigraphic series: these often correspond to a period of political turmoil and administrative reorganisation, such as the short period of independence which Persis experienced in the first half of the second century BCE, the conquest of the region by the Parthians, as well as the rise to power of what would be the Sasanian dynasty.

The overview offered above helps us draw out several overarching trends which shaped the Middle Persian script. The first is the gradual simplification of angular, lapidary and archaic Aramaic graphemes – a common scribal trend. The second is the evident influence of Parthian numismatics, and later, Parthian manuscript tradition, with direct borrowings into the Persid coin legends. In some cases, this meant a 'return' to more conservative letter shapes: Parthian, a powerful imperial administrative script, had kept close to Imperial Aramaic prototypes. The third is a conscious effort to distinguish graphemes that have become too similar to avoid (excessive) confusion: such modifications have pointedly occurred on the coins of a king whose name presented the chance juxtaposition of a series of graphemes which had become difficult to tell apart. The fourth is the occasional introduction of what can reasonably be explained as local cursive forms, as well as local cursive tendencies: these have no counterpart in Parthian or took a different direction in the latter script. Examples of these include the horizontal *shin*,

which first appeared in the legends of Wahšīr at the turn of the first century CE, and the loop-like *mem,* introduced in the reign of Mančihr II in the second half of the second century CE: the predecessors of both these kings had kept with older forms of the graphemes. Such innovations are introduced sporadically and over time and are therefore more likely to stem from local scribal tradition than be the result of external influence: sudden palaeographic changes have the tendency to bring on bigger, 'wholesale' modifications, linked to wider typological and iconographic alterations. Finally, it appears that the wavy, curly ductus of pre-Sasanian and Sasanian script was an ornate style, elaborated for the purpose of a new royal era (perhaps inspired by a decorative script applied through another medium, like paint?): it effected the overall aesthetic of the inscriptions but did not fundamentally change the letters' shape.

Thus, the overview of Persid coinage helps confirm that the palaeographic evolution that led to the emergence of the Middle Persian script was organic: local engravers composed with different scribal styles taking into account such factors as new numismatic models (Parthian), legibility and aesthetics, and reflected a general tendency to move away from angular lapidary forms to a more cursive ductus. The Sasanian dynasty may well have had its roots in the east. From the point of view of palaeography and (iconography, for that matter), the Sasanian kings were firmly anchored in a tradition that was local to Persis, which may be described as the product of a local manuscript tradition (or traditions!) evolving within a Parthian administrative and scribal framework.

III. Further examples of pre-Sasanian Middle Persian inscriptions.

Pre-Sasanian Middle Persian inscriptions on silver vessels.

Another category of inscribed objects – also omitted in Rezakhani's study – contributes to illustrate the variety of scribal traditions in Persis and may help understanding some palaeographic innovations: silver vessels. A first pre-Sasanian Middle Persian inscription on a silver bowl with gold inlay was published by Prods Oktor Skjærvø in 1997.[913] It is engraved all around the outer rim of the object in *pointillé* – this scribal convention, which stems from Parthian practice, is common to all silver vessels, including Sasanian ones. Inscriptions on Parthian and Sasanian silverware typically indicate the weight of the object, with different variants of the formulas MN S [Number] (the S stands for 'stater') or MN ZWZYN [Number]

[913] Skjærvø 1997.

(ZWZYN being the aramaeogram for 'drachm'). It also often identifies the owner of the piece with the phrase [Name] NPŠE (*xwēš*; 'his, property of').[914]

This bowl is no exception to this basic rule although it also provides additional information. The first few words of the inscription transcribe the name and patronym of a king, read by Skjærvø as follows: "King Ardašīr, our brother, descendant of Dārāyān, son of king Dārēw" ('rtḥštr MLK' AH'yn dry'nkn BRE dry'n MLK'). Sims-Williams has more recently proposed the reading "Of the brothers of King Ardašīr, descendant(s) of Dārāyān, son(s) of Dārāyān."[915] We will return to this difficult patronymic presently. Next comes the identification of the object according to the standard formula [Object] ZNE 'this'. Sims-Williams corrected Skjærvø's original reading and demonstrated that the object identified was a *štxw*: a type of vessel or bowl.[916] This term is engraved on other Parthian, pre-Sasanian and Sasanian inscribed silver vessels. The bowl is further described in the inscription as being made of YNGDWN *zl* KSP and weighing 50 staters (S 20 20 10). Skjærvø has shown that the Middle Persian verbal heterogram YNGDWN, formed on the Aramaic root *ngd*, is used in several Aramaic attributes applied to metal and likely expresses the quality of being 'chased, laminated, stretched or hammered into a sheet'.[917] As Skjærvø argued, in the context of the inscription, it probably describes 'hammered' metal: in this case the vessel is of hammered gold (*zl*, *zarr*) and silver (KSP, *asēm*).[918] The last words are engraved in a very different ductus: the dots of the *pointillé* are wider and so close to one another that they almost merge into full lines. This last passage records the familiar ownership formula wḥwḥštr BRBYT' NPŠE, property of prince Wahšīr. The noticeable difference in ductus between the first section of the inscription and the final 'property' formula suggests that the latter was added to the vessel at a later stage: the bowl was probably first presented to king Ardašīr and then came into the ownership of the prince (and later king) Wahšīr.[919]

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[914] For different variants of these stock formulae, see Gignoux 1975.

[915] Skjærvø 1997, 93-94; Sims-Williams 2021, 615-616.

[916] Sims-Williams 2021, 611-613.

[917] Skjærvø 1993, 186-188.

[918] Skjærvø 1997, 94.

[919] Skjærvø 1997, 95.

Comparing the coin legends with the silver vessel inscription.

The coins of Persis provide us with a remarkable royal sequence to compare this inscription with. The Persid king Ardašīr II describes himself on his coin legends as 'son of king Dārēw'; the latter is Dārēw II, son of Wādfradād III, himself preceded by Dārēw I. The coins also attest the existence of Ardašīr II's brother Wahšīr, also identified in his legends as being the 'son of Dārēw' (II).[920] This serendipitous sequence firmly places the engraving of the silver vessel in the middle of the first century BCE. The strange patronymic Dārāyānagān is translated by Skjærvø and Sims-Williams as 'descendants of Dārāyān': both scholars see it as a reference to the Persid King Dārēw/Dārāyān I (see below).[921] This fits nicely with the numismatic evidence and seems more plausible than Callieri's interpretation of the patronymic as the expression of the Persid kings' "full conscience" of their Achaemenid political heritage. Skjærvø even suggests that Sasanian national history may have conflated the Achaemenid and highly legendary Dārāy ī Dārāyān with his Parthian namesake from Persis.[922]

The inscription on the silver vessel confirms the 'fixed' spellings of the terms 'king' and 'son' as MLK' and BRE, which, based on numismatic evidence seem to have become generalised around the time of Dārēw I. The inscription introduces us to another example of 'fixed' spellings, further suggesting the increasingly systematic use of heterography by the mid-first century BCE: BRBYT' 'prince', appears in the emphatic state like BRE and MLK'; it is found with the exact same spelling in Sasanian inscriptions (both Middle Persian and Parthian versions) as well as manuscripts. On the other hand, the awkward spelling AH'yn for 'brothers' ('our brothers' in Skjærvø's reading) is an indication that not all Aramaic (proto-)heterograms had acquired their 'final' forms. In Sasanian Middle Persian one would have expected AHY'n: AHY, the possessive form in which this word was 'frozen' into an aramaeogram, with the phonetic complement 'n to express the plural.[923]

As Skjærvø has observed, the vessel helps us correct the name of the Persid king which was read 'Dārēw' by Alram.[924] In the *pointillé* inscription, the name is unambiguously written *d'ryn*: it clearly ends in a *nun*, which is drawn as a long vertical line with a foot going towards

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[920] Alram 1986, 173-175 and Table 19.

[921] Skjærvø 1997, 93-94 and Sims-Williams 2021, 615.

[922] Skjærvø 1997, 103.

[923] See Sims-Williams 2021, 616 for further comments on this term, its reading and spelling.

[924] Skjærvø 1997, 94.

the right, somewhat like a Latin L.[925] As we have seen, this is the more 'evolved' – and future Sasanian – version of this grapheme, which in the numismatic corpus only emerges with king Napād. In the coins of king Ardašīr II himself, as well as that of his brother Wahšīr and father (Dārāyān II), the name ends with the reversed-S grapheme, which usually renders either a *waw* or a *resh*.[926] The letter *nun* is not represented elsewhere in the Persid coin legends until king Nambed – who directly precedes Napād – so it is difficult to trace the local evolution of this grapheme. Nevertheless, the letter which begins this king's name presents a wavier version of the L-shaped *nun*, with a slightly curved head: the resulting shape comes close to a reversed-S.[927] In this way, the *nun* must have evolved from a simple cursive wavy line (see the coins of Dārāyān I), to the ubiquitous reversed-S shape and then been distinguished from the *waw* and *resh* with a sharper lower right foot. Here again, the corresponding Parthian grapheme took an alternate route, closer the Aramaic prototype, and acquired a left foot. Although *dārāyān* takes the shape of a patronymic, there is no doubt based on both the numismatic corpus and the vessel inscription that it is used as a first name.

From the point of view of palaeography, the inscription on the silver bowl is consistent in many respects with that of the legends on these kings' silver coins but also presents curious individual letter shapes **[Fig. 6.13]**. The word BRE is written with exactly the same ligatured style as on the coins, with the very long lower leg of the *bet* supporting the *resh* and *he*; the *lamed* has acquired its lower hook and the *nun* its lower right foot; the *resh* and *waw* resemble a '2' which is their 'final' form; the *dalet* presents the familiar 3-shape and even the *kaf* displays its 'final' form with lower cedilla: in the numismatic corpus this change only appears with king Pakor but from the vessel inscription it had clearly already been underway; the *mem* has moved on from the cross-shape of Parthian numismatics and acquired the corresponding Parthian manuscript shape, a shift which happens just around this time in the coins too, with the legends of Wahšīr; the *taw* is even more curled than on the numismatic legends and has a little lower foot, anticipating the coins in acquiring its final Middle Persian shape; the *yod* is similarly more rounded than in Persid numismatics, already resembling a little crescent opened to the left; the *pe* is much more rounded, but, similarly to the coins of from this period, has not quite formed a loop yet. We are introduced with the silver vessel to letters which do not appear in the numismatic corpus. One such letter is the *zain*, which has already acquired its final Sasanian

[925] Skjærvø 1997, 96-97.

[926] Alram 1986, 173-175 and Table 19.

[927] Alram 1986, 177-178 and Table 20.

shape: a small vertical line with a more or less sharp double bend like a reversed Latin 'z'. The Aramaic prototype was a simple straight line while in Parthian this grapheme only has a single sharp bend in the middle. Another 'new' letter is the *samekh*, which again presents its rounded, inscriptional Middle Persian shape. This is an important detail as the *samekh* was one of the arguments put forward by Rezakhani to support a possible influence of Indo-Sāka numismatics on the Sasanian Middle Persian alphabet:[928] the silver bowl shows that the shape of this grapheme was part of Persis scribal tradition well before then.[929] In this way, the *pointillé* inscription, which can be compared with such precision to the Persid numismatic legends thanks to the name and patronym of the king it records, helps us confirm that many of the palaeographic changes which can be observed on later Persid coins were already on their way or had already taken place a few decades earlier.

Further indications of a local scribal tradition in Persis.

Some more surprising shapes like that of the *alef* and *shin* also suggest that there were several contemporaneous scribal styles co-existing in this region. Thus, the *alef* on the coins of the Persid kings Ardašīr II and Wahšīr takes the Parthian (numismatic and manuscript) shape of an open-topped square with a 'tail' to the left. This is the style retained by the kings' successors and maintained in both inscriptional and manuscript Sasanian Middle Persian. By contrast, Ardašīr II and Wahšīr's father, king Dārāyān, had used the cross-shaped alef, itself a derived and simplified form of the star-shaped Aramaic grapheme.[930] In the silver vessel inscription, dated to the reign of Ardašīr II, the *alef* is different again. It appears to be a variant of the cross-shape, but with a ligature at the bottom which links the two lower extremities of the cross. Although Elymaean and Characenean also present ligatures for this grapheme, the resulting shapes are entirely different, suggesting a purely local innovation.

Another curious palaeographic innovation recorded in the *pointillé* inscription is the *shin*. In the first part of the text, this grapheme takes the strange shape of two long horizontal wavy lines drawn one on top of the other, with the upper one shorter than the lower; both join a single short vertical line to the left.[931] In the 'property formula', engraved slightly later than the first section of the text but still within the reign of Ardašīr II (his brother and successor

[928] Rezakhani 2016, 73.

[929] See the pictures at Skjærvø 1997, 98.

[930] Compare with Naveh 1970, 26 and 46.

[931] Skjærvø 1997, 97 and Sims-Williams 2021, 615.

Wahšīr is described as a 'prince') the *shin* is an elongated version of the proto-Middle Persian shape (see below). Indeed, the period spanning the reigns of Ardašīr II and Wahšīr appear to have been a creative one for this grapheme. In the coins of Ardašīr II the *shin* is decidedly Parthian, like a Latin L with an extra short horizontal bar at the top – an upright version of the Aramaic prototype. In Wahšīr's legends, it has shifted to a proto-Middle Persian shape: a base horizontal line with two 'ticks' or comma-shaped strokes resting on it.[932] For Skjærvø, the *shin*(s) in the silver vessel inscription is an illustration of an intermediate form, mid-way between the Aramaeo-Parthian and Middle Persian graphemes: it suggests that the final Middle Persian form was obtained not by rotating the entire letter 90° counterclockwise but by the upper horizontal line detaching itself and coming to rest on the lower horizontal stroke;[933] the left 'tick' in the Middle Persian grapheme would thus be the original vertical main stem. This may well be, although whether the grapheme's evolution was as linear as this description suggests is more difficult to ascertain. As we shall see presently, the *shin* takes yet another (fifth) shape in an inscribed silver vessel recently published by Nicolas Sims-Williams. What these different innovations do certainly illustrate is the emergence of a local ductus that was moving away from Aramaeo-Parthian prototypes, and by extension suggest a lively local scribal activity. Other graphemes in the *pointillé* inscription show a range of shapes: thus the *kaf* has acquired the 'advanced' Sasanian inscriptional shape – a '3' with lower cedilla – in the first occurrence of the word MLK' as well as in the aramaeogram for silver KSP('); in the second occurrence of MLK' it has an elongated reversed-S shape, common on Persid coins from this period; while in the patronym *d'rynkn*, if Skjærvø's reading is correct, it resembles much earlier versions of this grapheme on Persid coinage, closer to the Aramaic prototype.

A second pre-Sasanian Middle Persian inscription on a silver vessel.

A second silver vessel engraved with a pre-Sasanian Middle Persian inscription in *pointillé* was recently published by Nicholas Sims-Williams.[934] The inscription begins ZNE š'tḥw nwydyt "this bowl was presented" and then lists the names and military titles of those who presented the bowl; the name of the recipient of the gift is apparently omitted. The last sentence appears to be a blessing formula, read by Sims-Williams as "May it grant blessing!".[935]

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[932] Alram 1986, 173-175 and Plate 19.

[933] Skjærvø 1997, 95.

[934] Sims-Williams 2021.

[935] Sims-Williams 2021, 611, 614.

The ductus is overall much neater with proportionate, round, and ornate letters which display a more characteristically (inscriptional) Middle Persian ductus **[Fig. 6.14]**. Thus, the curves in the 3-shape of graphemes like the *dalet* and *kaf* are accentuated, with a deeper central dip in the main stem; similarly, the lower hook of the elegantly elongated *lamed* is rounded and pronounced; the *pe* has been stylised as a swirl; the angles of the *ḥet* are softened, heralding the Sasanian wave-like grapheme. The *taw* has a pronounced upper hook and has acquired its lower 'foot'; the main stem of this letter is even elegantly arched (rather than forming a straight vertical line), which is characteristic of the more ornate and official Sasanian inscriptions. Even the *mem*, which is still decidedly Aramaeo-Parthian, presents an elegant upward curl to the left of its upper horizontal bar. As Sims-Williams has observed, efforts were even made to distinguish the *waw* and *resh* – which is neither the case in Persid coinage nor in Sasanian inscriptions/manuscripts:[936] while the *waw* maintains its familiar reversed-S shape, the *resh* has a flatter top, more like an American number one (without the lower horizontal bar).

The inscription introduces us to new stylised, ligatured words – on the coins, the only fully ligatured word was BRE – such as BYN 'andar' ('in, at') **[Fig. 6.15]**. The *bet* is in this case also exaggeratedly elongated; the *yod*, drawn like a comma, rests upon it; the *nun*, placed right next to the *yod*, cuts through the *bet* in a long wavy line. The lower strokes of the *bet* and *nun* (respectively horizontal and vertical) intersect in their respective middle, forming a cross. This heterogram later became so corrupt in Sasanian manuscripts that the individual graphemes which make up the word are impossible to identify: the word almost became a letter in its own right.

Even in this ornate and carefully engraved inscription single graphemes display distinct shapes – incidentally this may indicate that in pre-Sasanian Persis at least, the co-existence, within an inscription, of varying shapes for the same grapheme was not regarded as a stylistic flaw, perhaps even contributing to the overall aesthetic effect? Thus, the *alef* sometimes takes the unusual shape found in the earlier silver vessels – a cross with a ligature at the bottom – which is unknown from the numismatic corpus and has no counterpart in either monumental inscriptions or manuscripts; but it also presents the (Aramaeo-)Parthian box-shape. Similarly, the *shin* takes the strange, elongated shape illustrated in the other silver vessel, but also presents a new form: in the word *š'tḥw* which designates this type of silver vessel, the upper, shorter bar of the shin comes to rest as a semi-circle on the longer, wavy horizontal stroke, while the vertical bar to the left crosses the lower stroke. It is probably best to view this 'new' *shin* as one of the

[936] Sims-Williams 2021, 610-611.

many variants of the grapheme use in Persis in this period, rather than qualify it as yet another 'intermediary' form to 'fit' it neatly in the evolution of the grapheme.

A last letter that is worth highlighting in the second *pointillé* inscription in the *'ayin* which opens the (proto-)heterogram 'L ('to'). It resembles a Latin 'z' and presents a little upward curl or 'flourish' in the upper left extremity, an embellishment which is typical of this particular inscription. As Sims-Williams has observed, it is carefully distinguished from the *resh* and *waw*.[937] Without the lower right bar it would have been analogous to the corresponding Parthian grapheme but almost indistinguishable from the Persis *resh* and *waw*: we could therefore posit that the lower bar is once again the result of the welding between the main stem and a diacritic added underneath it. As we shall see in the following chapter, the *'ayin* is one of the first Aramaic-derived graphemes to disappear from Middle Persian: like the *qof* it did not represent an Iranian phoneme and was confined to aramaeograms, before increasingly becoming replaced by the *waw* and gradually falling into disuse. The etymologising spelling of the aramaeogram 'L is suggestive of a rigorous – if innovative, palaeographically – scribal tradition.

Preliminary conclusions concerning the local pre-Sasanian scribal tradition of Persis.

The exact relationship between the early Sasanian dynasts and the local rulers of Persis is difficult to establish. Whether there were direct family links between the brothers Šābuhr and Ardašīr and Mančihr III and/or Ardašīr IV is impossible to prove. The same however, can be said of the Persid kings themselves: unless their coins specifically state their kinship through patronyms, their exact family ties remain unknown. In terms of palaeography, typology and iconography, the numismatic corpus certainly suggests a direct continuity. Beyond stressing the continuity between the Sasanians and their Persid predecessors however, what this detailed overview of the Persid coin legends serves to highlight is the evident presence of a strong local scribal tradition which was firmly anchored in this region throughout the Seleucid and Parthian periods. Consistency in orthography, etymologising spellings and numerous recognisably Aramaic-derived graphemes suggests that the thread which linked the scribes of Persis to the monolithic Achaemenid administrative and scribal tradition was never completely broken – no doubt thanks, in large part, to the Seleucid and Parthian empires who maintained a certain administrative tradition and stability in the region. The same cannot be said of Elymais and Characene. However, through the letters engraved on the coins of Persis, also transpire

[937] Sims-Williams 2021, 611.

simplifications and cursive forms, innovations and diacritics, ligatures and stylistic flourishes, frozen or heterographic spellings, that were all specific to Persis – with no counterpart in Parthian or other regional scripts – through which we can discern a rich and lively local and cursive scribal tradition which has left no vestiges because of the perishable media it was inscribed on.[938]

Other vestiges attributed to the Persid kings similarly herald Sasanian imagery and artistic themes as well as give a hint of the skilled artisanship which was probably flourishing in Persis under the Parthians – a word must be said about these to conclude this chapter. Incised in the limestone blocks of the ruins of Persepolis is a series of graffiti which depict princes mounted on richly caparisoned horses being led by dignitaries, bedecked in sumptuous garb. Their wide pants and fitted tunics are textured with different patterns and their headdress embellished with a row of pearls all along the outer rim and decorated in the center with motifs such as the crescent moon and star. The similarity of these headdresses with that of the Persid kings on their coins has encouraged scholars to attribute these engravings to them. Two of the mounted princes hold out a ribboned wreath. Three of the figures, depicted in full body, stand with their left hand resting on the hilt of their sword while their right holds what appears to be an incense-burner. In a corner the figure of a lion, sitting on his haunches, snarls. These 'graffiti' were by no means scribbled on the stone by passers-by: the high technical skill of some of the figures have been recognised by scholars like Callieri.[939] Characteristic details of the horses' harness such as the large balls of wool (?) which trail on the ground on either side of the saddle as well as the big bows around their hind legs, the depiction of the bearded princes and dignitaries – heads in profile to the left but with frontal busts – the pattern of their clothing and their high tiaras, the ribboned wreath held outstretched by the mounted princes: these would all be constants of Sasanian monumental rock sculpture.

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[938] Commenting on the ligatures in the word BRE in the early Persis coins, Herzfeld commented in 1924 that it "cautions us against considering the script of the early Sasanian inscriptions as the normal cursive script of the time. From this and from other facts, it is proved that beside the script of the inscriptions there was always a more cursive writing in existence, and sometimes the forms of the latter were allowed to enter into the inscriptions", Herzfeld 1924, 71.

[939] The latter has also argued that the incised figures were meant to be a support for painting, see Callieri 2006b.

Chapter 7

Early Sasanian manuscript vestiges: the rise of ligatures

I. Early Sasanian manuscript material: the parchment fragments from Dura Europos.

Inscriptional vs manuscript: the corpus of Sasanian written vestiges.

Most of the Middle Persian written documents which can be securely dated to the Sasanian period are epigraphic vestiges. These include coins as well as dated monumental inscriptions commissioned by the Sasanian kings or by important Sasanian officials.[940] By contrast, Middle Persian manuscript remains nearly all postdate the Sasanian period. The important archive of economic and administrative documents, written in a highly cursive quasi-stenographic script style and known as the "Pahlavi archive", belongs to the late seventh and eight centuries;[941] while the important religious literature of Zoroastrian texts, which constitutes the bulk of Middle Persian manuscript material as we know it today, is recorded in manuscript copies which date to the Islamic period. As the following study will serve to highlight, the lack of manuscript material from the Sasanian period has contributed to a distortion of scholars' understanding of writing practices and has often led to the assumption that Middle Persian palaeography gradually evolved from the highly ornate, monumental inscriptional style recorded in Sasanian royal inscriptions, to the cursive and characteristically ligatured hand known from the Zoroastrian manuscripts. Yet, there is ample evidence from the monumental inscriptions themselves that most of the written output in the Sasanian period was manuscript

[940] As well as an extensive corpus of inscribed seals. The main disadvantages which seals present in terms of studying the evolution of the Middle Persian script is that they bear no date and rarely enjoy a clear provenance: most were brought to light through unofficial digs and their archaeological context is not known. They do record important palaeographic information – some examples suggest a 'play' on different graphic registers with the conscious juxtaposition of different script styles within a single legend – and also display erudite scribal 'word-games', namely in elaborate compositions based on stylised alphabetical motifs known as 'monograms'. Because of the difficulty they present with regards to dating and context of use, seals will not be examined in detail at this stage of our enquiry into Sasanian scribal practice.

[941] It is kept in Berkeley at the Bancroft Library and in Berlin, see Weber 2008 as well as Gignoux 2012, Gignoux 2014 and Gignoux 2016.

on perishable materials – no doubt redacted in a cursive hand that had little to do with the highly ornate style of the rock cut texts. Indeed, official inscriptions systematically refer to a wealth of specialised, and now lost, manuscript documents that constituted the legal, administrative and literary backdrop for the epigraphic texts. We will explore the specialised vocabulary which describes these manuscript documents and other elements of scribal practice in this chapter, when we turn to Sasanian Middle Persian inscriptions. Now, if we want to gain a glimpse of what was being written besides monumental inscriptions in the Sasanian period, we must turn to Syria.

The Middle Persian manuscript vestiges of Dura Europos.

Paradoxically, the earliest, securely datable vestiges of Middle Persian writing consist of a handful of manuscript documents – parchments, an ostracon, and a series of dipinti – which pre-date the first Sasanian royal inscriptions. They were found in the ruins of Dura-Europos, a city on the southwestern bank of the Euphrates in modern day Syria close to the border with Iraq, which was initially founded in 303 BCE by Nicanor a general of Seleukos I.[942] Before its destruction by the Sasanians and its subsequent abandonment, the city changed hands several times. After two centuries of Hellenistic domination, it was conquered in 113 BCE by the Parthians, under whose rule it gradually lost its military function and flourished into an important administrative and cultural regional capital. The Romans occupied it briefly between 115 and 117 CE and then conquered it half a century later in 165 CE.[943] It was utterly destroyed by the second Sasanian king Šābuhr I in 256 – this date is debated by scholars however (see below) – after a bitter siege and soon after abandoned: the Sasanian king himself in his inscription at Naqš-e Rostam tells us that he deported (*ānīd*) the inhabitants of the Roman-held lands which he conquered and resettled them (*nišāst*) throughout the different provinces of his empire (ŠKZ§30); Dura Europos (*Dūrā*) is specifically mentioned at ŠKZ§15 as one of the cities of Syria which Šābuhr 'ravaged, burned and plundered'.[944] There are no settlements recorded after this period; the city was swallowed by the desert before being rediscovered in 1920 by British soldiers. The written, artistic and to a lesser extent architectural vestiges of

[942] On the history and chronology of the Dura settlement see Rostovtzeff *et al.* 1929-1952, Matheson 1982, MacDonald 1986, Leriche and A'sad 1994, Leriche and MacKenzie 1996 as well as James 2019.

[943] As the archaeologist Pierre Leriche observed, ironically the only Iranian cult known at Dura-Europos is that of Mithra and was introduced by the Romans, Leriche and MacKenzie 1996.

[944] Huyse 1999a, I, 31-32 and 43-44.

Dura reflect a culturally, religiously and linguistically diverse urban society. Jennifer Baird has highlighted the sheer density and extent of the 'writing culture' at Dura which displays, along with the parchments and ostraca mentioned above, a wealth of graffiti painted or scratched into the walls of the city in Greek, Latin, Palmyrene, Safaitic, Aramaic, Hebrew – as well as Parthian and Middle Persian.[945] It is to the Dura vestiges in these Iranian languages that we now turn.

Dating the Sasanian occupation of Dura.

The exact date of the Sasanian manuscript documents, as well as the precise context in which they were redacted, is the object of a lively scholarly debate. While some scholars prefer to place them in the few years which preceded the destruction of the city, in 253-256, when the Sasanian army is thought to have occupied the city, others reject the hypothesis of a Sasanian interval at Dura and firmly consider that the Middle Persian manuscript vestiges belong to the time of the city's destruction or just after. From the point of view of the evolution of Middle Persian palaeography and writing practices, this small difference in dating has little significance. On the other hand, it does have a bearing on the circumstances in which the texts were written, affecting the decipherment of the dipinti in particular.

Scholars date the destruction of Dura by Šābuhr I to 256 on the base of a series of coins found during the excavations: the latest issues found among the ruins – on the body of a victim buried in the debris from the siege – belong to the next-to-last series of coins minted in Antioch for Valerian, thereby providing a *terminus post quem* for the fall of the city.[946] Michael MacDonald has even suggested a slightly later date, 257, arguing that the siege of the city would have stopped any new coins from entering Dura: the latest numismatic issues recovered in the excavations were probably not the latest in circulation at the time.[947] This date for the final destruction of Dura by the Sasanians does not need to be put in question. More problematic is MacDonald's argument, followed by scholars such as Touraj Daryaee and Pierre Leriche, that the Sasanian written documents all post-date the siege of the city.[948] As Franz Grenet has observed, the building in which the Middle Persian dipinti were painted, the synagogue, was closed off by the rubble which was actively piled up by the inhabitants in their preparations to withstand the Sasanian siege: the synagogue, its frescoes and dipinti were

[945] Baird 2018.

[946] Matheson 1982, 36

[947] MacDonald 1986, 63.

[948] MacDonald 1986, 61-63 and 68; Leriche and MacKenzie 1996; Daryaee 2010.

sealed from the world until the excavations revealed them. The Middle Persian texts can thus hardly post-date the destruction of the city.[949] Similarly, the Middle Persian parchment fragments were found within the debris of the actual siege: the *terminus post quem* of these vestiges must necessarily be the same one as the siege itself. As we will see, the administrative nature of the parchments and ostraca lend further weight to the hypothesis of a brief Sasanian occupation of Dura before its final fall.

The Middle Persian dipinti and inscribed administrative documents are not the only testimonies of a (prolonged) Sasanian presence at Dura. The excavations revealed pictorial graffiti as well as a wall painting presenting several key features which recall contemporary Sasanian stone sculpture. In the building known as the House of the Roman Scribes, the horsemen depicted in two graffiti appear to wear the balloon-shaped headdress that is typical of Sasanian royal gear.[950] In a large fresco which covers the wall in a private home and depicts a battle, the cavalrymen wear a hair style that is characteristically Sasanian, with long locks parted into two voluminous bunches on either side of the head **[Fig. 7.1]**.[951] Similarly, their dress, which consists of textured and richly decorated tunics over long trousers, have exact counterparts as we have seen in pre-Sasanian and Sasanian stone vestiges. The horses are represented in the emblematic 'flying' gallop and their harness presents immediately recognisable Sasanian features, such as the big 'pompoms' which trail behind almost touching the ground. Determined to place any Sasanian presence after the city's siege however, MacDonald has preferred to view this 'battle mural' as the representation of a "skirmish between the local rural police patrol, the "archers", and the bandits endemic to the region", and attribute all other Sasanian-style pieces of art to pro-Sasanian factions among the inhabitants of Dura living in the city before its fall.[952] The dipinti painted onto the frescoes of synagogue would for their part be the graffiti of Sasanian – possibly Jewish – visitors, expressing their 'admiration' and 'satisfaction' for the scenes depicted; we will see presently how this assumption influenced the decipherment of several terms in the dipinti.

Beyond the stratigraphic evidence – which indicates that the Middle Persian dipinti were applied to the frescoes of the Synagogue before the siege of 256 *and* that a Middle Persian parchment was composed before this date in the city – and the Sasanian-style wall-paintings

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[949] Grenet 1988, 138.

[950] Rostovtzeff *et al.* 1929-1952, VI (1936), 306-307, Fig. 22 and 23.

[951] Goldman and Little 1980, 285.

[952] MacDonald 1986, 59; see also Grenet's discussion of MacDonald's article, Grenet 1988, 156-157.

and pictorial graffiti, an important argument in support of a Sasanian interlude at Dura preceding its final destruction concerns the resolutely administrative nature of the Middle Persian and Parthian ostraca and parchments.

The bilingual nature of the Sasanian administration at Dura.

Of the two extant Middle Persian parchments from Dura, one has enough written material preserved to allow some sense of its contents. It appears to be a letter sent by an army general (*gund*[sālār] or *gund*[bed]) to someone of lesser rank.[953] It records the transportation of a 'load' (*abarwār*) to the Tigris and the management of property belonging to the sender. Most interestingly, it mentions a 'rescript' (*dib*, *dpy*) authored by an individual named Šābuhr. In his edition of the text, Henning understood the missive to be referring to written orders issued by the Sasanian king himself to resolve a point of contention or confusion around a military load. The purpose of the Middle Persian ostracon is somewhat less clear but is again evidently administrative in nature. It consists in a long list of professions such as 'saddler' (Henning; 'armourer', Harmatta and Pékáry); cobbler; kennel master; baker; chief scribe; accountant and so on.[954] According to information received by Altheim and Stiehl the Middle Persian ostracon was found along with other, Parthian-inscribed, ostraca in the Palace of the Dux Ripae.[955] Because the Parthian documents concern grain distribution, it has been suggested that the list of professions could be an official record of the workmen in the service of the Persian governor of Dura during the period of Sasanian control. The other possibility evoked by Harmatta and Pékáry is that it was a scribal exercise.[956] As they observe, whatever its exact purpose was, the list certainly reflects the administrative organs of the city which Sasanian scribes were concerned with. They also note that it does not include Zoroastrian clergy or juridical officials: perhaps their management was independent or dealt with separately from the military organisation.[957] Another parchment, this time inscribed in Parthian, was also found among the rubble of the great wall ramp.[958] The date and names of the sender and receiver are missing and so is the main body of the letter. Nevertheless, Henning was able to read the introductory few

[953] Welles, Fink and Gilliam 1959, 415-417.

[954] Henning 1954b; Harmatta and Pékáry 1971.

[955] Altheim and Stiehl 1952, 40; Harmatta and Pékáry, 1971, 473.

[956] Harmatta and Pékáry 1971, 474.

[957] Harmatta and Pékáry 1971, 475.

[958] Welles, Fink and Gilliam 1959, 414-415.

lines, which mainly consist in the standard greetings formulae which headed official correspondence; he has highlighted just how close the wording and syntax of this fragment is to the fixed introductory formulae known from Achaemenid official correspondence in Aramaic: Achaemenid chancery models were still the blueprint for epistolary conventions in the early third century CE. As was mentioned in the fifth chapter, such fixed, even 'frozen' formulae were no doubt one of the main vectors for the aramaeographic components of the Middle Persian heterographic writing system.

The Parthian ostraca mentioned above as being found with the Middle Persian parchment also record several officials, such as a scribe, a treasurer and most importantly a satrap (*ḥštrp*), named Rašn.[959] Two of the ostraca contain a list of proper names which as Frantz Grenet has observed, are almost all Persian;[960] each of these names is linked to a specific number of *grīvs*. This unit of measurement is used for grain or flower and probably by extension bread;[961] both lists are headed by a large MN, *až*, 'from'. This led Harmatta to interpret the ostraca as fiscal receipts received by the satrap on behalf of Sasanian settlers established in the surroundings of Dura after the siege of 256.[962] He thus prefers to place Sasanian presence at Dura after the destruction of the city. Harmatta's interpretation has been put in question by Grenet.[963] The latter points out that the preposition MN which heads the lists may announce the *break-down* of the total grain quantity (also given in each ostracon) rather than indicate the *provenance* of the goods: the ostraca may not be fiscal receipts at all. Instead, they may reflect the record-keeping of grain distribution (military rations?). Be that as it may, both the context of the finds as well as onomastics – Grenet notes the recurrence of the name or onomastic component Ardašīr – would suggest that these Parthian-inscribed ostraca date to the Sasanian period and were written in the context of the Sasanian political and military management of Dura (as opposed to during the period of Arsacid control of the city). For our purposes, the most important aspect concerning this find of Parthian and Middle Persian manuscript documents, is perhaps that they testify to the bilingual nature of the early Sasanian administration: in the early Sasanian period, both Parthian and Middle Persian were used in

[959] Harmatta 1958.

[960] Grenet 1988, 137.

[961] For a discussion of this unit of measure, see Huyse 1999a, II, 114-155.

[962] Harmatta 1958.

[963] Grenet 1988, 137.

day-to-day scribal practice in the royal chancery – although whether some or all scribes could write both languages is a question that must remain unanswered for the moment.

The Persian scribes of the Dura synagogue.

The other set of texts written in an Iranian language at Dura consists in a series of dipinti painted on the frescoes of the Synagogue. In terms of both dating and outlining the nature of the Sasanian presence at Dura these inscriptions contain crucial evidence, but this evidence has been interpreted differently. The dipinti are almost all signed: the authors give their name and, very often, their official function also – when this is recorded, it is that of *dibīr*, 'scribe'; at least eleven Persian scribes are responsible for the dipinti. Grenet has stressed the importance of the function of *dibīr* in the context of Sasanian political and administrative organisation: scribes were not ordinary 'literate' people; they were professionals and officials, either directly in the service of the state or employed by a higher official with administrative or military responsibilities.[964] The suggestion that these inscriptions were the scribblings of curious Sasanian visitors to the synagogue in the aftermath of the siege is very difficult to support. Yet, to explain the pointed interest of Sasanian 'tourists' for the Dura synagogue, scholars have brought forward various hypotheses concerning the identity of these enigmatic *dibīr*. MacDonald proposed that they were Iranian Jews or "Persians deeply interested in the Jewish religion", who visited the Synagogue (as a sort of pilgrimage?) following the city's destruction – an idea taken up most recently by Touraj Daryaee.[965] Bernhard Geiger suggested that the Sasanian scribes travelled to Dura in the context of an official embassy sent by Šābuhr I to the Romans; as Grenet has observed however, this seems unlikely in view of the conflict opposing both powers at Dura between 252 and 256.[966] Altheim and Stiehl, who remind their reader that "persische Herkunft und jüdischer Glaube schliessen sich nicht aus" posited that the *dibīr* were Jews who had been brought from Persia specifically to decorate this place of worship.[967] In this respect, they were echoing Pagliaro's initial assumption that the 'scribes' of the synagogue were the painters of the frescoes[968] – we will come back to Pagliaro's study and the reasons for this assumption below.

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[964] Grenet 1988, 138.

[965] MacDonald 1968, 62; Daryaee 2010, 34-35.

[966] Geiger 1956, 299; Grenet 1988, 138.

[967] Altheim and Stiehl 1952, 27.

[968] Pagliaro 1942.

Whatever their exact purpose was in writing their name in the synagogue, the Persian scribes of Dura, like the other Middle Persian and Parthian material from the site, testify to an administrative and political Sasanian presence at Dura before the final destruction of the city. The fact that these officials were at least temporarily established in Dura rather than just 'passing through' or visiting is further suggested by the range in the dates which accompany the dipinti. Indeed, the painted inscriptions are almost all dated and indicate that the scribes were settled in the city for about a year. The dates recorded in the dipinti are comprised between the months of March and October; one date indicates the month of February (without a year) which Grenet has convincingly taken to be that of the following year.[969] The months predictably follow the Zoroastrian calendar. The years recorded, '14' and '15', are counted according to the reign of an unnamed king and are more problematic. The king can only be Šābuhr I – the Synagogue was built in 243/244, making this Sasanian monarch the only candidate for this period – but the exact start date of his 'era' is debated. Šābuhr I succeeded his father upon his death in 241/ 242. If the beginning of Šābuhr I's era is regarded as starting at this time, then the dipinti could have been written as late as 256/257. However, the Arabic chronicles unanimously record a period of coregency, which lasted at least a year: Šābuhr I was crowned during his father's life – by Ardašīr himself according to certain accounts – and his 'regnal fire' lit in 239/240, officially marking the beginning of his era.[970] The earlier date for the start of Šābuhr I's regnal era is also suggested by the chronology of Mani's life, which, as Henning put it, was "inextricably bound up with the dates of the early rulers of the Sasanian state" as well as the monumental inscription of Bīšāpūr.[971] Calculated according to this start date, the dipinti may have been applied as early as 253/254.

The stratigraphical evidence, the administrative nature of the extant Sasanian written material and the dating formulae of the dipinti all point to a period of Sasanian rule in Dura Europos before the destruction of the city in 256. For the purposes of our study, this information serves to confirm that the Middle Persian and Parthian texts were written by professional scribes of the royal Sasanian chancery, rather than chance visitors to the site. The scribal style recorded by the parchments and ostraca can safely be seen as reflecting the 'standard' cursive hand used by professionals in the early Sasanian period in the context of the royal

[969] Grenet 1988, 143.

[970] For an overview of the relevant passages in the Arabic chronicles see Chaumont 1974.

[971] For an exhaustive discussion of these sources see Henning and Taqizadeh 1957, 116-119 as well as Ghirshman 1975.

administration; similarly, the bilingual nature of the royal chancery at Dura can be regarded as official Sasanian practice, at least in the first decades of the dynasty (most of the administrative documents are in fact in Parthian). As we will see shortly, the dipinti illustrate a more 'ornamental' script when compared to that in the ostraca or parchments: their medium and context – paint applied to frescoes in a holy building – was after all slightly different. They were no doubt produced by professional Sasanian scribes who also wrote letters and lists on parchment and ostraca in a highly cursive hand but were inspired by the more solemn circumstances offered by the synagogue and the frescoes to display their scribal skills.

Palaeographic features of the Dura Middle Persian parchments: the rise of ligatures.

The Middle Persian inscribed parchment fragments from Dura consist in one very small strip in which hardly a whole word which can be deciphered **[Fig. 7.2]** – although individual letters can still serve our analysis of the script – as well as a larger piece written on recto and verso and which as we saw above concerns the transport of a (military?) load **[Fig. 7.3]**. On the smaller strip, Henning discerned in the upper, partly damaged line a *pe*:[972] it is fully rounded and ligatured to the right, almost like a Modern Persian *waw*; this is the letter's 'final' cursive Middle Persian form. In the second line, one can distinguish the neatly written letters *'mly*-. The left tail of the *alef* joins with the round *mem*, which is neatly crossed to the left; similarly, the *lamed* and *yod* are ligatured. The shape of the *lamed* is particularly striking: it has acquired the slanting shape of much later Middle Persian cursive and completely moved away from the straight vertical line with lower hook which is typical of Persis/Middle Persian coinage and inscriptions. The same *lamed* occurs again in the fifth line, linked to a *yod* which has also distinctly acquired its later comma-like shape – a slightly elongated version of the left-opening crescent shape that can be observed on the late-Persis and early Sasanian coins. On the other hand, the *dalet* which immediately follows the -ly- pair retains the 3-like shape which is typical of numismatic and inscriptional scripts from this period. The fourth line offers a clear example of a *shin*, which resembles that described in the previous chapter on late Persis coinage: a lower horizontal line with two hooks resting on it; this letter is linked to the right with the preceding letter, which Henning reconstructs to be a *pe*. In the same line we have an elegant *ḥet*, ligatured to the left with a *waw* which takes the simplified – and late Pahlavi form – of a single vertical line. The *ḥet* is the wavy line familiar from late Persis numismatics although in that corpus the

[972] For a transcription and commentary, see (Henning in) Welles, Fink and Gilliam 1959, 417; for an illustration, Altheim and Stiehl 1952, 84, Fig. 31 as well as Frye 1968, pl. XXXIV, Fig. 40.

letter never appeared with a ligature. Finally, it is worth noting that although the *mem* takes in this manuscript fragment the older form of a loop neatly crossed to the left, it heralds the late Middle Persian *mem*, with the lower left stem of the cross pointing a downward and lengthening.

This tiny strip of parchment holds precious information concerning mid-third century Middle Persian cursive. The marked tendency towards ligatures is probably one of its most striking aspects. Although these are not as rounded or deep below the line of writing as the manuscripts from the Islamic period, almost all the letters featured present a link to either the preceding or following letter, depending on scribal convention. Also telling are the shapes of several letters which display they 'final' Middle Persian manuscript forms, such as the *alef*, *yod*, *lamed*, *waw* and *pe*. As we shall see, these same graphemes were being written in a very different style in contemporary rock inscriptions and even other parchments: this small parchment fragment is strong evidence for the coexistence of different scribal styles – better, registers – in a given period.

Palaeographic features of the Dura Middle Persian parchments: a multiplicity of script styles.

Indeed, the larger fragment of parchment with Middle Persian writing displays marked differences in script style **[Fig. 7.3]**.[973] The *lamed* takes the more formal shape of a straight vertical line with lower hook, familiar from Parthian, late Persis numismatics as well as early Sasanian inscriptions; the *waw*, simplified to a single line in the smaller fragment, maintains the ornamental 2-like shape of coins and inscriptions; the *yod*, especially in word-final position, presents a formal 9-like shape which contrasts with the 'elongated comma' of the small strip of parchment and later cursive; the *pe* is almost completely round, without the long tail of high cursive. Henning identified the official nature of this piece of administrative correspondence as well as the high rank of the protagonists involved. The letter certainly displays a neat, regular and evidently more 'formal' hand than the smaller extant fragment, better suited to the circumstances. The style is nonetheless cursive, with simplified graphemes – such as the *taw* and *ṣade*, which display simplified main vertical stems rather than the dented ones of numismatics and inscriptions – ligatures and the stylisation of letters in word-final positions. The ligatures are not as systematic as in the smaller, more cursive fragment. The graphemes tend to be squeezed together tightly rather than actually linked or connected: it would thus

[973] (Henning in) Welles, Fink and Gilliam 1959, 415-417; Altheim and Stiehl 1952, 74, Fig. 3 and 4.

appear that in more formal styles the scribe lifted his pen more than when writing less official documents. Still, there are multiple cases, particularly on the verso, when the scribe allowed his hand to become a little 'sloppier' than in the first formal introductory lines, where the left tails of the *shin*, *alef*, *yod*, and *lamed* link with the following letter. Similarly, the lower 'foot' of the 2-shaped *waw* and *kaf* present a marked tendency on the verso to 'link back' to the letter preceding immediately them. This larger parchment also includes several examples of stylised letters in word-final positions. The lower foot of a final *nun* is almost systematically left to trail all the way back below the line of writing, 'underlining' the two – sometimes three or four – preceding letters; this flourish is particularly exaggerated in the recto and was evidently considered an 'elegant' touch. The recto presents a striking example of a word-final *alef* with a final 'tail' that has been extended all the way to the lower line, merging with the word beneath it.

The difference in palaeography between these two parchment fragments confirms the existence of a multiplicity of script styles used synchronically, no doubt by the same scribes, depending on what the situation called for. Comparing these two manuscripts is particularly edifying: the medium, date and archaeological contexts are the same; it is the circumstances/purpose of the documents which affected the script. The larger parchment even presents a divergence in style between the carefully written recto and the more cursive verso. This short overview allows us to put forward a few observations. In this early period, 'detached' letters were evidently considered more elegant: in informal documents or highly cursive passages, ligatures were increasingly the norm, or at least more 'natural' for the hand of the scribe *when writing on parchment*. This feature is particular to Middle Persian: as we will see, cursive Parthian does not display a tendency towards ligatures in cursive. Numismatic-/inscriptional-style graphemes co-existed with much more simplified versions of the same letters, many of which had already reached their 'final' manuscript forms; the former were evidently considered 'elegant' and 'formal', better suited to official correspondence between important protagonists. In this way, cursive, formal cursive, numismatic and inscriptional Middle Persian are better regarded as different but synchronically used graphic registers rather than a diachronic evolution from the latter to the former. The rest of the Dura Europos written vestiges confirm these preliminary conclusions.

Palaeographic features of the Middle Persian ostracon from Dura.

The extant Middle Persian ostracon, which contains the list of workmen or professions and which has been deemed by some to be a simple writing exercise, displays a surprisingly regular and legible hand for a draft fragment **[Fig. 7.4]**.[974] The writing instrument used was thinner than that in either of the two parchment fragments and the harder, clay writing surface stopped the letters 'bleeding' into each other as much; the graphemes are thus neatly formed and easily distinguishable. Writing on a potsherd may have encouraged the scribe to lift his writing instrument systematically, restricting the use of ligatures and links. Indeed, stylistic features mainly consist in the exaggerated *vertical* elongation of graphemes – whether above or below the line of writing – but there are barely any examples of horizontal elongations; the rougher, drier writing surface evidently discouraged this. In this way, all the *lamed*s have very long stems, which often meet the upper line; the stems remain very straight – they are never slanting like in the smaller parchment fragment – with the lower hook simplified to a small left-curving foot; this may just about join the following letter but often does not. Similarly, the *nun* – which takes the shape of a Latin L – the 2-shaped *waw* and the 3-shaped *kaf* with its lower 'cedilla' are very elongated below the writing line but their bottom right stroke/foot/cedilla is by contrast very short, barely reaching beneath the preceding letter: in the two parchment fragments by contrast, this lower horizontal stroke could underline the entire preceding word. Similarly, the left 'tail' of the *alef* which almost systematically links with the following letter in the parchments is here practically inexistent and the grapheme is rather abruptly interrupted (one exception occurs in the middle of the second line, where the *alef* reaches into the following *mem*). The only case of a longer horizontal line is a *bet* in the first word of the second line, a standard feature of this grapheme even on the earliest Middle Persian coins. This word – read *ḥnbrk* by Harmatta and identified by him as the Middle Persian 'prototype' of the Armenian *hambarak* 'storekeeper'[975] – offers the most interesting examples of ligature of the ostracon. The last two letters of the word, the *resh* and the *kaf*, rest on the long lower horizontal stroke of the *bet*; the *kaf* even crosses it, with its lower half written beneath the line. The first two letters of this word also present an important example of the *ḥet* with a following letter – in this case a *nun* – which is exactly analogous to the ligature between a *ḥet* and *waw* in the smaller parchment fragment. In both cases, the wavy *ḥet* is written at an angle, acquiring a lower 'tail'

[974] Frye 1968, Pl. XXVII, Fig. 24; Harmatta and Pékáry 1971.

[975] Harmatta and Pékáry 1971, 470.

or small stem which joins the lower horizontal 'foot' of the *nun/waw*. These two examples may well help explain why the *ḥet* became indistinguishable from the *alef* in much later cursive: when it is ligatured, even this older form of the grapheme can be confused with a ligatured *alef*; the wavy head of the *ḥet* becomes simplified to a rounded, open-topped square, and the ligature to the left resembles the 'tail' which finishes the cursive *alef*. Other than this striking example of the influence of cursive, the shapes of the graphemes themselves are rather formal in the ostracon, with few simplifications. The *mem* is neatly crossed to the left and the *pe* is almost a perfect circle; the *yod* is shaped like a comma, open towards the left when it is in the middle of a word but towards the bottom in word-final position; the *dalet* has a clear 3-shape and even the main stem of the *kaf* retains in most cases its 3-like shape with cedilla, even though it is less exaggerated than in the *dalet*. If this list of professions was a writing exercise, then it was a very carefully executed one, with well-formed legible graphemes, good spacing between words and some elegant stylisations. The script on the ostracon belongs mid-way between the tiny parchment fragment – the most cursive and ligatured so far and presenting the most simplified graphemes – and the formal missive on the larger manuscript piece. It would also appear that the rougher surface of the clay potsherd was less conducing to horizontal ligatures, so that the main stylisations occupy the vertical line of writing. The comparison of the ostracon and parchment, written in the same period and in the same archaeological contexts are an illustration of how the writing medium also, as well as the purpose of the document can influence script style, the tendency towards ligatures and even the choice of stylisations. These three document fragments also indicate that many of the features which are characteristic of much later, Islamic period manuscript Middle Persian, be it the shape of the graphemes, their cursive simplifications/elongations as well as ligature conventions already existed in the manuscript documents of the early Sasanian period or were well on their way.

The Parthian written vestiges of Dura.

Before turning to the much-discussed Middle Persian graffiti painted on the frescoes of the synagogue, a brief word ought to be said of the palaeography of the Parthian parchment and ostraca found at Dura. Although the focus of this study is Middle Persian, the Sasanian imperial chancery was, as we saw above, resolutely bilingual.

In his review of Richard Frye's photographic edition of the parchments and ostraca from Dura, Christopher Brunner considered that the scripts in the Parthian documents broadly agree with one another and more importantly attest to the "continuation" of the script style

illustrated in the texts from Avrōmān.[976] He concedes however that the Dura manuscripts present more cursive forms, with several simplified and lengthened graphemes, heralding "modification towards their Sasanian forms".[977] It certainly is easy to appreciate when comparing the Avrōmān parchments with that from Dura that the Parthian script had undergone some changes in the two centuries preceding the rise of the Sasanian dynasty.[978] Many of the Parthian graphemes in the Avrōmān corpus were closely related to their Aramaic prototypes. The *alef* is an archaizing three-pronged star; the *shin* takes the shape of an upward-facing trident; the *bet* is a wide angle opened to the left; the heads of the *kaf* and *resh* are still markedly concave (like a Latin 'y'); the *qof* is completely rounded, like a Latin P, true to Aramaic practice. These letters have all acquired their Sasanian forms in the Dura texts **[Fig. 7.5]**: the *shin* is now fully upright; the head of the *resh* and *kaf* are flattened out; the *bet* has lost much of its angular quality and acquired the characteristic elongated, reversed C-shape of the Sasanian period; the *qof* is angular and open towards the bottom. The Parthian parchment of Dura does not present any ligatures, but, like at Avrōmān, the letters lean and merge into each other, touching and linking along the line of writing. The script of the sale contract at Avrōmān is overall much neater and the words are much more clearly and regularly spaced. In both sets of documents the main stylisations take the form of exaggerated elongations of graphemes in word-final positions. Still, at Avrōmān, the elongations are typically towards the bottom, with the vertical stems of the *nun*, *qof* and *lamed* extended all the way to the lower line in the case of the two first; to the upper line in the latter. In the Dura parchment, the elongations are along the horizontal line: the lower tails of the *dalet* and *nun* curve sharply left and can underline the entire following word.

As Brunner observed, the script on the Parthian ostraca of Dura is very close to that on the parchment found on the same site **[Fig. 7.6]**. The description of the letter shapes made above for the parchment is valid for the potsherds. Both also share characteristic features, such as the tendency for the *waw* to become almost fully circular or again the minimal gap between words; like in the parchment, the stylisation of word-final letters in the ostraca mainly consist

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[976] Brunner 1972, 494-495. Note that of the three parchments at Avrōmān: one parchment is written entirely in Parthian; the other two parchments are written in Greek, one of which has an endorsement in Parthian on the verso.

[977] Brunner 1972, 495.

[978] For a reproduction of the better-preserved Parthian parchment of Avrōmān, see Minns 1915, Pl. III. For the Parthian parchment from Dura, see Altheim and Stiehl 1952, 73, Fig. 1 and (Henning in) Welles, Fink and Gilliam 1959, 414-415; for the Parthian ostraca from Dura, see Harmatta 1958.

in extending along the horizontal line the lower tails of the *nun* and *kaf* so that it underlines or comes to touch the first letter of the following word. The number 1 which often ends the lines – this indicates, as mentioned above, the amount of flour allocated to the names listed in the ostracon – is made to dip way below the line, either at an angle or straight down. As Brunner noted however, the script in the ostraca is overall more cursive, with many simplified graphemes: at times, it becomes difficult to tell the *dalet*, *resh*, *kaf*, *nun* and even *bet* (particularly if it is in the middle of a word) apart. Nevertheless, the difference in script between the Parthian parchment and ostraca of Dura is not as marked as that between the Middle Persian parchments and ostracon from the same site. This brief overview of the Parthian script style attested at Dura and its comparison with the parchments from Avrōmān (dated to 33 CE), shows that Parthian graphemes had resolutely moved away from Aramaic prototypes and reached their 'final' Sasanian forms by the middle of the third century BCE. While the documents from Dura attest to the bilingual nature of the Sasanian chancery, they also indicate that both scripts remained firmly distinct: in the study of Persis coinage, we had been able to observe the direct influence of Parthian numismatic script, which included 'wholesale' borrowings from the Parthian alphabet into the legends of the Persian vassal kings. By the early Sasanian period, both scripts had much evolved but each firmly in its own way, developing different characteristic features. In particular, the tendency towards ligatures illustrated by the Middle Persian manuscripts from this period has no counterpart in contemporary Parthian documents: although these do present some stylisations, elongations of word-final letters and examples of graphemes leaning into each other, the scribes writing in Parthian almost always lifted their writing instrument to draw the next letter.

II. The Middle Persian dipinti and graffiti from Dura Europos.

The dipinti of the Dura synagogue.

In the most recent and comprehensive publication of the Dura graffiti and inscriptions, David Noy and Hanswulf Bloedhorn document sixteen Middle Persian dipinti painted on the frescoes – technically tempera brushed into dried plaster – of the synagogue.[979] All four walls of the synagogue were covered with narrative compositions divided into three registers, top (register A), middle (B) and bottom (C).[980] The Middle Persian dipinti are all written on the frescoes of

[979] Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, 177-209.

[980] Mesnil du Buisson 1934a and 1934b; Hachlili 2010.

the lower register C, at about eye-level. They concentrate on two of the painted scenes: the Triumph of Mordecai, and one panel of the Elijah cycle – where Elijah revives the widow's son (1 Kings 17:21-22). Both these scenes are adjacent to one another and located to the left of the niche, directly opposite the synagogue's main door.[981] It should be noted from the outset that in many historical contexts, writing on a work of art or monument was not necessarily considered subversive or destructive, in the same way that graffiti often is today – in fact, it was quite often an expression of admiration or devotion.[982] Scholars have also noticed that the authors of the dipinti took particular care not to damage or 'deface' the paintings with their inscriptions,[983] some even considered them as "participating in the structures they occupy, reasserting rather than contradicting the integrity of the painted form".[984] The dipinti are neatly painted in spaces of lighter colour offered by the representation (a foot, a calf, the shoulder of Mordecai's horse and its flank, a piece of fabric) and are naturally delimited by the outer lines of the figures, adapting to the shape of the space. Depending on the space available and the author's artistic whim, the dipinti are either written horizontally (on Haman's thigh, in a long, rectangular, neatly 'justified' text; on a bystander's *himation*) or vertically (along Mordecai's horse's hindquarters; below his saddle).[985]

The Middle Persian dipinti are not the only inscriptions in the synagogue, nor even the only inscriptions on those painted scenes. Other written vestiges of the synagogue include: visitors' graffiti in Aramaic, with the author's characteristic plea to the reader to remember them; 'official' inscriptions commemorating the benefactors who funded renovations; painted 'captions' in Aramaic, which name specific figures in the pictorial scenes – such as 'Moses', 'Esther' – and label the subject matter depicted in the scene, 'Moses, when he parted the sea'. It should be noted concerning the 'donor inscriptions' – in Greek and/or Aramaic – that the formula, "X made this painting/scene", makes it sometimes difficult to decide whether the person named 'made' the painting in a literal sense or was the benefactor who funded it. Noy and Bloedhorn agree to view the latter as more probable.[986]

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[981] See the diagram in Mesnil du Buisson 1934b, 560.

[982] For a recent study of graffiti in the ancient word, see Harmaşah, Ragazzoli *et al*. 2017; Guichard 2014.

[983] Grenet 1988, 134.

[984] Wharton 1995, 49, cited in Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, 180.

[985] Frye 1968, Pl. I – XII.

[986] Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, 153-154.

Of scribes and painters: the authors of the dipinti.

As mentioned above, the identity of the authors of the dipinti as well as their motivations for writing on the synagogue's frescoes has been the subject of a lively scholarly debate. This is in part because their damaged state makes the reading of key words difficult. In the first major study dedicated to the Middle Persian dipinti, Antonino Pagliaro assumed that the Persian scribes – *dibīr*, spelled either *dpyr* or, more often, *dpywr* – named in the inscriptions were the painters of the synagogue's frescoes, proudly signing their work of art.[987] This was an idea put forward in the very first publication dedicated to the synagogue paintings by the Comte du Mesnil du Buisson. He considered that while the conception of the narrative compositions was no doubt the responsibility of the religious head of the Dura Jewish community, the frescoes were executed by 'foreign mercenaries'.[988] He attributed the scene figuring the Triumph of Mordecai to the hand of a "Maître Iranien", based both on more or less convincing stylistic and iconographic details such as Mordecai's Iranian dress and the treatment of his horse ("Quand il [le maître iranien] peint des chevaux son intérêt s'éveille – et c'est encore là le caractère iranien"[989]), and on the presence of the Middle Iranian dipinti, which he took to be the Iranian master's signature.[990] In his study of the dipinti, Pagliaro argued that there was no clear distinction between scribe and painter in the Sasanian period. He drew a comparison with the seeming lack of distinction made between scribe and painter – or more exactly 'illuminator' – in Manichaean texts: illustrated books were probably the most renowned religious artistic medium used by Manichaean followers to record and circulate their ideas.[991] The books juxtaposed pictorial scenes with texts and enlarged, coloured letters, creating a three-dimensional effect.

Encouraged by his assumption that the Persian *dibīr* of Dura were painters, Pagliaro interpreted several key words in the dipinti as technical terms relating to the art of painting: *nidipist*, *nidipit*, *nikartan*[992] were all verbs expressing the notion of "dipingere" ('to paint'); *dipān* as "figure" (figures); *dip*, which in this context would mean 'painting' rather than the usual 'written document'. In their study of the synagogue inscriptions, Altheim and Stiehl followed Pagliaro in assuming that the Persian *dibīr* were painters, and so did Jean de Menasce

[987] Pagliaro 1941, 583.

[988] Mesnil du Buisson 1934a, 119.

[989] Mesnil du Buisson 1934b, 563.

[990] Mesnil du Buisson 1934a, 115.

[991] Pagliaro 1941, 584; see also Gulacsi 2008.

[992] I reproduce here Pagliaro's transcriptions, his readings have since been rejected.

in his critical review of their *Asien und Rom*.[993] While Pagliaro regarded the Persian painters as 'complete strangers' to the Jewish religion and 'cultural environment' of the synagogue – he suggested that the artists were called in from Persia proper for the project, but went home during the hot summer – Altheim and Stiehl argued they were Jewish Persians. Although he does not explain it clearly, Pagliaro's feeling that the dipinti are extraneous to the frescoes is probably due to the fact the short texts do not 'label' or 'name' the figures they are written on; nor do they offer any indication that the authors understood what they were looking at: the dipinti refer to 'this painting/picture' – *nk'l* or *nk'ly*, easily legible in a number of inscriptions – in a vague manner. Only two of the inscriptions are tentatively thought to 'comment' on the scene of the revival of the child by Elijah, but without naming the latter.[994] The synagogue is also imprecisely referred to as ZNE BYTA 'this house'.[995] In several dipinti, the scribes state that they came (YATWN) and saw(?) the "*by'm'y/bym'y*". Scholars generally agree that this may render the Greek *βῆμα*, 'platform, tribunal', although this was categorically rejected by Geiger, who prefers to view it as a synonym for *nikār* 'picture'.[996] The latter also deciphered the word *ptlstky*, *padrastag*[997] in several dipinti, which he takes to mean the 'edifice', a synonym for *BYTA*.[998] In the current state of conservation of the inscriptions it is impossible to either challenge or support his decipherments of this word; nevertheless, as Noy and Bloedhorn noted, Geiger had to resort to heavy emendations to come to this reading.[999] Finally, Noy and Bloedhorn observed that the scribes present characteristically Zoroastrian names: this, admittedly, would not necessarily exclude the possibility that they were Jewish; nevertheless, the other donors named in inscriptions or captions in the synagogue are either Greek or Aramaic.[1000] Geiger found the proposition that the Persian scribes were Iranian Jews ludicrous.[1001]

Pagliaro's idea that (some of) the frescoes of the synagogue were the work of Iranian artists was dismissed by Geiger who published a new edition of the Middle Persian dipinti. He

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[993] de Menasce 1952.

[994] Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, 197-198, 200-202; Geiger 1956, 284, 309-311.

[995] Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, 185-187.

[996] Geiger 1956, 307; Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, 192-193. This term would nowadays be transcribed *nigār*.

[997] After MacKenzie 1986, this term would now be transcribed *payrastag*.

[998] Geiger 1956, 299; Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, 190-194.

[999] Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, 189.

[1000] Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, 179.

[1001] Geiger 1956, 299.

refuted the argument concerning the lack of distinction between painter and scribe in the Manichaean context: the former was referred to as *niγārgar*, 'picture-maker'.[1002] Geiger judged Pagliaro's and Altheim and Stiehl's studies "complete failures" and believed that the scribes were "Iranian visitors sent to Dura by the Sasanian king before the fall of the city as members of his retinues of ambassadors".[1003] He also identified a *zandak ī yahūdān* or 'official' of the Jews in one inscription, which prompted him to conclude that the scribes were accompanied during their diplomatic visit to the synagogue by the religious head of the Jewish community who was in charge of explaining the meanings of the paintings to them.[1004] The words read by Pagliaro as specialized terms relating to the art of painting Geiger re-deciphered as a series of verbs expressing the notion of 'seeing/beholding': the scribes would be commemorating their visit to the synagogue, indicating that they had viewed/seen/beheld the frescoes. Where Pagliaro had deciphered *nidipist* and *nidipīt* Geiger read *nkylyt* (*nigerīd*) *ndyšyt* (*niyīšīt*) and *psčyt* (supposedly deriving from the Old Iranian root *ci-* 'to see', emended and transcribed as *patčīt*).[1005] In order to support his readings, however, Geiger has to explain previously unknown Middle Persian terms, assume a number of scribal 'errors' and tax the scribes of being 'utterly confused'.[1006] Geiger's reading of *zandak ī yahūdān* has also been emended to *bandak ī yahūdān*, 'servant of the Jews', discrediting the idea that the Persian scribes were given a presentation by the head of the Jewish community during an official visit.[1007]

Key words in the Middle Persian dipinti.

Nevertheless, Geiger's readings were overall a marked improvement on Pagliaro's (and Altheim and Stiehl's) and are generally accepted; isolated corrections and improvements have been put forward by scholars, and have been taken into account by Noy and Bloedhorn in their latest edition of the texts.[1008] In the current state of conservation of the Middle Persian dipinti, and based solely on Frye's plates, it is practically impossible to agree or disagree with either Geiger's readings or the recent emendations to them. Some brief remarks may be made none

[1002] Geiger 1956, 287.

[1003] Geiger 1956, 300.

[1004] Geiger 1956, 285, 299-300.

[1005] Geiger 1956, 284, 292-297.

[1006] Geiger 1956, 298, 303.

[1007] Grenet 1988, 144; Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, 187-190.

[1008] Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, 177-209, prepared with the assistance of Philip Huyse who provided, as well as emendations, the transcriptions for the readings of the dipinti.

the less. Keywords such as the dating formulae, *dpywr*/*dypr*, *nk'l*/*nk'ly*, *BYTA* and *by'm'y* can be clearly read in several dipinti and present no difficulty of decipherment. The synagogue dipinti are authored by a group of Persian functionaries who call themselves 'scribes' and mention the 'images' next to which (ZNE, *ēn*) they wrote their message; they describe the synagogue as a 'house' and mention what appears to be a *bēma*. The main verb (often the last word) which describes what the scribes actually did with regards to the frescoes is much more difficult to ascertain because of breaks in the plaster and the rubbing of the ink.

In Plate I of Frye's edition, the final word – the main verb – was read by Pagliaro *prgst*, *pargast* ("fu compiuto", 'was completed') and by Geiger *ptčyt*, *patčīt* 'was observed, viewed' and later emended to *psndyt*, *passandīd* by Huyse and Grenet.[1009] The difficulty is that the second letter is a little damaged and the scribe has written the third and fourth letters very close together. In my opinion, based on the picture, it is very difficult to decipher anything else than the letters *psynyt* **[Fig. 7.7]**. This reading was in fact proposed by Jean de Menasce in his review of Altheim and Stiehl's edition of the inscriptions; he took it to be the verb *pēsīdan*, 'to paint, colour', translating it as 'had painted, copied'.[1010] Grenet also declared that de Menasce's reading was "la seule qui peut être maintenue après contrôle sur l'original"[1011] – but later retracted this statement preferring *passandīd*. This word does not have a counterpart in the other dipinti. For this one inscription therefore, perhaps de Menasce's (and Grenet's) original reading and his suggestion that the scribe had the fresco painted or copied is the one that ought to be maintained. In Plate II, the inscription is thought to end with the words *'pryny krty* (*āfrīn kard*): the letter *lyny krty* are clearly legible but unfortunately the first two letters are destroyed. If the reconstruction is correct, the scribes record that they 'paid homage to/praised' the pictures.[1012] The other two main verbs read by Geiger, based on which he argued that the scribes 'viewed' or 'beheld' the pictures, are *nigerīd* and the otherwise unknown *ndyšyt* (which he considers synonymous with the former).[1013] The first, *nigerīd*, he deciphered in Plates II, III, VII, VIII and X. The relevant passages in Plates II, III and VIII are unfortunately too damaged to offer any trace of the word any longer. In Plate VII however, at the end of line 3, the letters *AP-šn by'm'[y] [??]kylyt* are clearly legible: this phrase can plausibly be transcribed as *u-šān*

[1009] Frye 1968, Pl. I; Pagliaro 1941, 612-613; Geiger 1956, 293-295; Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, 181-185.

[1010] de Menasce 1952, 516.

[1011] Grenet 1988, 155, n. 85.

[1012] Frye 1968, Pl. II; Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, 185-187.

[1013] Geiger 1956, 284, 292-297.

[the scribes] *bēma nigerīd*. Still, it is important to note that the verb *nigerīd* in this case refers to the *bēma* rather than to the pictures. In Plate X, line 3, the following letters can be securely deciphered: *nk'l [?]kldyt*. Geiger reconstructs the letters *ny* in the gap preceding the second word and argues that the verb *nykldyt* is a pseudo-historical spelling of *nigerīd*. The occurrences of the second verb, *nydyšyt*, in Plates III, V and VI are no less problematic. Once again, plate III is now too damaged to allow any reading of the word. In both plates V and VI, the main verb *nydyšyt* follows the word *by'm'y* – just as in plate VII therefore, the main verb is directly linked to the *bēma* rather than to that of *nk'l*: in plate V the fourth letter is unfortunately lost because of a slip in the plaster but the letters *ndy[?]yt* are clearly legible; in plate VI the ink has rubbed a lot but the following letters of the last word can be read, *ndy[š][y]t*. This brief overview of the key words deciphered in the dipinti does not mean to put in question the fact that the Persian scribes 'beheld' the pictures. Still, it aims to show that what exactly they did at the synagogue remains difficult to ascertain without new and better readings. Furthermore, whereas the verbs 'to see/look at/behold' can be read with reasonable confidence in several cases, in almost all of them it is the *by'm'y* which is the direct object of the (seeing) action: in this way, perhaps the focus of any further analysis of the dipinti should move away from the scribes' role with respect to the *nigār* and instead shift towards what the enigmatic *bēma* may have represented.

Palaeography of the Middle Persian dipinti from the Dura synagogue.

In his review of Frye's photographic edition, Brunner grouped all the Middle Persian written vestiges together when he regarded them as precious illustrations of the cursive script of the third century CE.[1014] Yet, as demonstrated above, the Middle Persian inscribed parchments and ostracon show different versions of the 'standard' cursive hand of the early Sasanian period. By comparison, the synagogue dipinti present a much more formal, 'lapidary' style script. These present a number of cursive features also illustrated in the parchment and ostracon, but the letter shapes themselves are generally more ornate and better distinguished – the authors of the dipinti, who were careful to mention that they were professional Sasanian scribes, were evidently eager to show off their scribal skills. The dipinti had a different purpose to the parchments and ostracon: they were made to last, to commemorate the passage or work – whatever the exact reason was – of their authors, while the other Middle Persian written vestiges record administrative notes, transactions or communications. The dipinti were all

[1014] Brunner 1972, 493.

executed by different hands; each displays a personal style and its own idiosyncrasies, as well as varying degrees of care in the execution of the letters. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this study, the dipinti can be taken as a whole: the following observations will highlight characteristic features and broad tendencies that this small corpus of texts displays, and only point out some of the more striking or specific scribal details or peculiarities.

Almost all the dipinti of the synagogue present the combined used of cursive and more ornamental/monumental letter styles within the same inscription, the same line or even the same word. There is no 'rule' dictating the choice of one style or the other for a particular grapheme although certain trends can be identified. The first line – sometimes the first two – is typically the 'neatest', presenting the use of more monumental letters: the scribe's hand has a marked tendency to become more cursive towards the end of the dipinti. This was also a feature of the larger parchment fragment, the missive between two Sasanian military officials. We can similarly posit for the dipinti that the monumental style of lettering was considered more 'elegant' but also co-existed with a more rapid, cursive, 'natural' hand. Then, the use of monumental-style lettering is apparently favoured when writing heterograms. This is particularly striking in the case of the *lamed*: in oft-occurring, short heterograms such as OL ('to') and AL ('not') and whatever line the word appears in, the grapheme is always an archaising, Aramaic *lamed*, with a long vertical line ended by a – sometimes very exaggerated – hook **[Fig. 7.8]**. In such cases, the *lamed* is also often oversized – about ten times as big as the preceding *waw* or *alef* – and if the word finishes a line, it can take up almost three-lines-worth of space.[1015] In other, phonetically-written words that contain a *lamed*, the difference in treatment of this letter is notable: the grapheme is reduced to a single vertical line, sometimes even drawn at a slight angle – characteristic of later Middle Persian cursive script – and almost always links to the left with the following letter. It is often exaggeratedly elongated, easily reaching the upper line, sometimes touching or even crossing it – a typical stylisation as seen above – but in phonetically written words the *lamed* never presents the Aramaic lower 'hook'. The Aramaic-style graphemes of certain heterograms do concern only the *lamed*. In Plate I the scribe appears to have made a distinction between the letters *qof* and *mem* in the aramaeogram QDM, *abar* ('on/in'): the *qof* did not represent a phonetic reality in Middle Persian and was only used to spell heterograms, with a grapheme that became identical to that of the *mem*. It is not clear when the two letters stopped being differentiated in Middle Persian; the distinction was kept in Parthian into the Sasanian period. In the last word of the first line (Plate I), the first

[1015] Frye 1968, Plate I.

letter is a distinctively monumental *mem*, with a small 'dip' in the loop just below the left cross; the last letter of the same word is a much more simplified, cursive *mem* **[Fig. 7.8]**. Because of the dipinti's bad state of preservation, it is difficult to tell in the other instances of the word *QDM* whether this differentiation was systematic. It certainly seems to be the case again in line 3 of Plate XII, where the cross of the *mem* is left to 'trail' in a typically cursive way, whereas the Q is neat and monumental. It is also possible however that the distinction between Q and M in these cases stems from the fact that the beginning of words, like the beginning of lines and texts, tends to be more carefully written and ornamental. Still, the 'survival' of Aramaic-style graphemes in armaeograms is a feature of Islamic period Middle Persian manuscripts – as if the heterograms were not only a vehicle for 'frozen' Aramaic words but for graphemes also. This convention can certainly be seen as formalised, in the case of the *lamed* at least, by the mid-third century CE in the dipinti. Finally, the position of the letter in the word also seems to influence its style: thus the *resh*, *waw* and *nun* in the middle of a word, especially in oft-occurring words like 'month' or 'this', tend to be simplified down to a single short vertical line; this makes them difficult to tell apart from the *zain* (see line 1 of Plate X with the phrase *YWM [Hor]mezd*) **[Fig. 7.9]**. Otherwise, the *resh* and the *waw*, virtually indistinguishable, take the form of a curvy '2', while the *nun* is like a Latin 'L'. The *mem* in word final position often takes a cursive shape that resembles the much later manuscript grapheme: the lower strand of the cross is elongated and left to 'trail', sometimes all the way down to the lower line, making it look almost like a Latin 'p' (see the *mem* in the middle of line 1 in Plate VI). Similarly, in Plate V, we have a striking example of a cursive *ṣade* in word final position, at the end of the first component of the compound name 'Burz-Ādur' **[Fig. 7.10]**: the *ṣade* adopts an *alef*-type head with a long curling tail which curves back to the right and links with the *lamed* directly preceding it. It certainly appears that the scribe wrote the *l+č* pair of his name in a single stroke; the pair is also 'underlined', by the long lower bar of the *bet*, significantly contributing to the overall stylisation of his name. As such, the ligatured, cursive *ṣade* has little to do with its monumental counterpart, although it has not yet acquired the distinctive 'reversed-question mark' form of later Middle Persian cursive either; rather, it is reminiscent of this grapheme's shape in the parchment known as the 'Pahlavi Psalter' (discussed below).

Stylisations and ligatures in the Middle Persian dipinti.

As for the Middle Persian parchments and ostracon, the main stylisations in the dipinti consist in the exaggerated elongations of graphemes, either vertically or horizontally: as mentioned,

the stem of the *lamed* can be elongated one to two lines up; the bottom curve of the 3-shaped *dalet* can sometimes reach the line below; the bottom stem of the cross of the *mem* can be stretched down; the bottom horizontal stroke of the *bet*, particularly if it begins a word, is typically elongated so that it underlines the entire following or two-following words; the lower horizontal foot of the *nun*, if this letter is in word final position, will similarly be stretched all the way back to underline the word it finishes; the lower 'cedilla' of the *kaf* can also reach quite far backwards. In several cases, the *shin* is made into a long horizontal line with its two little hooks perched all the way towards the left end, effecting an exaggerated elongation of this grapheme.

Although there are multiple examples of ligatures in the dipinti, they are certainly not as accentuated as in the smallest parchment fragment; they mainly consist in the leftward lengthening of a grapheme so that it joins the following one, but in most cases the scribe clearly lifted his writing instrument between the letters. A few exceptions include oft-occurring letter pairs: in the conjunction *AP* which begins many sentences in Middle Persian, both graphemes are systematically written in one stroke; this also seems to be the case for the letter combinations š+n and perhaps also l+a/y. Such 'true' (mini-)ligatures do not have counterparts in the Parthian material from Dura, where letters lean into each other but are written separately: this seems to be a specific feature of cursive Middle Persian, as early as the 3rd century CE. Then, the *bet* beginning a word is typically lengthened and the letters that immediately follow it are made to rest upon its lower horizontal bar, sometimes even crossing it (the *waw*, *resh*, or even wavy *ḥet* can cross it; see the first word in Plate I). This was a type of ligature/stylisation that already featured in later Persis coins (see chapter 6, with the aramaeogram BYN). Again, it is characteristic of Middle Persian and does not exist in Parthian. Other graphemes that are lengthened to support following letters or may even 'cross' through them include (but are not limited to) the *alef* and the *lamed*. On Plate XI, line 1 the left 'tail' of the *alef* supports the letter *yod* and crosses through the middle of the *kaf* in the aramaeogram AYK (*ku*, 'that') **[Fig. 7.12]**. The *lamed* typically reaches and can cross the upper line of writing. In Plate XII, in the aramaeogram LK (*tō*, 'you') in the first line, the *kaf* is written through the lower hook of the *lamed* **[Fig. 7.11]**. The Middle Persian dipinti also offer several examples of the changing shape of the cursive *ḥet*, already highlighted above for the smaller parchment fragment. Especially when this letter is in word-initial position, it takes the shape of an *alef* with a trailing left tail which links with the following grapheme. In such cases, the only real difference between this letter and an *alef* is that its 'head' is written above the main line of writing, whereas an *alef* rests upon it. Here again, we can posit that the effort to 'link' this letter to the following

grapheme heralded its much later cursive shape, when it became indistinguishable from the *alef*.

Prototypes of later 'corrupted' forms in the Dura dipinti.

The increased tendency towards ligatures, including in script-styles using more formal lettering like the synagogue dipinti, was responsible for certain 'corrupted' forms: in late Middle Persian manuscript certain oft-occurring words almost became graphemes in themselves and the original letters that composed them are difficult to single out. It is likely that later scribes were unable to distinguish the graphemes of such compositions and learned the forms almost as they would a 'logograms'. The Middle Persian dipinti from Dura retain the prototypes of such corrupted forms, which help trace how these terms became single, distinctive blocks. An example of this process is the aramaeogram AYK, *kū*, which typically introduces indirect speech. In late cursive it takes the shape of three little hooks all linked together and terminated by a sign which at first sight resembles a large number 2 – a loop with the main stem stretching down and back below the word. An early form of this heterogram can be found in Plate XI, where the letters *alef*, *yod* and *kaf*, although linked, are still perfectly distinguishable **[Fig. 7.12]**. The *kaf* takes its ornamental shape – a number three with a cedilla, which as we saw in the previous chapter was probably introduced by scribes to distinguish it from the *dalet*; the cedilla reaches right back, underlining the word, a stylisation which is characteristic for this grapheme in word-final position. The 'corrupted form' of later manuscripts can easily be explained: the scribes came to write this word exactly as it appears in Plate XI but without lifting their writing instrument; the result was three ligatured hooks terminating in a loop – the head of the *kaf* linked to the preceding *yod* – with a simplified, straight stem reaching down and back below the word. A very similar explanation can be given for the 'corrupted' form of the aramaeogram LK, *tō*. In later manuscripts it presents the shape of a long vertical stem linked to a 2-shaped grapheme: this is here again a case of the ornamental *kaf* being ligatured to the preceding *lamed* and reaching back below the word in a characteristic early Sasanian stylisation. One of the more striking 'corrupted' late Middle Persian cursive forms concerns the heterogram BYN, *andar* ('in').[1016] It is written as a deep hook – reaching below the line of writing – linked to a smaller hook and terminated by a vertical line which curves back to the

[1016] It should be noted that although the examples mentioned here are all aramaeograms, corrupted forms concern words in *plene* also, such as Hormazd: the main criterion appears to be their frequent occurrence.

right. The composition is then crossed at an angle by an oblique line: it is very difficult to guess the graphemes that constitute it.

As Brunner recognised, the dipinti record a prototype of this very 'corrupted' form (in which the letters have merged to the point of being unidentifiable as individual graphemes), in line 4 of Plate V **[Fig. 7.12]**.[1017] Now, the preceding chapter showed that the Persis coins already presented ligatured forms for this word. It was one of the first examples of Middle Persian graphemes linking and crossing. On the coins, the lower horizontal line of the *bet* is lengthened and the *yod*, drawn like a comma, is made to rest on this lower bar; the *nun*, placed close to the *yod*, crosses the lower stroke of the *bet* vertically. In the dipinti, the BYN corresponds exactly to this description, with one added feature: the *nun* is not simplified to a straight line like in the Persis coin but takes its ornamental shape, with a lower right 'foot'; this foot is stretched back below the word, 'underlining' it. Here again, we may posit that the later, corrupted form resulted from the scribal tendency to mark ligatures: scribes increasingly drew the same letters, with their stylisations, but without lifting their writing instrument. In this way, the first deep hook is the head of the *bet*, directly ligatured the *yod*, which forms the second hook; the pair is terminated by a straight downward line which reaches back to the right – the *nun*. The reason the *bet* lost its elongated horizontal stroke is simply because this allowed the scribe to draw the entire word in one go, without lifting his writing instrument and 'going back' to the head of the *bet* to add the *yod* and *nun* on its lower bar. Was the oblique line that crosses the later composition a way of representing the truncated 'tail' of the *bet*?

Investigating the formation of later cursive 'corrupted' forms.

The above overview of the earliest examples of ligatures, stylisations and the influence of cursive script allows us to contribute to a scholarly debate concerning the development of 'corrupted' forms such as BYN. Barr argued that to understand the formation of such compositions, one must "start from cursive forms of the elements forming the ligatures and not from the forms of the letters such as they appear on the stone monuments or in the Psalter MSS. written in archaic script":[1018] corrupted BYN cannot have originated from monumental B + Y

[1017] Brunner 1972, 495-496.

[1018] Barr 1936, 399, n. 2. Barr was here arguing against Nyberg and Henning's explanations of the peculiar grapheme or 'flourish' (Schnörkel) which can end verbal heterograms and which is identical in shape to the 'corrupted' cursive BYN. Nyberg considered that this verbal ending was the ligature of monumental Parthian *yod* + *he* (Nyberg 1928, 13). In his review of Nyberg's *Hilfsbuch,* Henning rejected Nyberg's hypothesis that

+ N, where the letters are kept separate. Any ligatures that occur on monuments are directly influenced by the cursive script which "in Persia as everywhere has developed independently and apart from the monumental script".[1019] Barr held that corrupted BYN stemmed from a cursive ligature of *bet+yod* with an added *nun*; he regarded the oblique stroke which crosses BYN as an ornamental element, binding the elements of the word together. Brunner by contrast argued that the dipinti of Dura were the "true source of Pahlavi BYN" and gave a (rather obscure) critique of Barr's explanation for the formation of the later corrupted form.[1020] He agreed with Barr that Sasanian inscriptional B+Y+N could not be the prototype of cursive BYN, but rejects his explanation of a *bet+yod* ligature with an added final *nun*: in the dipinti, while the *bet* can be ligatured with following graphemes, it always keeps its long lower horizontal stroke; it is never truncated. Rather for Brunner, the shape as we have it in the Dura dipinti "gradually became rounded and condensed" until it was unanalysable to scribes. Although he does not say so explicitly, Brunner seems to regard Barr's 'ornamental' oblique stroke as the remainder of the truncated tail of the bet.

There are a number of problems with the explanations given above which appear to me to be due to a problematic understanding of the articulation between monumental and cursive scripts in early Sasanian Iran. When Barr argues that late corrupted BYN cannot have derived from the monumental Middle Persian script and must necessarily stem from cursive practice, he is rejecting the idea of a diachronic evolution from monumental to cursive. This is certainly supported by the evidence presented in both the preceding chapter and this one: different graphic registers, with intermediary forms – depending on the context or the scribe's whim – coexisted in pre-Sasanian and Sasanian Iran. On the other hand, his view that they evolved separately is inaccurate: monumental and cursive were not kept hermetically apart, and as the overview of the Dura material shows, the same scribes not only wrote both scripts, but also wrote them in the same text or the same word, drawing on both registers to achieve elegant stylisations. For this reason, the monumental or inscriptional Middle Persian script is probably best viewed as 'ornamental' rather than archaic or even archaising; the preceding chapter demonstrated that it was probably created in the wake of the rise of the Sasanian dynasty, to celebrate a new era, and drew both on older, formal letter-shapes as well as innovations

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elements of monumental Arsacid script could have made their way into Sasanian Middle Persian but did agree that this ornamental ending could be traced back to monumental Middle Persian letters (Henning 1935, 6).

[1019] Barr 1936, 399, n. 2.

[1020] Brunner 1972, 495-496.

introduced by a lively local cursive scribal tradition. Of course, there is some overlap between 'older forms' and a 'formal' script: un-simplified graphemes were evidently considered elegant, including in the context of cursive or semi-cursive documents. Appreciating the dynamic relationship between monumental and cursive forms is essential to study the development of 'corrupted' cursive forms. Barr regarded cursive letters as the base elements for such compositions, but as we have seen, late, corrupted forms contain the blueprint of several ornamental/monumental letters – such as the *kaf* and *nun*, typically in word-final position, or the *bet* in word-initial position – that were deformed by their ligature to other letters which were themselves increasingly more cursive in shape. In this regard, Brunner's explanation of 'corrupted' BYN as being the result of the form seen in the Dura dipinti becoming gradually more 'rounded' and 'condensed' is rather vague: not only is it necessary to factor in the combined used of monumental and cursive forms in single ligatures, but what really seems to have set cursive Middle Persian apart was the Sasanian scribes' increasing practice of writing entire words without lifting their writing instrument. One only has to try to write the semi-monumental BYN as it appears at Dura **[Fig. 7.12]** in one long single stroke to end up with the corrupted form of late manuscripts. The addition of the oblique stroke was either an ornamental feature – such long lines are indeed typical of manuscript stylisations – or the representation of the characteristic, long tail of the *bet* which had been truncated in the scribe's effort to write the entire word without lifting his writing instrument. As to Brunner's argument of the Dura graffiti as the 'true source' of the corrupted form – no single document or corpus can probably be regarded as the ultimate source of a scribal form: as we have seen, BYN was one of the first words to present innovative ligatures in the coins of Persis. The different written Middle Persian vestiges that are extant were only a fragment of the manuscript material that was produced by Persian scribes: what drove the transformation of scribal forms was no doubt the innumerable repetition, along with innovations and stylisations, of words – the fact that 'corrupted' forms typically concern much often repeated terms is probably the best illustration of this process.

The Middle Persian and Parthian graffiti of Dura.

The Dura vestiges offer a last example of early Sasanian writing, with a graffito engraved on the door jamb of the synagogue's main entrance.[1021] Only the first two words have been tentatively deciphered by Geiger (*zwt'n* YATWN, which he translated as 'come sooner').

[1021] Geiger 1956, 283-284; Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, 209.

Brunner commented that the author of the graffito appeared to "copy the ligatures of the cursive dipinti".[1022] Apart from the two words tentatively read by Geiger, it is possible to clearly distinguish several individual graphemes and make some palaeographic observations. The inscription, scratched in one long, thin vertical line presents very angular letter-shapes: the thin writing instrument on the hard surface probably made it particularly difficult for its author to draw curves **[Fig. 7.13]**. The *dalet* takes the form of a 'zigzag' more than the rounded 3-shape of the neighbouring dipinti; the *mem* appears almost more triangular than rounded. The graphemes are also very disproportionate to one another, no doubt again because of the writing conditions: with this graffito, we are far from the carefully executed dipinti of the frescoes. Nevertheless, the script style of this inscription is somewhat comparable to that in the dipinti in that it combines cursive and monumental versions of the same graphemes, sometimes within a word. Here again, 'monumental' letters typically occur in word-initial and more often word-final position to effect flourish. Other stylisations include the exaggerated elongation of the main stem of the *lamed*, the lower stroke of the *bet* and sometimes also of the left tail of the *alef*.

Three Parthian graffiti are also engraved at the synagogue.[1023] Like the Middle Persian example they are scratched with a thin instrument which contributes to make the letters angular and disproportionate, making it difficult to tell such letters as the *samekh* and *pe* apart. One is engraved in the background of the Triumph of Mordecai and two on the Elijah cycle: the authors of the graffiti identify themselves as scribe and great scribe (*'prs'm* SPRA and *syh'r dpyr* RBA). Since these are the frescoes that concentrate many of the dipinti by the Persian scribes, it is tempting to see that the evocation of the authors' function, 'scribe', is a way of linking their graffiti to the dipinti. Their short signatures are much less carefully executed than the Middle Persian graffiti, however. Unusually for Parthian, two of the graffiti present ligatures of the pairs *alef*+*mem* and *alef*+*pe*: this may be due to the cursive script style; or perhaps the scribes were more used to writing Middle Persian and displaying their skills in Parthian cursive.

[1022] Brunner 1972, 497.

[1023] Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, 196-198, 199-200, 202-204.

III. The Pahlavi Psalter.

The peculiar case of the so-called "Pahlavi Psalter".

The written vestiges of Dura Europos constitute a precious record of the early Sasanian Middle Persian and Parthian scripts. They are also the last documented examples of manuscript Middle Persian for much of the remainder of the Sasanian period: the other Middle Persian manuscripts to have reached us all date to the very end of the Sasanian period or are post-Sasanian vestiges. Before closing this chapter however, the peculiar case of the manuscript known as the "Pahlavi Psalter" ought to be mentioned. Its date is much debated; while several scholars place it in the sixth or seventh centuries, Skjærvø has recently argued for a much earlier date, in the fourth century. Because of the possibility of this earlier date, and also because the manuscript offers an example of an unusual Middle Persian script which has crystallised scholarly debates, it seems relevant to briefly discuss it here.

The so-called Pahlavi Psalter is a manuscript of a Middle Persian translation of the Syriac Psalter that was found in Bulayïq near Turfan at the turn of the twentieth century during a series of German archaeological expeditions to Central Asia commissioned by the Königliche Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin.[1024] It consists of twelve fragmentary pages, many of which have suffered damage in the middle, as well as two additional smaller fragments, all belonging to a much larger and now lost book.[1025] The Pahlavi Psalter was found along with Syriac, Christian Sogdian and Christian Turkish material. The circumstances of its composition are difficult to establish. Middle Persian is not otherwise attested as a liturgical language used by Christians of Central Asia, although Manichaean Middle Persian, written in Manichaean script, is. The Middle Persian fragment constitutes an exception in this context and Desmond Durkin-Meinsterernst has convincingly identified it as a product of Sasanian Iran – it is likely to have been composed by a Christian community in Iran, which, when it moved to Central Asia, took its written documents with it.[1026] When this community left Iran and why – because of Sasanian persecutors or because of Arab conquerors? – and whether there was a Middle Persian scribal school established in Central Asia are questions that have to remain open for the present.

[1024] Andreas and Barr 1933; Asmussen 1964; Gignoux 1969; Skjærvø 1983; Gignoux 2002; Durkin-Meisterernst 2006.

[1025] For reproductions of the manuscript, see Andreas and Barr 1933, Tab. I-XI.

[1026] Durkin-Meisterernst 2006, 6-8.

The translator of the Middle Persian Psalter: Syriac or Persian?

Scholars strongly disagree concerning the identity – Syriac or Persian – of the translator of the psalter. Philippe Gignoux, in his careful comparison of the Middle Persian translation with the Syriac original, concluded that the translator was perhaps more at ease in Syriac than in Middle Persian.[1027] Gignoux namely notes a certain hesitation in the choice of Middle Persian words to render Syriac concepts, with a tendency to favour the transcription of Syriac terms rather than find adequate Persian equivalents. Durkin-Meisterernst more recently observed that the translator's recourse to Syriac transcriptions may have been a strategic 'exaggeration' of the Middle Persian script's tendency to use heterographic writing.[1028] Syriac, a younger form of Aramaic, presents identical spellings of some words which have become aramaeograms in Middle Persian: this means that entire lines of the translation are, at times, nearly identical to the Syriac original, a feature which may have been particularly attractive to the translator and an important motivation for his peculiar choice of words. Durkin-Meisterernst does agree with Gignoux however that there is, as a result, some ambiguity as to whether the translator meant certain terms as heterograms or Syriac transcriptions. The translator also often concurrently uses the transcription of a Syriac term and an equivalent Middle Persian translation; in some cases, both options are even juxtaposed in a rather awkward manner.[1029] Furthermore, the literal, etymological use of certain Middle Persian words to render Syriac concepts may either be a device used by the translator to stay as close as possible to the original or another indication that he was not a native Middle Persian speaker. Gignoux highlights his choice of the word *dastgird* to render Syriac *'bād īdayā* 'the work of hands': etymologically, Middle Persian *dastgird* is indeed composed of the elements *dast* 'hand' and *kard-* 'to do' but the term never appears in literature with this sense, widely taking on the meaning of 'domain, property'.[1030] Based on the translator's at times awkward linguistic choices, Gignoux suggested that he may have been one of the Nestorian missionaries sent throughout Asia in the 6th century, under the impetus of the Patriarch of the Church of the East, Mar Aba.[1031]

By contrast, Skjærvø argued that Middle Persian was the mother tongue of the translator of the Syriac Psalter.[1032] Skjærvø made a systematic investigation of key features of the

[1027] Gignoux 1969, 244.

[1028] Durkin-Meisterernst 2006, 5-6.

[1029] Gignoux 1969, 236.

[1030] Gignoux 1969, 241-242.

[1031] Gignoux 1969, 244.

[1032] Skjærvø 1983, 179.

morphological and syntactical structure of inscriptional Middle Persian and Parthian and compared his results with the language of the Pahlavi Psalter: his study showed that the Middle Persian translation was perfectly consistent with the early Sasanian inscriptions. In particular, like the inscriptions, the Pahlavi Psalter follows a two-case system in nouns and pronouns, in which the direct and oblique are formally and syntactically separate; this distinction disappeared in later manuscript Middle Persian texts.[1033] Skjærvø not only concluded that the author of the translation was Persian, but that the text may have been composed as early as the fourth century.[1034] The one important difference that Skjærvø did highlight between the inscriptions and the Psalter concerned the phonetic complements added to verbal ideograms: while early inscriptions lack a consistent system for the spelling of phonetic complements, the Psalter presents a regular system. However, he ascribed this difference to the divergence in local scribal traditions and the translator's endeavour to render the Syriac original in a consistent manner.[1035]

Dating the Pahlavi Psalter.

The studies of the language of the Pahlavi Psalter come hand in hand with a disagreement concerning its date. The manuscript's peculiar palaeography has also played an important part in the discussions concerning the text's composition **[Fig. 7.14]**. Friedrich Carl Andreas initially considered – like Gignoux – the 6th century as a *terminus ante quem*: Mar Aba, who composed some of the canons contained in the Middle Persian translation, died in the middle of the sixth century. However, he judged the script archaising and for palaeographic reasons decided to date the original translation – before the addition of Mar Aba's canons – to the 5th century.[1036] Barr, who published Andreas' edition posthumously, preferred to disregard the text's palaeography as a dating criterion, pointing out that the archaic script style it displays may have survived in Central Asia without being affected by scribal developments back in Iran.[1037] Based on the punctuation marks and diacritics that appear in the manuscript and that are unknown in Syriac manuscripts before the seventh century, he favoured this later date; he

[1033] Skjærvø 1983, 48.

[1034] Skjærvø 1983, 178-179.

[1035] Skjærvø 1983, 179.

[1036] Andreas and Barr 1933, 5-6.

[1037] Andreas and Barr 1933, 6.

agreed nevertheless that the initial translation may have been older.[1038] Durkin-Meisterernst supports Barr's rejection of the text's palaeography as a being a solid clue to its dating.[1039] He points out that although the Pahlavi Psalter does present the tendency – unlike later Middle Persian manuscripts – to differentiate graphemes, its peculiar script was apparently still used/read in the late or post-Sasanian period. Two letters belonging to the Psalter script have even been identified as inspiring the creation of graphemes for the later Avestan alphabet.[1040] For Durkin-Meisterernst, this shows that the 'Psalter script' was just "one representative of what must have been a number of (possibly local) scripts in use in the Sasanian empire".[1041] He even considers the possibility that the translation first existed in a more common cursive Middle Persian form, and was later copied into an 'archaising' palaeography because this formal script was "felt more appropriate to the character of the holy text".[1042] Indeed, Barr had already tentatively suggested that some of the misspellings found in the Psalter may have been due to the misreading (or mis-rendering) of an original cursive hand.[1043]

The script of the Pahlavi Psalter: combining monumental forms with ligatures.

One of the most striking features of the Pahlavi Psalter script is its systematic recourse to ligatures: the words are regularly spaced out and form clear units of attached letters **[Fig. 7.14]**. Another characteristic of this text is the 'formal' shape of the individual graphemes. These are very similar – in most cases identical – to the letter style used in the dipinti and in the larger parchment fragment from Dura. The Psalter is thus highly comparable to the Dura manuscript vestiges in that it combines a ligatured style with formal, un-simplified lettering. The main difference concerns the Psalter's *systematic* use of ligatures: throughout the text and whenever the ligature-conventions allow him to, the scribe who wrote the Middle Persian translation does not lift his writing instrument from the page. While the hand of the Dura scribes often favoured ligatures, particularly for oft-occurring words and common letter pairs, many graphemes within words are still separate and there is an overall sense that the 'detached' style is, like the formal lettering, more elegant. In the Pahlavi Psalter by contrast, the highly regular, systematically

[1038] Andreas and Barr 1933, 6.

[1039] Durkin-Meisterernst 2006, 7.

[1040] Hoffman and Narten 1989, 25; Durkin-Meisterernst 2006, 5, n. 3.

[1041] Durkin-Meisterernst 2006, 5, n. 3

[1042] Durkin-Meisterernst 2006, 5, n. 3.

[1043] Andreas and Barr 1933, 6.

ligatured script is an intrinsic part of the scribe's writing style and the manuscript's elegance: as Durkin-Meisterernst observed, clearly much attention was devoted to the composition and writing of this holy text. As such, the Psalter represents a marked shift in both scribal practice and aesthetics – could this change in paradigm have been influenced, at least in the case of the Psalter, by the rounded and ligatured Estrangelo Syriac script? It is, at this stage, impossible to decide on a date for the Psalter script but it evidently belongs to a scribal tradition that was definitely removed in time (and probably space) to the Dura manuscript vestiges.

As mentioned above, most of the graphemes in the Psalter manuscript correspond to the 'formal' Middle Persian letter style displayed at Dura: the *shin* is a straight horizontal line with two hooks resting upon it; the *yod* can either take the form of a comma or a 'hook' open to towards the bottom, a shape that – like at Dura – is more common in word-final position. The *mem* is a simple loop neatly crossed to the left; the lower stem of the cross always links with the following letter and never trails downwards as at Dura, however. The Psalter furthermore contains no examples of the 'monumental' *mem* – with the dent in the loop – which may have been used at Dura to tell the *qof* apart from it. True to the monumental style, the *ḥet* in the Psalter is a neat horizontal wave – it does not have the tendency to fall below the line of writing as it does at Dura. The *resh* and *waw* are, characteristically, indistinguishable; the upper hook of the 2-shape of these graphemes is much less pronounced in the Psalter script. The *lamed*, again like at Dura, is either a straight vertical line curving to the left at the bottom, linking with the next letter, or the 'hooked' Aramaic *lamed*: the latter is reserved for short ideograms like OL. The *ṣade* takes the distinctive shape displayed in plate V of the Dura dipinti: an *alef*-type head and a long curling tail which curves back to the right and links with the preceding letter. The *kaf* is a large 2-shaped grapheme, familiar from Dura in word-final position (such as in the aramaeogram AYK): in the Psalter however, this is the main form of this letter; in the dipinti, the *kaf* in other positions takes the monumental 3-shape with cedilla. The *pe* is a neat loop closed and linked to the right with the letter that precedes it; like in the dipinti, it can sometimes be reduced to a simple full circle, particularly if it is not linked. The *taw* in the Psalter typically takes the form of a circle attached to the left to a short vertical line; this shape is also common in the dipinti although in that corpus, as in the Dura parchment, the grapheme also often takes a more monumental form (a Latin 'L' with a hook in the upper middle of the stem).

As in the Dura parchments, the main stylisations consist in the exaggerated horizontal elongations of certain graphemes: the lower horizontal line of the *bet* and the lower right foot of the *nun* and *kaf* typically underline the entire word following (for the *bet*) or preceding (in

the case of the *kaf* and *nun*) the grapheme. This embellishment is overemphasized at the end of lines, where the left stems of graphemes in word-final position – including *alef*, *shin*, *mem* – will typically be elongated to fill in any blank space left between the last word and the end of the line: the Psalter manuscript is neatly justified both to the left and to the right. The Psalter thus supports the possibility evoked above that writing on parchment favoured horizontal elongations, whereas on ostraca flourishes occupy the vertical plane.

By contrast to the Dura scribes, the author of the Psalter manuscript was careful to be systematic in his lettering style and avoids 'mixing' formal and simplified, cursive, letters: the *waw* and *resh* for instance can very rarely (if ever) be confused with the *nun* or *kaf*. There are also some notable differences between the Dura and the Psalter letter shapes. Most striking is the *dalet*, which in Dura maintains the 3-shape of late Persis and Sasanian monumental script but in the Psalter has lost the 'dip' in the middle and been simplified to a large comma-like character: as such, it is comparable to the *yod*, although it is kept firmly apart from this grapheme by its size, which is twice as large. The *he*, which at Dura is the wavy 'hat' on top of an L-shaped base – familiar from monumental script – takes in the Psalter an innovative form: it resembles a '2' that has been turned 90° anti-clockwise. The *samekh* at Dura is again the monumental grapheme directly derived from the Aramaic/Parthian prototype (like a cursive Latin 'n'), while in the Psalter in takes the form of two little hooks linked to one another on the line of writing. This shape is identical to much later Middle Persian cursive. In the Psalter however, particularly when it is ligatured, this grapheme is very difficult to distinguish from the *shin*, which is much closer to its monumental form in this manuscript (see above).

Preliminary conclusions: investigating the lost manuscript vestiges of Sasanian Iran.

The overview of the manuscript vestiges from Dura Europos, and in its own way the more difficult to place Pahlavi Psalter also, testify to a diversity of cursive styles flourishing in Sasanian Iran. These were not only due to variant scribal traditions: the Dura vestiges, which can all be dated with much precision to the same period and placed within a similar archaeological and administrative context, illustrate the Sasanian scribes' conscious play on different graphic registers to better adapt their productions to administrative and formal circumstances, different writing surfaces, create embellishments or display their scribal skills. These earliest manuscript vestiges namely document the combined use of cursive and more formal letter shapes within the same text, as well as the rise of the use of ligatures in manuscript, including when using monumental-style graphemes. The Parthian manuscript vestiges from

Dura testify to the resolutely bilingual nature of the Sasanian royal chancery in this early period. They also indicate that ever since this early date, the tendency towards ligatures was a particular feature of Middle Persian manuscript: in often-occurring words or letter pairs, towards the end of words or texts, the scribe's hand appears to have favoured links between graphemes and avoided lifting his writing instrument. Yet, while at Dura there is still a sense that a more formal and elegant style includes detached lettering, the Pahlavi psalter shows that a change of aesthetics eventually occurred, with regular ligatures becoming an intrinsic feature of an elegantly written document. The case of later 'corrupted' cursive forms is particularly striking. The Dura vestiges contain the prototype of such forms, which eventually underwent such transformations that the graphemes that constitute them become nearly impossible to identify. The early Sasanian evidence indicates that their development stems from a combination of scribal practices from this period: on the one hand the use of cursive and monumental letters – the latter, typically in word-final positions – within single words to effect embellishments and the increasingly frequent recourse to ligatures to link these letters belonging to different graphic registers together. There is a substantial gap in the manuscript vestiges of Sasanian Iran which makes it impossible to trace with any more precision the local developments of Middle Persian manuscript: the next corpuses of manuscript vestiges all date to either the much later Sasanian period or post-date. Nevertheless, the Sasanian monumental inscriptions, which constitute the bulk of our written material for this era, refer frequently to a wealth of hand-written documents which remain to be discovered. It is to these that we now turn.

Chapter 8

Early Middle Persian inscriptions: Documenting the lost manuscript tradition of Sasanian Iran and exploring the different symbolic aspects of Sasanian epigraphic texts

I. The corpus of early Middle Persian Sasanian inscriptions within the Sasanian scribal tradition.

The lost manuscript tradition of Sasanian Iran and the political, symbolic, legal and religious aspects of Sasanian epigraphic texts.

The preceding chapter discussed the few manuscript remains that were securely datable to the Sasanian period. Monumental inscriptions constitute the bulk of the vestiges for this period, yet it is essential to appreciate that they were only a fraction of the written output of Sasanian Iran. When studied carefully, several monumental inscriptions betray a trace of the now lost Sasanian manuscript material: the rock-cut texts refer to administrative and legal manuscript documents and missives, and describe different aspects of scribal practice, such as the signing and sealing of contracts and the recording of legal evidence in specially dedicated archives; they also name key functions and offices that are directly linked to the act of manuscript writing and document a wealth of specialised terminology to refer to written texts, testifying to a rich and complex Sasanian administrative scribal tradition.[1044]

The aim of the following chapter is twofold. First, it will investigate the specialised vocabulary documented in several inscriptions to refer to manuscript material and scribal practice, as well as certain palaeographic features of the rock-cut texts that may betray manuscript models. This will highlight to what extent Sasanian inscriptions were embedded in a rich manuscript tradition which provided the administrative, legal and even religious backdrop against which the monumental texts must be studied and understood. Because of their three-dimensional nature however, inscriptions also present linguistic, textual-structural

[1044] It is worth noting that although, as the following chapter will demonstrate, the use of manuscript writing in the context of Sasanian administration is well attested, there is almost no trace of the use of writing in the realms of religion and literature in the early Sasanian period.

features and literary *topoi* that are unique to monumental, rock-cut, exposed[1045] texts. The second focus of this chapter will be to pay special attention to the different ways in which the inscriptions are embedded in their *physical* surroundings. Indeed, the choice of its location, such as a mountain, spring, private property or dynastic site, was an important part of an inscription's significance and its author's motivations for having it engraved; the writing surface – prepared and carved out, or not – also directly affected both the layout of the rock-cut text and its palaeography. Strikingly, authors of inscriptions systematically mobilise a number of linguistic tools to refer to key features of their inscriptions' natural and built environment, creating what linguists have termed a "deictic field" of reference:[1046] Sasanian monumental rock-cut texts are 'geo-localised' with respect to their environment and intrinsically belong to the space they were engraved in; they make little sense away from it.

The careful documentation of keywords relating to the act of writing and manuscript documents in monumental inscriptions on the one hand, and the description of the inscriptions' relationship with their natural and archaeological surroundings on the other, will help draw out the special status and significance of monumental rock-cut texts, and in particular their possible administrative, legal and religious qualities within the broader landscape of Sasanian written vestiges.

Studying the Sasanian inscriptional corpus: problems of typology and chronology.

When examining the monumental inscriptions of Sasanian Iran, one of the first difficulties is to decide on the best order in which to discuss them. A rigid categorisation of Sasanian monumental inscriptions into different types or classes – royal vs private;[1047] funerary vs commemorative etc. – can lead to the problematic compartmentalisation of the rock-cut texts.[1048] First, several examples belong in different categories – for instance, royal, funerary,

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[1045] On the notion of "exposed writings", see Fraenkel 1994.

[1046] For the concept of an inscription's "deictic field of reference", which will be discussed below, see Chmielewska 2007, esp. 151-153 as well as Bühler 1990, 117-136.

[1047] For a recent edition with photographs of Middle Persian private (non-royal) and funerary Sasanian and post-Sasanian inscriptions, see Nasrollahzadeh 2019.

[1048] This was most recently put forward by Alexander Engeskaug who attempted a quantitative analysis of the Sasanian corpus of Middle Persian inscriptions. His approach has the advantage of taking into account often overlooked, minor private inscriptions, typically neglected in epigraphic studies in favour of longer, 'more important' royal texts. However, the numerical analysis of a corpus as limited as that of inscriptional Middle Persian (160 individual inscriptions), also runs the risk of overrepresenting certain categories as a result of chance

legal and commemorative. Then, some inscriptions may have had several 'lives': typically, in a case of *damnatio memoriae*, the rock-cut text or part of it has been destroyed and reengraved to fit another king's political program. The different stages of this inscription's engraving may belong not only to distinct categories but also different royal eras; rigid categorisations have difficulty accounting for such hybrid texts and are not helpful in defining their special status. Finally, dealing with the inscriptions by category does not do justice to the relationship between different types of texts: an example of this are the two Middle Persian inscriptions engraved on the ruins of Darius' *tačara* (discussed at the end of the chapter). These are directly adjacent to one another and present one of the most interesting cases of inter-textuality of the Sasanian inscriptional corpus. The second, more recent inscription was engraved to testify that the older text was in good condition and pays homage to its author; in other words, the very *raison d'être* of the second inscription is the first one. Yet, the project dedicated to Sasanian history and material culture, *Sasanika*,[1049] does not document, in its inventory of Sasanian inscriptions, the second one of the two inscriptions from this pair, presumably because it is not a 'royal' text.

The strict chronological organisation of inscriptions has its own problems. First, several texts are not dated with precision. Then, proceeding by date or even royal era makes the discussion of overarching themes relevant to different inscriptions belonging to various time periods particularly difficult or unmanageable. The reservations detailed above concerning the limits of the inscriptions' categorisations are also relevant to the strict chronological organisation of these texts, such as the problematic case of *damnatio memoriae*.

For the purposes of this study, the inscriptions of Sasanian Iran will be addressed by combining aspects of the texts' typology and chronology, with a view to discussing the main themes that are the focus of this chapter. As stated above, the present aim is to document lost manuscript material and Sasanian scribal practice as well as examine the monumental text's relationship with their environment, in search for clues concerning the inscriptions' special status within the corpus of Sasanian written material and their possible legal, administrative and religious value.

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finds: for instance, Engeskaug tentatively concludes that writing stonemasons' marks belongs to Late Sasanian "praxis", because a series was discovered on the sixth century blocks of a wall in Darband (Engeskaug 2020, 179). This is unlikely: stonemason's marks are known from Achaemenid Iran, and certain non-alphabetical marks from the stone blocks of the early Sasanian site of Bīšāpūr are thought to be stonemasons' signatures. This observation further raises the difficult question of what constitutes an inscription and not – a signature remains a signature even if it is non-alphabetical.

[1049] Touraj Daryaee (ed.): https://sites.uci.edu/sasanika/inscriptions/.

II. Text and context (I): the relationship between Sasanian inscriptions and their natural and built environment.

Sasanian label inscriptions: the symbolic choice of language and script.

One of the very first uses which early Sasanian kings had for monumental rock-cut texts was the identification of protagonists – royal, but also divine – in monumental stone sculptures. The two main themes of Sasanian royal bas-reliefs can be described as depicting the king's military victory over enemies – either in the form of a battle or a royal triumph – and investiture scenes.[1050] In the latter, the Sasanian king is presented, typically on horseback, receiving a ribboned diadem from a divinity, generally Ohrmazd, the great god of the Zoroastrian pantheon. In such scenes, the king is identified with a trilingual – in the later Sasanian period a sole Middle Persian – inscription recording his full royal titulature; in rare cases, the divinity also is named. The only monumental texts attributed to the first Sasanian king Ardašīr known to this day are two such a 'label' inscriptions.[1051] The trilingual texts are engraved on the bas-relief at Naqš-e Rostam depicting his investiture by Ohrmazd,[1052] on the chests of the protagonists' respective horses.[1053] Ardašīr (left) and Ohrmazd (right) face each other with their right hands outstretched toward each other holding the ribboned ring between them **[Fig. 8.1]**; under Ardašīr's horse lies a corpse thought to be that of the last Arsacid king Artabanus V; under Ohrmazd's horse lies another corpse with serpentine hair, regarded to be a unique representation of his archnemesis Ahriman. Considering scribes in later Zoroastrian manuscripts systematically wrote Ahriman's name upside down – a form of scribal taboo – it is remarkable to have this god of darkness represented in a royal monumental stone relief in a sacred site.[1054]

[1050] Note, however, that James R. Russell holds Sasanian 'investiture' scenes to be strongly funerary in nature, Russell 2016, esp. 150-151. This hypothesis will not be followed here.

[1051] It should be mentioned that there is some debate as to whether the rock relief and the two label inscriptions were actually engraved during Ardašīr I's lifetime or were a posthumous commission by his son Šābuhr I, and whether the label inscriptions were engraved at the same time of the sculptures were carved, see Overlaet 2013.

[1052] In a provocative article, Bruno Overlaet rejected the identification of the god Ohrmazd in this bas-relief, see Overlaet 2013; this hypothesis will not be retained here.

[1053] In fact, exactly where two of the Middle Persian dipinti of the Dura synagogue were painted, see Frye 1968, pl. 4 and especially pl. 5.

[1054] For a discussion and short historiography of this relief, see Hinz 1969, 126-134, and 126, n. 23.

This first set of monumental inscriptions inaugurated the early Sasanian practice of inscribing trilingual texts, with a Middle Persian, Parthian and Greek version. While Middle Persian was the mother tongue of the nascent Sasanian dynasty, Parthian, as we saw in the previous chapter, was the other official language and script of Sasanian administration; it was also the mother tongue of the Sasanian king's predecessors, many members of which were important Sasanian dignitaries. The introduction of Greek, the language of the eastern Roman Empire, provided Sasanian official inscriptions and sculptured artworks with an international dimension.[1055] Perhaps it was meant to speak to foreign envoys and embassies. However, as Philip Huyse has observed concerning Šābuhr's trilingual inscription (see below), it is not necessary to postulate a target audience for the Greek version of Sasanian monumental texts: this language was used as a tool to 'universalise' the king's message in *lingua franca* of the (western world) at that time.[1056] Symbolically, the use of Greek placed Sasanian Iran on the map of international diplomacy. It was this Greek version which later convinced early European visitors to Iran that the sculptures represented the victories of Alexander the Great. The order in which the different versions of the texts were engraved has its significance. In the label inscription on Ardašīr's horse **[Fig. 8.2]**, the Parthian version (3 lines) is at the top, the Greek (4 lines) in the middle, and the Middle Persian one (3 lines) at the bottom. The space in which the three versions are engraved is delimited by Ardašīr's leg to the left and by the end of the horse's torso to the right; the inscriptions follow the smooth, curved line of the animal's chest muscles. The Parthian and Greek versions are engraved above each other in a neat paragraph that is justified both to the left and to the right; by contrast, the Middle Persian is indented to the right by several inches, as if it were a later addition. In the second label inscription, identifying Ohrmazd opposite, the order changes, with the Middle Persian one at the top, then the Parthian and finally the Greek **[Fig. 8.3]**. Each version is a single line, and all three are neatly justified to the left, although with the Middle Persian line running a little shorter than the other two. It is impossible to decide which of the two trilingual inscriptions was engraved first but it is tempting to suppose that the engravers' priority was to identify the king who had just toppled the Arsacids, and entrench the claim to power of the new dynasty's founder in the rocks of Persia's conquered territory. In this respect, it is worth noting that the

[1055] Note that as discussed in chapter 5, Greek was also an important administrative language, as well as a language and script of prestige, in the Parthian empire – in using Greek, the Sasanians were probably also continuing Parthian practice.

[1056] Huyse 1999a, II, 201.

very first version engraved was Parthian, the language of the defeated Arsacids, and the second one Greek, the language of the Persian king's Roman interlocutors: these two political entities were the most directly concerned by the foundation of the new Sasanian dynasty. Middle Persian did not have the same international importance – as mentioned above, perhaps the ostentatious indentation to the left indicates that it was, in fact, a later addition?

In the nearby dynastic site of Naqš-e Rajab, a trilingual label inscription similarly identifies the second Sasanian king Šābuhr I, represented on horseback with a throng of dignitaries standing behind him. Here again, the Parthian (4 lines) and Greek (6 lines) versions have evidently been given prominence. They are engraved in a neat paragraph one on top of the other directly on the torso of Šābuhr's horse, echoing the captions on Ardašīr's investiture scene described above; the justified lines are delimited by the end of the horse's anatomy to the right and the elements of its harness to the left. The Middle Persian version was not added beneath the two others as would be expected – there is little space left on the horse's breast and the line of writing would have run between the animal's forelegs **[Fig. 8.4]**. Instead, it is engraved on the unsculpted, flattened rock space to the right of the bas-relief, in a rectangular paragraph of four and a half lines. The asymmetric layout of this trilingual text implies that the Parthian and Greek versions were engraved first and the Middle Persian one added in afterwards – bringing further weight to the similar suggestion made above for Ardašīr's label inscription. The intended recipients of the news of Šābuhr's investiture were first and foremost the Parthian contingent of the Sasanian elite and the empire's western rival.

All three sets of label inscriptions are predictably written in a beautifully carved, monumental style. The graphemes are proportionate both to each other as well as to the Parthian and Greek letters, regularly spaced out and decidedly ornate. All examples of the letter *mem* for instance feature a dip in the grapheme's main loop, just below the left-ward cross, the right stem of which even ends in a curvy flourish. The *lamed* is Aramaic-style, with a straight main stem and bottom hook. The *pe* is an elegant hoop, both strands of which have been lengthened, making it look like a reverse cursive Latin 'p'. The main stem of the L-shaped *nun* is even given a slight wave. The main stem and large hook of the *taw* are fully detached from one another. The lower horizontal bar of the *bet* is lengthened at an angle and systematically 'underlines' the word following it.

The engraved captions follow an identical formula which systematically begins with the two words *pahikar ēn* (*ptkl*/*ptkly* ZNE; Parthian, *ptkr* ZNE): "this image/picture (sculpture)". The Iranian *pahikar* is rendered in Greek by ΠΡΟCΩΠΟΝ (*πρόσωπον*, face, visage, countenance). Follows the full titulature of the king – or name of the divinity, in the

case of Ohrmazd – represented.[1057] The close deictic *ēn* effects a direct relationship between the engraved text and the sculptured representation, dismissing any possible doubt concerning the identity of the represented monarch. Save for these first two first words, the caption follows the royal titulature-formula engraved on the respective kings' coins – *mazdēsn bay* [king's name] *kē čihr az yazdān* – to the very word, making the labelled bas-relief a monumental version of the portrait-with-legend combination minted on the issues of each monarch. In the rock-carvings, where there is more space, the name and title of the king's father (and grandfather, in the case of Šābuhr) is also added; the former king's full titulature is reproduced with exactitude, echoing the latter's own label inscriptions.

What's in a caption? The symbolic, political significance of Sasanian label inscriptions.

The political and symbolic significance of monumental label inscriptions is probably best illustrated by a striking case of *damnatio memoriae* in one of the royal bas-reliefs engraved on the gorge of Tang-e Čogān leading to the royal city of Bīšāpūr. Six monumental bas-reliefs are cut into the cliff sides on either side of the gorge; the lower part of their frames reaches the viewer standing in the gorge at about eye level. Three – the most lavish – celebrate the investiture and victory of Šābuhr I over Rome.[1058] To these was added an investiture scene by Wahrām I (r. 271-274 CE), son and successor (after Hormizd) of Šābuhr I.[1059] Wahrām I can be identified in this bas-relief thanks to the label inscription as well as his crown: a characteristic 'radiating' diadem – inspired by Mithra's headdress – topped by the balloon-like Sasanian coiffe known as the *korymbos* **[Fig. 8.5]**. Wahrām I's son, Wahrām II (r. 274-293 CE), had a bas-relief engraved next to that of his father's: he wears his distinctive winged crown with *korymbos* and is represented on horseback receiving an embassy of foreign envoys – thought to be representatives of Arab tribes – accompanied by their horses and camels.[1060] The sixth scene displays a starkly different style of engraving and is a later commission, thought to

[1057] The name of the god Ohrmazd is translated as Zeus in the Greek version. Some small changes in the royal titulatures of the Sasanian kings do occur: thus, Ardašīr presented himself as king of Ērān, whereas Šābuhr was king of Ērān and non-Ērān, a phrase which will be subsequently adopted by all his successors.

[1058] For an exhaustive photographic edition of these three reliefs attributed to Šābuhr I, see Herrmann, Howell and MacKenzie 1980-1983, I and III, 7-21, pl. 1-24c.

[1059] For this bas-relief, see Herrmann, Howell and MacKenzie 1980-1983, II, 11-19, pl. 16c-17b.

[1060] For an exhaustive description of this relief, see Herrmann, Howell and MacKenzie 1980-1983, II, 5-10, pl. 1-16b.

depict Šābuhr II:[1061] the king – represented fully frontally – is seated on his throne in the middle with a crowd of dignitaries (left) as well as soldiers and military officers (right) standing behind him; certain military officers brandish the severed heads of conquered enemies. The cliffs of the gorge of Tang-e Čogān thus portray a remarkable dynastic sequence of Sasanian kings, illustrating the monarchs and their distinctive attributes, not unlike the pages of the Sasanian royal "Book of Portraits" described by a number of Arabo-Persian chroniclers including Hamza al-Isfahani (see chapter 1).

Now, Wahrām I's relief was usurped by his brother Narseh – another son of Šābuhr I[1062] – who partly destroyed the label inscription identifying the former in his bas-relief **[Fig. 8.5]**.[1063] The inscription is engraved beside the king's head, to the right. Ernst Herzfeld was the first to note that the name 'Wahrām' in the caption was obliterated and that of 'Narseh' engraved over it.[1064] Because both kings were brothers, the rest of the titulature's sequence – namely the king's father's name and title – was identical and allowed to remain intact. However, scholars observed that Wahrām I was also identified by his radiating crown: it is this distinctive headdress that made him immediately recognisable to the onlooker, more so no doubt than the caption: the text is not easily legible from the ground, assuming the viewer could have read inscriptional Middle Persian at all.[1065] This makes Narseh's efforts to obliterate his brother's name in the short label inscription remarkable. In her careful study of this bas-relief, Georgina Herrmann suggested that Bahram's headdress may have been altered: the extremities of the crown's rays appear to be broken, and with the addition of (now lost) stucco mouldings, it could have been possible to recreate Narseh's personal headdress over that of Wahrām's.[1066] Be that as it may, Narseh's usurpation of Wahrām's caption is an example of the political and symbolic significance of the obliteration of a king's name from a monumental inscription and from a dynastic sequence. Indeed, changing the name of the king in the caption did not only modify

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[1061] This is debated, however, see Herrmann, Howell and MacKenzie 1980-1983, II, 20-37 and esp. 32-33, pl. 18-32c.

[1062] After a long reign that lasted three decades, Šābuhr I died leaving four sons behind him – a bitter feud for the throne ensued, see Weber 2016; Cereti and Terribili 2012, 75-77; Dignas and Winter 2007, 17; Frye 1983, 126-128.

[1063] See the edition of this double inscription by MacKenzie, in Herrmann, Howell and MacKenzie 1980-1983, II, 14-19.

[1064] Herzfeld 1924, 120.

[1065] Ghirshman 1971, 97.

[1066] Herrmann, Howell and MacKenzie 1980-1983, II, 18-19, pl. 12-13.

the text: it attributed the entire monument to another monarch and destroyed the former's endeavours to be remembered by posterity. By rubbing out the name of his brother at Tang-e Čōgān, Narseh effectively removed Wahrām from the lineage of Sasanian kings as it was depicted on the cliffsides leading up to Bīšāpūr.

The Wahrām/Narseh inscription is engraved in monumental lettering and is the first royal caption to include a single Middle Persian version. This may indicate – now that the dynasty was well-established – that the message of royal legitimation was primarily intended for an internal audience rather than either foreign envoys or Parthian predecessors: the fight for the throne that took place between the sons of Šābuhr I certainly would support this. It certainly suggests the rise in importance of Middle Persian as embodying the political identity of the dynasty and increasingly becoming the main language of the Sasanian administration: as we saw above, the earlier Sasanian kings had given Middle Persian versions a secondary place in their bas-reliefs, only adding these at the end or towards the side. The label inscription of Wahrām/Narseh is justified to the right, delimited by the end of the bas-relief's frame, and the script is identical to that in the captions engraved under Šābuhr I and Ardašīr, with rounded, perfectly proportionate letters displaying all the familiar ornate characteristics of the monumental graphic register: a dip in the *mem*, a hooked *lamed*, a three-shaped *dalet* and *kaf* with cedilla. Only the *alef* is markedly squarer than its counterpart in earlier captions, where it is closer to the Parthian trident shape. The graphemes are also overall somewhat larger than in previous inscriptions: the omission of the Greek and Parthian versions no doubt allowed the engravers to dedicate more space to it.

The last two label inscriptions extant similarly display a single Middle Persian version; they are engraved to the left and right respectively of the high-relief statues of Šābuhr II (309-379 CE) and Šābuhr III (383-388 CE), in the upper register of the second cave (the smaller grotto) at the site of Tāq-e Bostān.[1067] This pair of inscriptions was first documented by Ambrosio Bembo who mistook them for Coptic texts; they were later instrumental to Silvestre de Sacy for the decipherment of Middle Persian (see chapter 2). Both inscriptions follow the semi-circular shape of the upper register, so that they are narrow at the top and wider at the bottom; the caption to the left is justified to the right and the one to the right justified to the

[1067] The most exhaustive study of the site of Tāq-e Bostān and its reliefs is a magnificent four-volume publication, *Takū-i Busutān*, by the Institute of Oriental Culture of the University of Tokyo, edited by Shinji Fukai and Kiyoharu Horiuchi. Volume 2 is entirely dedicated to the two grottos and their reliefs; for the Middle Persian inscriptions in the smaller cave, see Fukai and Horiuchi 1969-1984, II, pl. 72-73 and III, 163-166.

left. The titulatures follow the formula type inaugurated by both kings' early Sasanian predecessors, and the monumental script of the inscriptions is again near-identical to earlier examples, displaying a remarkable continuity in the graphic style – for this type of epigraphic text – over a century and a half **[Fig. 8.6]**. Nonetheless, some minor differences can be highlighted: the Tāq-e Bostān label inscriptions follow the Wahrām/Narseh example in using a square *alef*; the earlier, Parthian style, trident-shaped monumental *alef* appears to have been abandoned. Another feature of this later pair is the lengthening of the lower horizontal strokes of graphemes: the left foot of the *nun*, the cedilla of the *kaf*, the horizontal bar of the *waw* and *resh*, the left 'tail' of the *alef*, are all stretched out and, in the case of the *kaf* and *nun*, underline the preceding letter. The lower stroke of the *bet*, which in earlier label inscriptions was drawn at an angle – easier to carve on hard stone – is now perfectly horizontal and underlines the letters following this grapheme. The limited space provided by the semi-circular niche may have in part encouraged this: a perfectly horizontal lower stroke of the bet takes up less space than if it is drawn at an angle. Nevertheless, these features were characteristic of manuscript writing as illustrated by the Middle Persian inscribed parchments at Dura – and to some extent the dipinti at the synagogue – where lower horizontal strokes were almost systematically lengthened to effect the elegant underlining of graphemes or whole words.

Inscription and environment: Šābuhr's twin inscriptions at Hājjiābād and Tang-e Borāq.

Although they are not dated, the inscription of Šābuhr I in the cave at Hājjiābād, and its near-identical counterpart in the rocky recess of Tang-e Borāq, are probably the first monumental rock-cut texts commissioned by this king.[1068] As mentioned in chapter 4, they commemorate an exploit achieved by the king in those two locations: in both cases an exceptionally impressive feat of archery. By commemorating and describing this event, the inscriptions provide a lasting, material embodiment for Šābuhr's fleeting – albeit extraordinary – achievement allowing the king to mark and anchor his presence in the physical landscape of his empire's territory. As noted by several travellers (see chapter 4), the natural rocky recess of Hājjiābād was widened and smoothed, with four deep rectangular frames (about four inches deep each) cut into the bedrock to receive the different versions of the inscription. Only two of the frames are engraved however, each with a version of the bilingual Parthian and Middle

[1068] For an edition of the inscriptions, see MacKenzie 1978, as well as Daryaee, *Sasanika*, https://sites.uci.edu/sasanika/sapur-is-inscription-hajjiabad-sh/ and https://sites.uci.edu/sasanika/tang-e-Borāq/; for a full history of research of this text, see chapter 4.

Persian inscription. The Middle Persian occupies the rightmost frame; the Parthian is engraved in the frame in the center **[Fig. 8.7]**. The other two (leftmost) frames are left blank leading to some speculation as to their intended purpose: had the engravers planned a longer inscription initially, or was a Greek version also prepared that never made its way next to the Parthian and Middle Persian texts? Because Greek is written from left to right, one would indeed expect this version to occupy the leftmost frames, with the direction of writing 'looking towards' the other two right-to left texts. Perhaps the frames were meant to receive something other than an inscription however, such as a bas-relief of the king shooting the arrow. The rocky recess of Hājjiābād overlooks a grassy dell. Although the area is now extremely dry like the rest of the region, early travellers describe a well-watered valley with lush vegetation and an abundance of fauna (including tortoises and fish!); cascades of pristine water fell from the top of the cliff over the numerous caves in this area and, at least in the nineteenth century, these rocky recesses were evidently considered holy by inhabitants who placed small offerings of oil lamps inside them (see chapter 2).

Now, this quaint description resembles strongly what can still be observed at Tang-e Borāq, the location of Hājjiābād's 'twin' inscription. The bone-dry, sun-scorched, dusty valley suddenly gives into a shaded, miraculously cool, mossy-green recess from which little curtains of sparkling pure water cascade down into a deep, crystal-clear swimming pool of blue-green water; shepherds come to this small gorge with their flock and throw stones across the gorge into the cave to pass the time while their sheep drink and enjoy the shade **[Fig. 8.8]**. Whether or not they had a holy significance in the Sasanian period already, such rocky recesses were no doubt an appropriate setting for a royal party on the hunt to rest, water their horses and play games – and conduct archery contests, as Sasanian kings were fond of doing.

At Hājjiābād, the deep frames provide the outline for the Middle Persian and Parthian inscriptions, so that both texts are roughly justified to the left and right. The inscriptions' engraving is overall not as neat as that of the captions of Naqš-e Rostam, Bīšāpūr and Tāq-e Bostān. The lines of writing are not quite straight: in both texts, these go up to the left so that there is quite a lot of blank space left in the bottom lower left of both frames. The space between words is not regular either, sometimes practically non-existent; the letters are not quite proportionate to one another – the first line and beginning of lines are strikingly larger, a feature particularly exaggerated in the Parthian version – nor are they always aligned, resulting in an overall 'jumbled' effect; the engraver has often slightly miscalculated the space that was available to him so that the last letters of each line are smaller and squeezed together. The conditions at Hājjiābād were evidently much more difficult for the engraver. He probably did

not have all the tools and help that would have been available to him in a royal site like Naqš-e Rostam and certainly had less time to plan the inscription – as we will see, the text records the unforeseeable complications that followed the king's bowshot.

Traces of cursive models at Hājjiābād.

The graphemes belong to the immediately recognisable ornamental inscriptional script **[Fig. 8.7]**: the long, straight stems of the *lamed* are finished by a lower 'Aramaic' hook; the *mem* always presents a dip in the main loop under the juncture; the *kaf* is the familiar three-shape with cedilla. Nevertheless, the slightly rushed quality of the engraving is reflected in several instances of simplifications and the Middle Persian version even presents some examples of linked graphemes which betray the influence of a manuscript model. Thus, in several instances, the *kaf* has a much more 'zigzag' elongated shape than a clear '3'-shape with cedilla; similarly, the *nun* is a long vertical wave rather than a neat, dented vertical line with lower right foot. The two hooks of the *shin* are often simplified to small straight lines, making this grapheme look like an alef with a right tail (see a particularly striking case of this in line 6); similarly, the head of the *waw* and *resh* have in several examples lost much of their elegant curve. The lower stroke of the *bet* is horizontal rather than drawn at an angle like in the earlier label inscriptions; this grapheme is typically exaggeratedly lengthened to underline the entire word which it begins, which as we have seen is similarly a standard embellishment of manuscript. A striking case of 'ligature' occurs in line 10, in the verbal aramaeogram HWE (*hē*): the *ḥet* and *waw* are written very close to each other as a pair while a substantial gap separates these two graphemes from the final *he*; both the *ḥet* and *waw* are long and narrow, 'squeezed' next to each other and the lower right foot of the waw begins where the lower left curve of the het ends. The term 'ligature' here is put in inverted commas because the engraver, working on a hard surface, necessarily had to lift his tools to trace these two graphemes and could not have naturally found a true ligature more comfortable than detached letters: the linked pair therefore most probably reflects a feature of the manuscript model, in which the scribe had ligatured both graphemes together in a natural, single stroke of his writing instrument on the parchment/papyrus.

Another case of an embellishment that seems more at home in manuscript than in monumental rock carvings concerns the ductus of the aramaeogram ṬB, *nēw* 'brave, strong'. The word occurs twice in the inscription, once in the middle of line 12 and at the end of the last line. The *tet*, which is a grapheme that occurs rarely and only in aramaeograms – it did not correspond to a phonemic reality in Middle Persian and would eventually be replaced by the

taw, including in aramaeograms such as ṬB/TB – is made to be very large, about twice as high as the other letters in the inscription. It takes the unusual shape of a big S, although the lower hook is less pronounced and curves back to the right at the very tip. In the first occurrence of this aramaeogram, both letters are written very close; the lower hook of the *tet* appears to touch the beginning of the *bet*'s lower horizontal bar. In the last line, 'ṬB', the very last letters of the entire inscription, are spaced out and the lower horizontal stroke of the *bet* is exaggeratedly lengthened: as we saw, the elongation of graphemes to fill in the blank space left at the end of lines is a typical feature of manuscript and the Middle Persian inscription of Hājjiābād is the first rock-cut text discussed so far to display this type of embellishment.

The Tang-e Borāq inscription, which presents an extremely similar text save for some minor – but telling – modifications towards the end, was unfortunately heavily damaged. *In situ*, only one large, jagged block remains, fallen flat to the ground. It is therefore much more difficult to reconstruct the layout of the text. Still, from the surviving stone slab, it is possible to note that the Middle Persian and Parthian versions were written one above the other, rather than next to each other, with the Middle Persian at the top. Here again, the inscription was engraved in a carved out stone frame, using monumental, ornate style lettering. The overall quality of the engraving at Tang-e Borāq appears to be slightly superior, with straighter lines of writing and more proportionate letters.

Exploring the notion of an inscription's "deictic field" of reference.

The inscriptions of Hājjiābād and Tang-e Borāq were described above as providing a material, lasting form to Šābuhr's feat of archery. This is not a subjective interpretation: it is explicitly stated in the first words of both texts. The opening formula follows the model found in label inscriptions, with [object described] + the demonstrative ZNE (close deictic*; ēn* in Middle Persian, *im* in Parthian). Whereas in the captions on royal bas-reliefs the object described was *pahikar* ('image, sculpture'), in the Hājjiābād and Tang-e Borāq texts it is *tigrāh* (Middle Persian) and *widāwan* (Parthian). The opening sentence is usually translated (at least since Nyberg, see chapter 4) as "*this is the bowshot* of me, the Mazdaean Lord Šābuhr etc." The close deictic *ēn*/*im* 'this' is somewhat curiously used to point to an object that is immaterial and invisible to the reader save for its description in the inscription. The rest of the text is dedicated to giving a 'body' to this immaterial object by providing the reader visual markers to appreciate the impressive breadth of the feat of archery. Demonstrative pronouns, adverbs and prepositions of place and the description of the king's physical position with respect to salient

topographical features are the main linguistic tools used to achieve this. Šābuhr, the author of both the shot and of the text – in contrast to the captions, the Hājjiābād and Tang-e Borāq inscriptions are written in the first person – describes the exact position he was in when he shot *this* arrow (*ēn tigr*; *im tiγr*). Here again, the close deictic is somewhat surprising: either it is a way to refer to the bowshot as a material object, or the royal arrow was originally placed next to the inscription as a commemorative monument – perhaps to encourage any potential contender to outdo the king's feat (see below)? Šābuhr was in front of (*pēš*; *parwān*) the entire court (the lords, princes, grandees and nobles) when he shot it: with this wording, the Sasanian aristocracy is very much cast as a witness to his feat. Šābuhr then placed his foot ('*my* foot', *u-n pāy*) in *this* rocky recess (*ēn darrag; ēd wēm*) – in a direct allusion to the cave of Hājjiābād – and shot the arrow to *that* cairn (*ān čēdāg*; *hō čēd*), a now lost marker that indicated the place where the arrow fell. The phrasing of this passage is slightly different in the Tang-e Borāq inscription because the topographical conditions were not identical: the king shot his arrow from *this* cairn/stone (*az ēn čēdāg*; *až im ward*) to *that* cairn (*ō ān čēdāg*; *ō hō čēd*).

The Hājjiābād inscription includes a digression at this point, absent from its Tang-e Borāq counterpart: *that* place (*ōy gyāg, ānō gyāg*) where the arrow fell was not properly visible from where the king shot it; Šābuhr therefore ordered the cairn to be moved within sight of the cave (*ōrōndar*, 'towards this side'). As mentioned in chapter 4, when visiting the site of Hājjiābād, it is easy to appreciate the problems of visibility discussed in the inscription. The wide dell opens to the left of the cave, but right in front of the rocky recess is a hill that slopes down to the left: if the king shot his arrow a little too much to the right it would have fallen over to the other side of the low hill, making it invisible to anyone standing in the cave. The careful and lengthy explanation of the exact reasons for the displacement of the original cairn indicates just how seriously the king and his court took this feat of archery, and how cautious they were in recording the length of the bowshot with objective markers visible to all.

Now, this detailed information was probably intended for a potential contender and amounted to clear rules ensuring that the king's challenge was as fair to him as possible. Indeed, both inscriptions end with a challenge to the passer-by – or to an ambitious young noble – to outdo the king's extraordinary bowshot, while respecting the king's exact shooting conditions. At Hājjiābād the potential challenger is enjoined to place his foot in *this* rocky cleft (*ēn darrag; ēd wēm*) and shoot an arrow to *that* cairn (*ān čēdāg*; *hō čēd*), in a repetition of the formula used earlier to describe the king's feat; similarly, at Tang-e Borāq the rival must shoot an arrow from *this* cairn (*az ēn čēdāg*; *až im ward*) to *that* cairn (*ō ān čēdāg*; *ō hō čēd*). The inscriptions

conclude by stating that should the hopeful contender be able to shoot to *that* cairn (*ō ān čēdāg*; *ō hō čēd*), he could indeed be considered strong-armed (*dast-nēw*).

With demonstrative pronouns, adverbs of place and the description of topographical features and visual markers, the inscription is located geographically and spatially with great precision. In other words, the content of the inscription situates the physical text according to its material context. Linguists such as Karl Bühler and Ella Chmielewska who have worked towards defining and theorising the complex relationship of "topo-sensitive" writings – such as graffiti and other such 'exposed writings' – have put forward the useful notion of the text's "deictic field" of reference.[1069] Specific linguistic and visual tools – or "clues"; these include prepositions, adverbs, demonstrative pronouns, but also dates, script and layout – establish a deictic field of reference, enabling the text's situation in time and space and its articulation with its physical support (the surface of writing) and context. This, in turn, provides a materiality to the "here and now" of the text, its auto-referential quality: for Chmielewska, the text "calls attention to itself" through its indexation to its environment.[1070] Indeed, the establishment of a deictic field of reference is characteristic of texts the value of which (in fact, their *raison d'être*) depends on being indexed to a specific location that has been chosen for its importance or meaning (its fame, beauty, history, religious meaning etc.). The works of these scholars provide a theoretical framework to examine how texts like the Hājjiābād and Tang-e Borāq inscriptions both derive their significance from a specific locale and also transform this locale into a place of significance.

The rocky recesses of Hājjiābād and Tang-e Borāq were probably chosen for the towering view they offered over the nearby dells, the beauty of their geography and resources (namely, the water and shelter they provided); perhaps they once presented, as they did later, a numinous quality also. The inscriptions engraved in both grottos no doubt derived a special significance from this peculiar landscape. Mainly however, the importance of the rock-cut texts is to provide a material trace of an extraordinary feat of archery made by the Sasanian king of kings: the deictic field of reference defined in the inscriptions serves to mark the range of the royal bowshot, ensuring that the passer-by appreciate the exceptional strength and skill of Šābuhr, but also that a potential rival or contender be given a fair challenge. That this challenge was not only jest but quite serious – and perhaps presented a political dimension also – is suggested by the meticulous care with which the text explains the necessity to move the bull's

[1069] Chmielewska 2007, 151-153 and Bühler 1990, esp. 117-136.

[1070] Chmielewska 2007, 151.

eye for better visibility, as well as the long enumeration of the different contingents of the Sasanian aristocracy who witnessed the feat: feats of archery evidently followed a clear protocol with rules presented in a near-legal manner.

Inscriptions and arrows: the ritual demarcation of territory.

In this respect, it is worth noting that scholars such as Drouin, Nyberg and Gignoux have highlighted the central importance of archery – as well as its other closely related sport, hunting – in ancient Iranian royal and political ideology.[1071] More recently, in an article dedicated to the symbolic significance of archery in Achaemenid and Parthian kingships, Antonio Panaino also discussed the religious use of the bow in ancient Iran, for instance in the ritual, royal determination of sacred space.[1072] As mentioned in chapter 4, Drouin and Nyberg drew attention to the legendary bowshot of the hero Āraš as a possible symbolic backdrop for the Hājjiābād text.[1073] Āraš's extraordinary bowshot – the sheer force of which ripped the hero's body apart – crossed many lands and mountains, and the place where his arrow fell marked the boundary between Iran and non-Iran. Panaino argues that the legend of Āraš had particular significance for the Parthian dynasty: according to Arabo-Persian sources, Parthian nobles claimed direct descent from the hero; a convergence even appears to have been made between the names of the eponymous founder of the Parthian dynasty, Arsakes, and Āraš; the iconography of the royal archer is characteristic of Parthian coin reverses.[1074] For Panaino "Šābuhr I, in displaying his ability as a bowman consciously rehearsed a "Northern pattern", perhaps trying to recall the example of Ǝrəxša, implicitly entering a symbolic space previously covered by the Parthian dynasty."[1075] Indeed, thanks to the Paikuli inscription (discussed below), we know that Parthian nobles made up a significant part of the *wuzurgān*, the Sasanian aristocracy: these were the witnesses to the king's bowshot in the Hājjiābād and Tang-e Borāq texts. With his bilingual Parthian and Middle Persian inscription at these sites,[1076] Šābuhr was

[1071] Drouin 1898; Nyberg 1945; Gignoux 1983.

[1072] Panaino 2019, 27-28.

[1073] Drouin 1898, 11; Nyberg 1945, 71-74.

[1074] Panaino 2019, 28-39.

[1075] Panaino 2019, 47.

[1076] Again, this may show that the king's main intended audience was internal to Iran: the Parthian and Persian aristocracy. Curiously, in the other earlier (label) inscriptions of this king, the Parthian versions were given particular prominence and this is the first instance where Middle Persian is given the more eminent position: at

anchoring himself in his newly conquered territory using a Parthian politico-ritual motif. The challenge addressed to a contender considering himself 'strong-armed' may have indeed carried political undertones.

Writing on ruins: Šābuhr I's inscription at Naqš-e Rostam.

The 1936 archaeological campaign carried out by the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago in Persepolis and its environs revealed an almost intact trilingual inscription by Šābuhr I engraved on the lower part of the monumental Achaemenid tower, the so-called Ka'ba of Zoroaster, which towers at 14 metres above ground level at the site of Naqš-e Rostam **[Fig. 6.6]**.[1077] The inscription presents a Middle Persian version, placed on the eastern façade, a Parthian version on the western one and a Greek version occupying to the south **[Fig. 8.9]**.[1078] The northern façade of the tower, which looks directly at the Achaemenid tombs cut into the living rock of the mountain opposite, is taken up by a high staircase which leads all the way up to a small *cella* in the upper part of the tower. As such, the location of Šābuhr's inscription at Naqš-e Rostam contrasts starkly with the secluded grottos, somewhat lost in the hills of Fārs, where the Hājjiābād and Tang-e Borāq texts were engraved. A few kilometres to the south of Naqš-e Rostam lay the monumental Achaemenid ruins of Persepolis; a few kilometres east was the Sasanian town of Staxr, thought to have hosted a temple to the goddess Anahita and a mint; visible from Naqš-e Rostam, on the way to Persepolis, was the other Sasanian dynastic site of Naqš-e Rajab, where kings and high officials had bas-reliefs and inscriptions engraved. Naqš-e Rostam itself was an ancient sacred site: an Elamite bas-relief identified as representing the god Napiriša and his consort Kiririša, probably dating to the second millennium BC, indicates that it had been invested by kings since pre-Achaemenid times.[1079] It was strategically located at the crossroads of two important axes of the Sasanian empire, used by caravans since times immemorial: to the north-east, passing through the valley of Staxr, the road led to the Achaemenid city of Pasargadae, and further north still to what became modern-day Esfahān; to the south-east, going through Persepolis, the road led to the province of Sīstān, and eventually Central Asia. Although it has now dried up, archaeologists have suggested that a

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the top (in the case of Tang-e Borāq), and to the right, first when you come in, for Hājjiābād. Perhaps this marked a change in paradigm, with a new political importance of Middle Persian.

[1077] Sprengling 1937.

[1078] The reference edition for this trilingual inscription is Huyse 1999a.

[1079] Herzfeld 1935, 4-5; Schmidt 1970, III, 121; Vallat 1998.

small carved-out rocky recess that is still visible on the northern cliff side at Naqš-e Rostam may have been a water cistern:[1080] the presence of a spring and pool was probably at the origin of the site's popularity as a watering hole/caravanserai and perhaps also its religious significance.

While the Hājjiābād and Tang-e Borāq inscriptions allowed Šābuhr to visually – perhaps ritually also, as we saw – mark and take possession of his territory by creating 'new' Sasanian sites and locales of significance, he also anchored his rule by reinvesting what can be seen as ancient 'sites of memory'[1081] such as Naqš-e Rostam, the sacred significance of which was the result of millennia of religious and royal, but also popular and commercial frequentation. In a dedicated article, Matthew Canepa proposed to view the Sasanian bas-reliefs and inscriptions of Naqš-e Rostam as "technologies of memory" allowing the Sasanian dynasty to appropriate for itself the glory of past Iranian empires.[1082] By juxtaposing their monuments to the older Achaemenid ones and echoing details of Achaemenid iconography – Ohrmazd's crenelated crown follows an Achaemenid model, for instance – the Sasanians tapped into the sacred significance of the sumptuous ruins and the collective memory which had crystallised around them: by reinvesting this site of memory with new monuments, the Sasanian kings grafted their new dynasty onto the history of ancient Iran. Matthew Canepa's study was an answer to the hotly debated question of the Sasanian kings' 'memory' of the Achaemenids. In his inscription at Naqš-e Rostam (ŠKZ§30), Šābuhr presents himself as the legitimate heir of a territory that belonged to his (unnamed) ancestors: *amā ud pidar ud niyāgān ud ahēnagān* (Parthian, *hasēnagān*) *dastgird būd*. A number of scholars have taken this passage to mean that the Sasanians had kept a historical memory of the Achaemenids and considered themselves their legitimate heirs after a Hellenistic 'interlude'.[1083] Others have argued that based on their national history, Sasanians presented themselves as heirs of the mythical Kayanids, rather than the Achaemenids: it is likely that the extraordinary ruins of sites such as Persepolis, Naqš-e Rostam and Pasargadae had become associated with these legendary kings; furthermore, the name 'Achaemenid' never occurs in Sasanian written vestiges and all that survives is the name Dārā, a later deformation of Old Persian Dārayava^{h}uš, 'Darius'.[1084]

[1080] Schmidt 1970, III, 65; Callieri 2006b, 342.

[1081] For the exploration of this notion in the framework of Sasanian art and archaeology, see Canepa 2010.

[1082] Canepa 2010.

[1083] For this interpretation, see Daryaee 1995 and 2001 as well as Shahbazi 2001.

[1084] See namely Yarshater 1971 and Huyse 2002.

The debate concerning the presence or absence of a historical memory for the Achaemenids in the Sasanian period – which probably says more about our views of the Sasanians than about how they perceived themselves – will not be taken up here. Still, the brief overview of this issue above illustrates the striking symbolic significance of Šābuhr's choice to have his trilingual inscription carved on a monument that had towered over Fārs for half a millennium and the many questions it still raises for scholars today.

Dating Šābuhr I's ŠKZ.

Šābuhr I's trilingual inscription on the Ka'ba of Zoroaster (henceforth ŠKZ) is not dated, but based on certain historical events scholars have been able to identify a *terminus post quem*. The inscription celebrates the capture of the Roman emperor Valerian and therefore must have been engraved after 260 (the dare of the battle of Edessa). It is more difficult to determine a *terminus ante quem*. Šābuhr I's troubles with Palmyra began in 262 – these go unmentioned in the text – and Philip Huyse therefore proposed to view the inscription as having been engraved in the 260-262 CE interlude between these two military events,[1085] when the Sasanian king may have had more leisure to be concerned with domestic affairs. New elements are needed to resolve this question in a definitive manner. Nevertheless, I would personally favour a later date, towards the end of Šābuhr I's reign (r. 240-270 CE). As we will see below, the provisions made by Šābuhr I in the second part of his inscription read as a testamentary bequest – this is in fact how the inscription had been understood by Martin Sprengling in his very first studies of the text.[1086] There is ample evidence that testamentary provisions like those of Šābuhr, established in the context of *pad ruwān* or 'soul' foundations (see below), can be made in the founder's lifetime rather than right before his death: this element alone is therefore not conclusive. Still, in a study of the complex and intricate relationship between Šābuhr's ŠKZ and the later inscription of the high-priest Kerdīr – which is engraved right beneath the Middle Persian version of ŠKZ and dates from the reign of Wahrām II (r. 274-293) – I concluded that both texts had probably been engraved at relatively close intervals in time: Šābuhr I's foundations had important legal and financial implications for Kerdīr which are vindicated in the high priest's text.[1087]

[1085] Huyse 1999a, I, 10-14 and Huyse and Loriot 2006, 310.

[1086] Sprengling 1940a, 208-209.

[1087] Ramble (forthcoming, b), "Kerdīr's *bun-xānag*: funding foundations in Sasanian Iran".

III. Text and context (II): the relationship between Sasanian inscriptions and the lost Sasanian manuscript tradition.

Traces of a cursive manuscript model in ŠKZ.

In terms of palaeography, the Middle Persian version of ŠKZ displays a beautiful, highly ornate monumental script. The layout of the inscription is largely defined by the stone blocks of the Achaemenid tower on which it is engraved. Philip Huyse noted that the letters at the end of the lines in the Parthian and Greek versions are crowded, to respect the limit marked by the end of the inscribed blocks.[1088] Similarly, ŠKZ begins just underneath the break between two blocks, at about a foot above eye level, with long, straight lines running several meters from right to left, filling up the block entirely. The text then skips a line because of the crack left by the space between this block and the following one beneath it and fills the lower block in the same manner. A link between both inscribed blocks is cleverly effected by a graphic trick: the long stems of the *lamed* in the first line of the lower block are exaggeratedly elongated and made to cross over the crack between both blocks and reach the lower part of the upper block **[Fig. 8.10]**. Rather neatly, the 'gap' between the two stone blocks also corresponds to a thematic split in the text: while the first part of the inscription on the upper block describes the king's military campaigns and outlines his newly conquered territory, the text on the lower block is dedicated to the king's soul foundations and his provisions for the soul fires. This suggests that the façades of the Achaemenid tower were in a relatively comparable state in the Sasanian period to the one in which they are today: at least the gaps between the bared blocks, which would have been originally filled in the Achaemenid period, were visible. In other words, the Achaemenid tower on which Šābuhr had his inscription engraved was conscientiously being treated as a 'ruin'.[1089]

The letters of ŠKZ are not as large as those at Hājjiābād, only about four to five centimetres high for an *alef* for instance, but they are much more neatly and delicately engraved and perfectly proportioned. The letter shapes of this inscription essentially correspond to that described for the label inscriptions of Naqš-e Rostam and Naqš-e Rajab: the loop of the *mem* is almost perfectly round with a deep dip while the upper stem of the leftward cross ends in a wavy flourish; the upper right hook of the *ṣade* similarly ends in a twirl-like embellishment;

[1088] Huyse 1999a, I, 10.

[1089] Rather than covered with stucco for instance. Of course, this does not mean that the Achaemenid tower was not reinvested or used in the Sasanian period. For a recent overview on the different hypotheses put forward concerning the function of the Ka'ba in both the Achaemenid and Sasanian periods, see Potts 2007.

most of the examples of *lamed*s have straight stems with a neatly defined lower hook; the *nun* has an elegant wavy stem with a straight lower right 'foot'; the lower horizontal stroke of the *bet* is drawn at an angle; the *alef* is still *à la parthe*, by contrast to the square *alef* of later label inscriptions; the *dalet* and *kaf* boast a well-defined 3-shape, with a clear cedilla for the latter.

Curiously, for such an important royal inscription, the script betrays telling features of cursive. Many examples of the aramaeogram ZY, which stands for the Middle Persian connective particle *ī*, present a ligature of the two graphemes. These are written as a single grapheme, which looks like an open-topped square with an upper hook in the left stem: in these instances, the waviness of the *zain* is simplified to a straight line and the *yod* is elongated and upright rather than crescent-like **[Fig. 8.11]**. As the preceding chapter demonstrated, this is a common manuscript feature. Like in other examples of 'linked letters' at Hājjiābād, this is not a true ligature in the sense that the stone mason who was engraving the inscription would have necessarily lifted his instruments to carve the letters: the ligature was probably not much more 'comfortable' or natural for his hand than writing the graphemes separately; in a manuscript context by contrast, it would have. As such, the ZY ligature in ŠKZ can be considered as an example of the transposition onto stone – and in a monumental version – of a manuscript, scribal habit. Similarly, in line 33, the letters *lamed* and *waw* in the middle of the name *kltslwby* (Kerdsraw) are joined, with the lower curve of the *lamed* meeting the 'foot' of the *waw*. In the same word, the final *yod* is embedded in the elongated *bet*, almost touching its lower horizontal bar. This is a recurring feature, and in several instances the *yod* rests on the *bet*: in line 15, the final (silent) *yod* of the word *dstglwby* (*dastgraw*, 'captivity'), is carved onto the lower horizontal bar of the *bet* that immediately precedes it. Although many of the examples of *lamed*s are ornate and present an 'Aramaic style' lower hook, many others have been much simplified, with the lower 'hook' becoming a slight curve to the left; several also present a left-slanting upper stem, which is characteristic of this grapheme in later manuscripts. These manuscript features do not have counterparts in the label inscriptions.

Legal aspects of ŠKZ: the first part of ŠKZ as an imperial land register.

Like at Hājjiābād and Tang-e Borāq, ŠKZ is written in the first person. The first word is in fact 'I', (*an*, ANE), followed by Šābuhr's full royal titulature,[1090] as it appears in the label inscriptions. The text thus reads as a first-hand declaration by the king, which provides its contents with the stamp of authenticity that derives from royal authority. Šābuhr states that he

[1090] Huyse 1999a, I, 22.

is the king of Iran and provides an itemised list of the provinces of his kingdom. Much of ŠKZ, in fact, is dedicated to lists: of cities captured and destroyed, of peoples conquered and now fighting in the Sasanian army, of new cities founded, of soul fires established, of the names of those in whose honour these were established, of provisions dedicated to the foundations for their maintenance. The lands under Šābuhr's sway are described with geographic precision; landmarks are used to outline their extent when necessary for added clarity. These are typically introduced by the phrase *tā ō* 'up to': for instance, *Balāsagān tā frāz ō Kaf kōf ud Alānān dar, ud hamag Parišwār kāf* (ŠKZ§2, *Balāsagān*, up to the mountains of the Caucasus and the Gate of the Alans); *az ān ālāg ī drayān Mazūnšahr* (ŠKZ§3, 'and on the other side of the sea, the land of Oman').[1091] As such, the inscription almost reads as a legal land register, enumerating the provinces of the Sasanian empire and providing a clear delimitation of the conquered territory. Similarly, in the list dedicated to the cities conquered from the Romans and now paying tribute, the anaphoric repetition of the phrase *az parwār hammis* 'with its environs' after the name of every single fortress and city appears to quash any possible contention over the extent of Šābuhr's land ownership. As in a memorandum, the list is even summed up, with the total number of cities and fortresses *with their environs* calculated for each of Šābuhr's campaigns to avoid any possible misunderstanding: *āmār šahrestān az parwār hammis* 37 (ŠKZ§17, 'a total of 37 cities with their environs').[1092]

ŠKZ: Relationship between text and image.

With equal precision, Šābuhr records the full sum of the reparation money, 500 000 denarii, he obtained from Philip the Arab in 244 (CE) to maintain the peace between Rome and Iran over Armenia. This is one of three great victories over the Roman emperors detailed in ŠKZ. Šābuhr also claims he killed Gordian – Gordian III did die in battle during the Roman army's retreat in 244 CE, but probably not at the hand of the Sasanian king himself – and describes the infamous capture of Valerian (in 260 CE), whom the Sasanian king declares capturing *himself with his own hand* (*xwad pad xwēbaš dast dastgraw kerd*, ŠKZ§22).[1093] The three major humiliations inflicted upon Rome are synthesised in a single bas-relief at the same site of Naqš-

[1091] Huyse 1999a, I, 22-24.

[1092] Huyse 1999a, I, 33.

[1093] Huyse 1999a, I, 37. For a study of the historical backdrop to the events reported in ŠKZ, see Huyse and Loriot 2006.

e Rostam, carved just opposite the tower on which ŠKZ is engraved **[Fig. 8.12]**.[1094] The triumphant Šābuhr is depicted in full royal regalia mounted on his richly caparisoned horse; under the horse's hooves lies a figure in Roman dress, probably meant to represent the emperor Gordian.[1095] Šābuhr holds the wrist of a second Roman with his right hand, in a clear depiction of the latter's capture: the prisoner is evidently the emperor Valerian, and the relief directly echoes Šābuhr's declaration that he captured him 'with his own hand'. In front of the Sasanian king's horse, with both hands outstretched to him in a gesture of supplication, kneels a third figure in Roman dress, no doubt representing Philip the Arab, literally brought to his knees by the heavy tribute imposed on him by the Sasanian king. While the inscription details these three victories in succession according to their historical chronology, the bas-reliefs effects a time collapse, representing all three events in a single scene, concentrating in a single frame the highlights of the Sasanian king's triumph, projected for all to see on the cliff side in which were cut out the majestic Achaemenid tombs.

Scribal motifs and auto-referential passages in ŠKZ: the shadow of manuscript and the materiality of text.

The first part of the inscription ends with an old scribal motif, known in ancient Iran since Achaemenid times. At ŠKZ§31, Šābuhr explains that he had his exploits written down so that he who would come after him would know of his deeds and of his rule. However, he also clarifies that much else was accomplished by him – many lands acquired and many feats achieved – that was *not* written down ('here') in the inscription (*čē ēdar nē nibišt*), in addition to what is recorded in the rock-cut text.[1096] The high-priest Kerdīr similarly declares in his own inscriptions (KKZ§15, KSM§23, KNRm§46) that much else was achieved by him that was not written in *this* document (*ēn nāmag*), for should these had been recorded it 'would have been too much' (presumably for the space available): *abardar was būd ī abar ēn nāmag nē nibišt, čē agar nibišt hē ēg was būd hē.*[1097] This clause occurs twice, at the end of two different lists in which Kerdīr's pious actions are enumerated. It is directly reminiscent of Darius' own *caveat*

[1094] For the identification of the three Romans in the bas-relief, see MacDermot 1954 as well as Herrmann, Howell and MacKenzie 1989, 18-23.

[1095] For a full description with high-resolution images of this bas-relief, see the dedicated volume by Herrmann, Howell and MacKenzie 1989.

[1096] Huyse 1999a, I, 44.

[1097] MacKenzie 1989, 55.

at DB.IV§45-50 that much else was done by him that was not written in his (this) inscription (*aniyašciy vasiy astiy kṛtam ava ahạyāyā dipiyā naiy nipištam*), for had he recorded everything, those (in the future) that would read his inscription would think it too much and think it a lie.[1098] The possible reasons for the existence of parallel formulae and motifs between Old Persian and Middle Persian texts is a much-debated issue and falls beyond the scope of this chapter.[1099] For the time being, it is enough to observe that in such passages, where the content of the text explicitly refers to the physical inscription – these might be described as 'auto-referential' passages – attention is drawn to its materiality: it is the opportunity for the author both to point out the limits of this materiality – it is not possible to make a full inventory of the king's deeds for lack of space/because it would not be appropriate – but also his reason for having the inscription made, in other words the *raison d'être* of the text – the inscription records the king's achievements and conquests for posterity (for those who will 'come after' him) so that these will be remembered/not be forgotten/their truth not doubted.

Legal aspects of ŠKZ: establishing royal soul foundations.

Another auto-referential passage follows this one and is equally significant, for it introduces the second part of the inscription, dedicated to the foundation of soul fires: at ŠKZ§33, Šābuhr

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[1098] Schmitt 1991, 70.

[1099] However, see Sprengling 1940b, 344; Gignoux 1971, 85-86; Skjærvø 1985; Huyse 1990; Shayegan 2012; Ramble (forthcoming, c), "Stock formula or textual citation? The case of Kerdīr's KKZ". The vector for stock formulae and thematic motifs is generally regarded as a lost Old Iranian epic. Many motifs common to both Achaemenid and Sasanian inscriptions may well bear the mark of a common Iranian oral literary tradition, perhaps indeed a royal epic, which offered a reservoir of key formulas and themes that were remoulded and used for stately compositions. Nevertheless, exploring the complex and intricate relationship not only between Kerdīr's four inscriptions, but also between Kerdīr and Šābuhr I's inscriptions (see below) as well as more generally between Achaemenid and Sasanian inscriptions highlights the difficult and fundamental methodological problem of distinguishing between the structural use of stock themes, fixed formulaic expressions deriving from oral literary traditions, and cases of direct intertextual referencing. To complicate matters further, these are probably not mutually exclusive and a generic theme (such as the presentation of the king's descent or the assurance that the king acted with the help/will of the gods) or a fixed formula ("other (things) in large numbers," "plundered, burned and ruined," "from place to place and province to province") may in a given context constitute a textual citation. Still, I would like to suggest that the immediate literary context of Kerdīr's KKZ – and by extension the high priest's other inscriptions – is also, and perhaps above all, Šābuhr I's trilingual inscription at Naqš-e Rostam. Furthermore, the example of the recurring motif concerning the 'lack of space' to fully enumerate the king's – or important dignitary's – deeds suggests the transmission of *scribal* motifs also.

explicitly declares that he establishes these *by this inscription* (*ud ēdar-iz pad nibišt nišāyēm*).[1100] In legal terms, this passage can be described as containing the operative sentence which effects the foundation of the Fires: now, this operative clause makes a direct reference to the physical inscription as the (legal) tool which ratifies their establishment. In a recent article dedicated to the high-priest Kerdīr's role in Šābuhr's soul foundations at Naqš-e Rostam, I had the opportunity to explore the legal and fiscal mechanisms that accompany such pious foundations and appreciate to what extent Šābuhr I followed the legal procedure detailed in late Sasanian period legal literature for their establishment and endowment.[1101] Indeed, Šābuhr's endowment of *pad ruwān* foundations at the site of Naqš-e Rostam was made in strict conformity with the legal prescriptions recorded in the *Thousand Judgements* and reflects the use of key legal vocabulary.[1102]

It is made in two separate steps. The first consists in the establishment of five name-Fires: one in Šābuhr's own name and for his own soul (*pad amā ruwān ud pannām*); one in the name and for the soul of the queen of queens, his daughter; three others for each of his sons reigning over the other three divisions of the empire. The establishment of the Fires is then duly accompanied by the conveyance to them of profit-yielding property, a procedure widely illustrated in the legal literature. The list of provisions made for the celebration of the rites for the soul and maintenance of the foundations is introduced by yet another explicit reference to the physical inscription and its written content. At ŠKZ§40, Šābuhr[1103] clarifies that 'it is specifically written in the inscription in the following order' (*ud nāmčišt pad nibišt abar stān nibišt ēstēd*),[1104] before detailing the exact quantity of bread, meat and wine dedicated to each fire foundation and the names of those in whom each foundation is established. The text thus points to the engraved words as the written and verifiable testimony of what was declared by the king for the provisions dedicated for each Fire. As such, the auto-referential clauses highlighted above can be seen as pivotal passages that warrant the terms of the foundation and cast the rock inscription as an important legal document.

Remarkably, the king declares recording the 'further details' of the property transferred to each one of the Fires (*ān* [*čē imēšān*] *ādurān dād*) in a charter, according to custom (*ān-in*

[1100] Huyse 1999a, I, 45-47.

[1101] Ramble (forthcoming, b), "Kerdīr's *bun-xānag*: funding foundations in Sasanian Iran".

[1102] Perikhanian 1983, 662; Macuch 1991.

[1103] Or the scribe in charge of composing the text.

[1104] Huyse 1999a, I, 52-53.

ōh-iz harw abar pādixšīr nibišt);[1105] he also clarifies that the establishment of the Fires was done legally (*ī-šān pad ēwēn*[1106] *nihād*).[1107] In this way, two types of legal documents are evoked by Šābuhr to record the establishment of *pad ruwān* foundations with dedicated, profit-yielding property to ensure their maintenance. First and foremost is the inscription itself, which operates, through a written declaration in the first person (*ud ēdar-iz pad nibišt nišāyēm*), the foundation of the fires; it records in stone, for all to see and verify, the list of provisions made to sustain the foundations throughout time – just as it recorded in the first part, the list of the newly conquered lands and the king's deeds for the sake of posterity. The king refers to another type of written document, this time manuscript: the charters (*pādixšīr*) which contain all 'further details' concerning his provisions of profit-yielding property (*harw abar pādixšīr nibišt*).

From this it emerges that the inscription is a form of monumental memorandum which contains a succinct version of the longer and more detailed manuscript records of the establishment of the fire foundations: its importance is in its monumental and lasting medium – the stone – which the king trusts will survive the test of time. It is impossible to appreciate the ritual/religious role that this monumental inscription may have had, but the choice of the ancient sanctuary and monumental Achaemenid-'Kayanid' tower for the engraving of the trilingual text is certainly suggestive of such an aspect. It is important to appreciate that the monumental inscription does not stand alone but must be understood against a broader background of legal manuscript literature, to which it in fact makes explicit reference. Šābuhr's inscription was thus both engraved in the physical landscape of an ancient Iranian sacred site and also embedded within a broader Sasanian literary landscape of written documents and archives: both these contexts, the physical, monumental and sacred on the one hand and the textual, manuscript and legal on the other, underpinned the inscription's authority, authenticity and legal value.

A fleeting allusion to the manuscript composition of ŠKZ before its inscription, in monumental version, on the Achaemenid tower can be found at the very end of the Parthian version. This version contains the signature of the scribe who was in charge of writing/composing the text; neither of the other two (Greek and Middle Persian) versions

[1105] On the particle *ōh* as meaning 'in the regular manner', see Skjærvø 2010, 194-199.

[1106] On the legal connotations of the expression *pad ēwēn*, see Macuch 2002, 121, n. 46.

[1107] ŠKZ§33-35; Huyse 1999a, I, 46-48.

present this addendum.[1108] At ŠKZ§51, it is stated that Hormizd the scribe, son of Šilag the scribe – this detail has sometimes been interpreted as a possible indication that the office of scribe was hereditary in Sasanian Iran – wrote *this* document with his ('my') own hand (*dast nibēg im man Hormezd dibīr puhr*).[1109] The declaration, in the first person, by the scribe that he wrote it with his *own* hand, reads as the certification of the validity of the written document and its contents: Hormizd the scribe is personally guaranteeing the authenticity of the text. In this respect, it is worth noting that although Šābuhr is clearly presented as the author of the content of the text, he is never associated with the act of writing as such. He *orders* documents to be written (*u-n framād nibištan*) and refers the reader to further details in written charters, but he himself never writes. Rather, the authority of the written words of the inscription – and the legal value of the king's foundations – comes from the king's oral declaration in the first person (I am Šābuhr and I hold these lands '*An* […] *hēm ud dārēm*', I found '*nišāyēm*'; I ordered to be written '*u-n framād nibištan*'). We then have a second guarantee of authenticity that the words were properly transcribed with Hormizd's signature. No mention is made of the engraver who was no doubt an entirely different person – however, he evidently worked with a manuscript version in front of him for, as we saw, he appears to have transferred to the stone certain ligatures and other such scribal features that belong to the sphere of manuscript writing.

IV. Text and context (III): cases of intertextuality within the corpus of Middle Persian monumental inscriptions.

Reading Kerdīr's four inscriptions in light of Šābuhr's ŠKZ.

The legal quality of rock-cut texts as well as the transposition of different aspects of the manuscript original onto the monumental, stone version of it are recurring features of Sasanian inscriptions and not confined to royal commissions like those of Šābuhr. The high-priest Kerdīr's four monumental inscriptions also contain explicit references to an important series of manuscript legal documents and archives as well as other activities directly linked to scribal

[1108] This signature does not necessarily indicate that the Parthian version was the first to be composed, before being translated into Middle Persian and Greek. Philip Huyse has carefully analysed all three versions with respect to one another and concluded that the text for the trilingual inscription was probably first composed in Middle Persian, the Sasanian king's mother tongue, and then put into Parthian; the Greek version, however, appears to have been translated after the Parthian version. For a full discussion of the relationship between all three versions, see Huyse 1999a, II, 182-201 and Huyse and Loriot 2006, 315-322.

[1109] Huyse 1999a, I, 63-64.

protocol such as sealing and signing. Like the Parthian version of ŠKZ, his inscription at the site of Naqš-e Rajab also presents the 'manuscript' signature of his personal scribe. Kerdīr's inscriptions are worth examining in the light of the key features of ŠKZ discussed above, as they entertain a very close linguistic and textual relationship with this royal text. The following aims to draw out the intricate palaeographic and textual correspondences between Kerdīr's inscription (KKZ) engraved on the Ka'ba of Zoroaster at the site of Naqš-e Rostam and Šābuhr I's ŠKZ. A close study of the use of key vocabulary and phrasing in both inscriptions reveals that Kerdīr's KKZ contains numerous allusions and references to Šābuhr I's ŠKZ, constituting a rare example of intertextuality within the corpus of monumental Sasanian inscriptions.

To this day, four inscriptions by the high priest Kerdīr have been brought to light.[1110] All four are located in Sasanian dynastic sites and engage directly with monuments commissioned by the kings Ardašīr I (r. 224–242 CE), Šābuhr I (r. 240/42–270 CE) and Wahrām II (r. 274–293 CE). Kerdīr's inscriptions at Naqš-e Rostam, Naqš-e Rajab and Sar Mašhad are carefully articulated around the monumental bas-reliefs next to which they are engraved; the high priest's fourth inscription however, engraved on the Ka'ba of Zoroaster at Naqš-e Rostam, is somewhat different in that it establishes a direct relationship not with a royal bas-relief but with a royal inscription, Šābuhr I's ŠKZ, engraved just above on the same monument.

The first of the high priest's rock cut texts to be documented by early European travellers to Persia was Kerdīr's inscription at Naqš-e Rostam (henceforth KNRm).[1111] It is engraved in 73 lines right behind the victory relief of Šābuhr I carved on the rock face and placed directly beneath the Achaemenid cruciform tombs, opposite the monumental Achaemenid tower (known as the Ka'ba of Zoroaster). Carefully entwined around the hindquarters, tail and tail-ribbons of the king's richly harnessed horse, Kerdīr's KNRm follows the outlines of the royal bas-relief but never encroaching upon it. Hovering over the inscription is a bust of the high-priest himself: he is wearing his distinctive *kolāh* decorated with a scissor-shaped emblem and he points his right hand with curved index-finger towards the royal figure, in a gesture of deference.

A shorter but almost perfectly preserved inscription by Kerdīr was then recorded by Flandin and Coste in the rocky recess located between the sites of Persepolis and Naqš-e

[1110] For a synoptic edition of Kerdīr's inscriptions, see MacKenzie 1989 and Gignoux 1991.

[1111] See chapter 2.

Rostam and known as Naqš-e Rajab.[1112] The inscription (henceforth KNRb) is engraved on a prepared, deeply cut and neatly framed surface placed right behind the investiture relief of the first Sasanian king Ardašīr I (r. 180 – 242 CE). Here again, the immediately recognisable bust of Kerdīr is carved adjacent to his inscription and the high priest points a curved finger towards the royal figure.

It was not until about a century later that the German archaeologist Ernst Herzfeld reported locating a third inscription by Kerdīr, engraved in 59 lines above a bas-relief representing Wahrām II slaying (?) two lions carved on a rock cliff in the small town of Sar Mašhad (henceforth KSM).[1113] Relatively isolated and progressively deserted in modern times, the town lay off the main roads taken by travellers coming from the Gulf and on their way to Shiraz and then Esfahān, and it had attracted little of the attention enjoyed by the Marvdašt plain and Persepolis. As at Naqš-e Rajab, a special rectangular panel was cut into the rock and prepared to receive the high priest's inscription, although this surface is much larger at Sar Mašhad, measuring over five meters in length and almost three meters high; at the bottom left corner the inscription works around Wahrām II's high dome-like hairdo known as the *korymbos*. The figure of Kerdīr is this time directly included in the royal bas-relief, rather than only represented as a bust: the high priest stands directly behind Wahrām II in the small party accompanying the king on his hunting expedition (?),[1114] alongside the queen and a third dignitary who is probably the crown prince.

Research on the elusive figure of Kerdīr and major progress on the decipherment of his inscriptions was suddenly propelled forward a decade later thanks to an extraordinary archaeological find. The 1939 archaeological campaign carried out by the Chicago Oriental Institute in Persepolis and its environs under the direction of Erich Schmidt revealed a second, practically intact inscription by the high priest at the site of Naqš-e Rostam, placed on the base of the Ka'ba of Zoroaster.[1115]

[1112] Flandin and Coste 1851, II, 135 and IV, pl. 190.

[1113] Herzfeld 1926, 256-257.

[1114] For the inscription, see Gignoux 1968 and Gignoux 1991; the exact subject-matter of this relief is much debated, see Trümpelman 1975 and Katsumi 1990.

[1115] Sprengling 1940a.

The plasticity of palaeography, or how to play with the materiality of text.

Kerdīr's text on the Ka'ba is placed right under the last line of ŠKZ, about 15cm below the royal inscription, and towards the left: the first 26 cm of KKZ's 19 lines thus run parallel to ŠKZ; they then continue beyond it, until the lines 'hit' the pilaster at the left corner and stop. Concerning this particular position of KKZ with respect to ŠKZ, Sprengling remarked: "The leftward position may be due solely, as has been pointed out, to the accident of good writing surface on the stones; it may possibly have been influenced by some idea of indicating rank below the great king, after the manner of seating at a diplomatic table".[1116] Like Kerdīr's other inscriptions, KKZ is aligned on the right and engraved in regular, straight lines. It begins at the very top right-hand corner of the massive stone block on which it is engraved, the first line of text running along right underneath its upper edge: the inscription is thus neatly 'framed' by the rectangular-cut block. The individual letters in KKZ are slightly smaller in size (about a fourth smaller on average) compared to those of the bottom lines of the Middle Persian version of ŠKZ; the spacing between the letters, words and lines is accordingly also reduced.[1117] Otherwise however, the script used for KKZ is, as in all the high priest's works, the same monumental Middle Persian alphabet as the one used in the royal inscriptions from the early Sasanian period, characterised by its detached and stylised letters, spaced out evenly, almost as on a grid. In this sense, a remarkable aesthetic harmony is achieved between the two inscriptions engraved on the east wall of the Achaemenid tower, and, visually at least, KKZ seems to continue ŠKZ. This brief description also shows that the placement of Kerdīr's KKZ differs somewhat from the high priest's other inscriptions in that it is not articulated around a royal bas-relief but instead establishes a direct relationship with a royal inscription.

In this respect, a detail of the palaeography of KKZ is worth highlighting **[Fig. 8.13]**. In the first few words of his inscriptions, the author introduces himself as being the high priest Kerdīr with the solemn phrase "*ud an Kerdīr ī mowbed*" ("and I, Kerdīr the *mowbed*"). In KKZ his name is spelled with two *lamed* graphemes, "*kltyl*", rather than with the letters *resh* ("*krtyr*") as in the analogous introductory phrase at Naqš-e Rajab, or with one *lamed* and one *resh* ("*kltyr*") as in the other occurrences of the high priest's name such as at KRNm §8, 11 etc. The *lamed* and *resh* are of course interchangeable in both Middle Persian inscriptions and later

[1116] Sprengling 1940a, 202.

[1117] Note that the letters of ŠKZ also become smaller and more cramped as they reach the bottom of the text, Sprengling 1937, 128.

manuscript Middle Persian literature: even very common heterograms such as that representing the term *šāh* ('king') are arbitrarily spelt either MLKA or MRKA.[1118] Nevertheless, the two *lamed* letters in Kerdīr's name in the first line of KKZ – it is the third word from the right and therefore falls right beneath Šābuhr's ŠKZ – are in this instance highly stylised and exaggeratedly elongated so that they spill well beyond the stone block which delimits KKZ, across the crack between this block and the one above it and encroach upon the upper block, which bears the royal ŠKZ.

Omissions and additions: exploring the textual discrepancies between Kerdīr's inscriptions. The subject-matter of Kerdīr's inscriptions can be readily separated into two main sections. The first part focuses on Kerdīr's achievements during the first decades of the Sasanian dynasty and lists the honours and titles obtained by the high priest under kings Šābuhr I (r. 240–270), Hormizd I (r. 270–271), Wahrām I (r. 271–274) and Wahrām II (r. 274–293). Because Kerdīr mentions all the titles given to him by Wahrām II (r. 274–293), Philip Huyse proposed dating the high priest's texts to the end of this king's reign in the early 290s.[1119] This would imply an interval of about thirty years between the engraving of Šābuhr I's inscription on the Ka'ba and Kerdīr's own on the same monument.[1120] Interestingly, the first Sasanian king, Ardašīr I (r. 224–242), is omitted from Kerdīr's career in both KKZ and KNRb, but included in his KNRm and Sar Mašhad texts. This is particularly surprising in the case of KNRb as the high priest's inscription is engraved directly adjacent to this king's investiture scene. Possible reasons for this omission will be discussed below. The second part of the high priest's text is dedicated to the narrative of his visionary journey into the beyond. This section is entirely omitted from KKZ although it is summarised in his much shorter inscription at Naqš-e Rajab.

Kerdīr's KNRm and KSM are badly damaged but on the basis of the close parallels between his inscriptions, scholars were able to fill the many lacunae of both longer texts. Philippe Gignoux published in 1991 a synoptic transliteration of all four inscriptions separately along with a complete line-by-line comparative transliteration of the texts, according to the

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[1118] See for example NPi§35 where both forms are used in a single line, Humbach and Skjærvø 1983, III, 24.

[1119] Presumably on the assumption that Wahrām II bestowed these on Kerdīr regularly throughout his nineteen-year reign, Huyse 1998, 112–113.

[1120] Concerning the dating of ŠKZ to 260-262 CE, see Huyse 1999a, 10-14 as well as Huyse and Loriot 2006, 310. As stated above, I personally favour a later date for Šābuhr I's inscription on the Ka'ba and a much earlier date for Kerdīr's iown text on the same monument: this would reduce the time gap between the engraving of both inscriptions significantly.

method put forth by Skjærvø.[1121] This edition is particularly precious as it highlights the correspondences between the different inscriptions while allowing the reader to immediately identify the discrepancies between them.

The detailed comparative study of these discrepancies was developed in a separate article by Gignoux in order to establish the history of the composition of the high priest's inscriptions, and notably the order in which they were engraved.[1122] The textual variations highlighted by Gignoux concern both the content of the text – namely, the inclusion or omission of certain sentences and even whole passages – as well as its form, such as notable discrepancies in orthography. Instances of the first type of variation include: the absence, already noted above, of the first Sasanian king Ardašīr from Kerdīr's career in both KKZ and KNRb; the omission of the long list of provinces of Ērān from KKZ; the inclusion, in the two Naqš-e Rostam texts only, of Šābuhr I's donation to Kerdīr of the much debated "*bun-xānag*",[1123] in reward for the high priest's services to the crown and to the gods. In terms of discrepancies in the orthography, Gignoux notes for example the marked preference in KKZ for heterograms over phonetic spellings in rendering both nouns and verbs. His premise is that Kerdīr's long inscription at Sar Mašhad was the first, 'original' text and served as the template for the composition of the near-replica at Naqš-e Rostam and the shorter versions on the Ka'ba tower and at Naqš-e Rajab. This, however, he argues on the grounds of the archaeological context of the Sar Mašhad inscription rather than on the basis of textual criticism.[1124]

The divergences both in content and in spelling displayed in KKZ would indicate that this inscription is not merely a 'slavish' copy of the first part of KSM but a fully reworked version. For the scholar, this inscription was the second to be commissioned by the high priest. Then would come the engraving of KNRm: like KKZ, this inscription includes the paragraph recording Šābuhr I's royal grant to Kerdīr, an indication of KNRm's direct dependence on the version on the tower.[1125] Finally, the summary of the high priest's career and vision would have been engraved last, with the shorter Naqš-e Rajab text. Several different configurations of the order in which Kerdīr had his four texts engraved have been put forward by scholars over the

[1121] Gignoux 1991, 23, n. 36.

[1122] Gignoux 1973.

[1123] See below for a summary and short discussion of this passage.

[1124] Gignoux 1973, 214-215 and Gignoux 1991, 23.

[1125] Gignoux 1973, 204.

years, with MacKenzie preferring a KNRb–KKZ–KNRm–KSM order and Philip Huyse favouring a KKZ–KNRb–KNRm–KSM configuration; this debate will not be taken up here.[1126]

The intricate textual relationship between KKZ and ŠKZ.

More directly relevant to our study, however, is Gignoux's tentative suggestion that Kerdīr may have omitted the list of provinces of Ērān from his text at the Ka'ba for the very reason that the empire's territories were detailed in full in Šābuhr I's inscription engraved above.[1127] Sprengling had noted the close correspondence between Šābuhr I's and Kerdīr's lists of provinces in his very first edition of KKZ, observing that "practically all of this activity [Kerdīr's activity in the provinces of Anērān] follows the track of Šābuhr's raids and conquests northward and westward".[1128] Gignoux was even able to use the list of provinces in Šābuhr I's inscription to restore the one recorded in the damaged versions of KNRm and KSM.[1129] He notes that the main distinction in the organisation of the provinces in their respective lists was that the high priest explicitly separated them into those belonging to Ērān (KNRm§35–36; KSM§16–17) and those belonging to Anērān (KNRm§37–40; KSM§18–19; KKZ§12), whereas Šābuhr I records the territories under his dominion at the outset of his inscription in a single lengthy catalogue. He also highlights some variations, such as minor changes in the order of appearance of the provinces as well as the omission of certain territories (for example Pārdān or again Mazūn/'Omān) in Kerdīr's version. Gignoux explains these differences historically: discrepancies in the order of provinces indicate that the list is not composed according to a strict geographical progression and reflects the evolution of the empire's organisation, with certain territories gaining or losing prominence in the years that separated the engraving of ŠKZ and KKZ.[1130]

In this way, ŠKZ would find a direct echo in Kerdīr's texts and, paradoxically, even more so in KKZ, because of the absence of the list of territories of Ērān in that inscription: Kerdīr's text on the Ka'ba thus seems to be working directly with the royal inscription engraved just above, relying on it to record the territories under Sasanian control and allowing the high

[1126] But see Huyse 2011, 165-169 and Gignoux 1991, 23-27.

[1127] Gignoux 1973, 211.

[1128] Sprengling 1940a, 224.

[1129] Gignoux 1971.

[1130] Gignoux 1971, 93

priest to focus, in the limited space left at the tower beneath ŠKZ, on his work regarding the restoration of fire temples and priests in the provinces of Anērān.

I would like to go further and suggest that the immediate literary context of Kerdīr's KKZ – and by extension the high priest's other inscriptions – is Šābuhr I's trilingual inscription at Naqš-e Rostam. Not only are KKZ and the Middle Persian version of ŠKZ adjacent to one another physically, with the high priest's name conspicuously encroaching onto the stone block bearing ŠKZ: Kerdīr also frequently refers back to the royal inscription engraved just above, bringing his own text into line with it by deliberately using either identical or very similar vocabulary, phrasing and fixed expressions. From the very first few words of KKZ, Kerdīr positions himself very much as a successor of king Šābuhr I, in the matter of piety at least, suggesting his actions are a fulfilment of the Sasanian king's will: Šābuhr I had finished his inscription by expressing his hope that he who would succeed him might be more obedient (*huparistādar*) and well-wishing (*hugāmagdar*) towards the gods—Kerdīr takes up the thread so to speak where Šābuhr left it, using the same (unusual) vocabulary, "I, Kerdīr the Mobed shall (continue to) be obedient, (*huparistā*) and well-wishing (*hugāmag*)".[1131] The same sentence, but in the past tense, also closes his detailed description of his founding of fires and other good works and introduces the second section of his narrative, dedicated to his visionary journey into the beyond (*bē ān owōn čiyōn an az ahy ōrōn yazdān ud xwadāyān huparistā ud hugamāg būd hēm*).[1132] As Sprengling noted, Kerdīr even starts off 'semi-royally' by presenting himself with the formula "And I, Kerdīr, the mowbed" in a markedly similar manner to Šābuhr I in the (reconstructed) opening lines of his own inscription "I, the Mazdaean lord, Šābuhr".[1133] This of course is the opening formula of many old Iranian inscriptions, but it is possible to see Kerdīr's opening "*ud*" ('and') as yet another way to directly link back to ŠKZ.[1134]

In the opening lines of his inscription, the high priest describes Šābuhr I's founding of many Wahrām fires (*was ādur ī Wahrām nišānī*) throughout the kingdom (*šahr ō šahr, gyāg ō gyāg*) with the help of the gods (*pušt ī yazdān*), the king's celebration of many rites for the gods (*was kerdagān ī yazdān abzāyī*), his signing of charters with priests concerning these newly founded fires (*was ādurān ud mowūn pādixšīr āwišt*) and the resulting benefit for the priesthood (*was mowmard urwāhm ud padēx bawēd*). This description directly echoes ŠKZ§32

[1131] This use of identical vocabulary is similarly remarked upon in Huyse 2011, 160.

[1132] KNRm§49 and KSM§25; MacKenzie 1989, 55 and Gignoux 1991, 80.

[1133] Sprengling 1940a, 203.

[1134] This possibility is similarly evoked in Gignoux 1973, 196.

where Šābuhr I states that with the help of the gods (*pad yazdān pušt*) he founded many Wahrām fires (*was ādur Warahrān nišast*) throughout the kingdom (*šahr ō šahr*) and did many good works benefitting the priests (*was mōwmard kirbagīh kerd*).[1135] The king further declares recording his foundation of a series of name-Fires for the members of the royal family in a charter (*harw abar pādixšīr nibišt*).[1136] The key elements of these passages are re-moulded by Kerdīr in a refrain-like paragraph that is repeated after each main section of his text (*ud šahr ō šahr, gyāg ō gyāg was kerdagān ī yazdān abzāyī ud was ādur ī Wahrām nišānī ud was mowmard urwāhm ud padēx bawēd ud was ādurān ud mowūn pādixšīr āwišt*).[1137] The high priest even adapts this formula to describe his own founding of fires and good works, appropriating for himself his praise of the king's founding policy: thanks to him, many fires and priests throughout the kingdom were made prosperous (*padēx bawēd*); he also signed charters (*padixšīr*) concerning many fires; he founded many Wahrām fires from place to place.

Finally, there may well also be a direct reference to ŠKZ in the much-debated passage in which Kerdīr records Šābuhr I's special grant to him of a "*bun-xānag*": at KKZ§3 and KNRm§7 the high priest declares that Šābuhr I made a particular assignment to him, Kerdīr, personally (*ān-im ōh gōnagdar Šābuhr šāhān šāh pad waspuhragān pāymār kunēd*) concerning the many fires and rites mentioned in the inscription (*ēn and ādur ud kerdagān čē pad nibišt*) with the words "Let this be your *bun-xānag*, and as you know that a deed (will be) good for the gods and for us, act so".[1138] The entire sentence concerning Šābuhr I's grant is omitted from the otherwise almost identical copy of high priest's text at Sar Mašhad, as well as from the abridged version at Naqš-e Rajab located only a few kilometres south of Naqš-e Rostam: this seems to suggest that the compound alludes to an aspect of the direct physical context of Kerdīr's two Naqš-e Rostam inscriptions that is absent from the Sar Mašhad and Naqš-e Rajab sites. What exactly Kerdīr's *bun-xānag* entailed is the subject of a dedicated study that I have developed elsewhere,[1139] and this difficult problem will not be taken up again here. Suffice it to say that in this important paragraph the high priest claims that Šābuhr I personally bestowed major administrative – and financial – responsibilities upon him and

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[1135] ŠKZ§32; Huyse 1999a, I, 45.

[1136] ŠKZ§33-35; Huyse 1999a, I, 45-48.

[1137] See the end of paragraphs of KKZ§4, 6, 9, 10.

[1138] KKZ§3: *ud ēn and ādur ud kerdagān čē pad nibišt, ān-im ōh gōnagdar Šābuhr šāhān šāh pad waspuhragān pāymār kunēd, kū-t bun xānag ēn ēw bawēd, ud čiyōn danē kū kerd yazdān ud amā weh, owōn kun*, MacKenzie 1989, 54 and 57.

[1139] In Ramble (forthcoming, b), "Kerdīr's *bun-xānag*: funding foundations in Sasanian Iran".

establishes his special relationship with the Sasanian crown. The responsibilities bestowed concern the administration of 'fires and rites', and I have argued that these were none other than the huge fire and soul foundations established by the king in his inscription at Naqš-e Rostam in the second part of ŠKZ. This would explain – among other things – why this particular passage is excluded from the Sar Mašhad and Naqš-e Rajab inscriptions. For the purposes of this study, it is enough to stress that "the many fires and rites mentioned in the inscription" alluded to in KKZ§3 seem to be a direct reference to the foundations recorded by Šābuhr I in ŠKZ and that "the inscription" cited by the high priest is indeed ŠKZ itself.

The references to ŠKZ are structural to the composition of KKZ. From the very first sentence the high priest appears to be linking back to the royal inscription with an opening "*uď*", a royal-like introductory formula ("I, Kerdīr the mowbed"), the repetition of key vocabulary (*huparistā*, *hugāmag*) found in Šābuhr's last line and the omission of the first Sasanian king Ardašīr from his *curriculum vitae*, which allows Kerdīr to immediately begin his career with Šābuhr's reign. Refrain-like phrases (such as "from province to provincem many Wahram fires were founded and many priests made prosperous", "may I be/I have been obedient and well-wishing towards the gods" etc.) also remould expressions and vocabulary found in ŠKZ and serve to open and close key passages describing the high priest's career, his pious activities and the territories in which he carried these out. This close textual articulation finds a direct counterpart in KKZ's physical placement on the Achaemenid tower as well as in elements of its palaeography. Although it cannot constitute an argument in itself, the fact that the composition of KKZ is so closely tied to Šābuhr's text suggests that Kerdīr's inscription on the Ka'ba may have been commissioned first, thereby lending weight to Huyse's suggested configuration for the engraving order of the high priest's inscriptions. Most remarkably, the numerous allusions to ŠKZ contained in KKZ and discussed above constitute a rare example of intertextual referencing within the corpus of monumental Sasanian inscriptions.

ŠKZ as the literary, political, legal and religious backdrop to KKZ.

The close textual relationship between ŠKZ and KKZ reflects the formal transfer of a pious foundation's guardianship from a reigning king to a priest.[1140] It was probably control over such wealth and Šābuhr I's formal conveyance of it to Kerdīr that justified the high priest's

[1140] So Perikhanian 1968, 22-23 and Macuch 1991.

encroaching on the royal sanctuary with two inscriptions and a relief.[1141] As the intricate referencing highlighted here shows, king Šābuhr I's ŠKZ provides the literary, as well as the political, legal and ritual backdrop to Kerdīr's KKZ.

Like ŠKZ, Kerdīr's KKZ makes explicit reference to manuscript documents and archives to underpin the authority of the statements in his inscription(s). He boasts sealing many agreements or treaties (*pādixšīr*) with priests: this was the same specialised legal document to which Šābuhr had referred his reader for the 'further details' concerning his endowment. In view of the legal backdrop of both inscriptions, this type of document likely describes endowment contracts stipulating the provisions for soul foundations and the priests' role and stipend with regards to them. One of the refrains that rhythms Kerdīr's inscriptions is a triad of such specialised documents, *gitt* ('document'),[1142] *pādixšīr* ('agreement') *mādayān* ('books, records') signed by the high priest throughout his career. At the end of each section where Kerdīr details the good works he accomplished under each Sasanian king, he clarifies what name and title he used to sign all the *gitt*, *pādixšīr* and *mādayān* prepared under that reign. Thus, he first served Šābuhr under the name 'Kerdir the hērbed' and everything (all the *gitt*, *pādixšīr* and *mādayān*) he signed under that king's reign (*zamān*) 'at court and throughout the empire, from place to place' (*pad dar ud hāmšāhr gyāg ō gyāg*) bore the signature 'Kerdir the hērbed' (*Kerdīr ī hērbed*); under Šābuhr's son Hormizd it was Kerdīr the *Ohrmezd mowbed*;

[1141] The difficulty in dating Kerdīr's inscription was briefly mentioned above. If we understand Šābuhr I's transfer of the administration of the royal foundation to Kerdīr (as reported in KKZ) as part of the testamentary provisions made by the Sasanian king towards the end of his reign/life, this may have some incidence on the date of the engraving of KKZ. Sprengling had in fact understood Šābuhr's legacy to Kerdīr as a testamentary bequest, (Sprengling 1940a, 208-209). There is no reason really to think that Wahrām II bestowed honours on Kerdīr throughout his reign rather than granting them to him upon his accession to the crown: Wahrām II's close relationship with the high priest was probably already well under way under his father Wahrām I's rule. Hormizd's and Wahrām I's reigns being so short, this could push back the date of the engraving of KKZ significantly, to a few years only after Šābuhr's death. Kerdīr may well have wanted to 'lock in' this royal grant with an inscription as soon as possible after the rather close succession of kings that followed (three kings between 270 to 274 CE after Šābuhr I's demise c. 270 CE) and the instability this would have generated. Furthermore, with KKZ, Kerdīr seems to be at the very height of his career, whereas the Paikuli inscription shows that by 293 he had rather fallen from favour (and was presumably quite elderly), another argument for dating the high priest's inscription to an earlier rather than later period. Kerdīr's securing the management of the huge royal foundations (as well as the network of Fires throughout the kingdom) and the tremendous financial power this entailed as early as the mid-270s may have in fact contributed to maintaining Wahrām II in power for some twenty years, despite the internal feuds that tore apart this king's reign.

[1142] For the translation of *gitt*/*gittag* as 'document', see MacKenzie 1989, 65.

and under Wahrām I, it was again *Kerdīr ī Ohrmezd mowbed*; finally, under Wahrām II, he bore the title *Kerdīr ī bōxt-ruwān-Wahrām ī Ohrmezd mowbed*. Kerdīr's precaution in detailing the different titles he bore under each Sasanian king and his efforts to clarify the exact nature of the signature he placed on all the different types of documents signed under each king is striking. It evidently strives to thwart any possible challenge to either his authority or the authenticity and validity of the manuscript texts that were signed and sealed throughout his impressive career: these were presumably the basis for his extraordinarily prestigious position, not least of all with respect to the royal soul foundations at Naqš-e Rostam. This is in fact explicitly stated at the end of his inscription, when Kerdīr refers to the reason for engraving his rock-cut text and gives a sum-up of his career, repeating the three main titles he bore under the four kings he served. The high priest states that he wrote this text (*u-m ēn nāmag* […] *nibišt*) because he had long (*az ahy ōrōn*) been personally signing and sealing many agreements and contracts relating to priests and fires throughout the empire, under various lords and kings: anyone who in the future (*kū kē frāstar zamān*) would see 'a charter, a record or a document or some other memorial' (*pādixšīr mādayān ayāb gittag ayāb any nāmag*), would know that he was *that* Kerdīr (*ān Kerdīr hēm*), who was named Kerdīr the hērbed under Šābuhr etc. This last sentence is the only time the recurring triad *pādixšīr–gittag–mādayān* is augmented with a fourth type of manuscript document (*nāmag*), evidently for the sake of absolute exhaustivity.

Although it is admittedly entirely unsurprising, the passages just detailed are an appreciable testimony to the existence of a royal archive of documents, contracts and other manuscript books which were carefully kept and catalogued: in the reign of Wahrām II, documents written, signed and sealed under Šābuhr were still considered as referenceable texts, cited by the high priest as proof of the responsibilities bestowed upon him; they could be consulted, discussed and – evidently – contested also. Most importantly, the intricate textual relationship between Kerdīr's and Šābuhr's inscriptions, and in particular Kerdīr's reference to the royal engraved text, further shows that the monumental stone inscriptions were themselves part of this Sasanian, consultable archive of documents.

Like the Parthian version of Šābuhr's monumental inscription, Kerdīr's inscription at the site of Naqš-e Rajab is signed by a scribe who gives his name and title: *Bōxtag dibīr Kerdīr ī xwādāy.* In his edition of this inscription, Philippe Gignoux restores the connective particle ZY between the words *dibīr* and Kerdīr.[1143] With this emendation, the signature reads *Bōxtag* the scribe of Lord Kerdīr: it implies that *Bōxtag* was the personal scribe of the high priests.

[1143] Gignoux 1991, 36 and 39.

However, Gignoux himself admits in a note that this emendation is not necessary.[1144] On the rock, the two 'units' *Bōxtag dibīr* and *Kerdīr ī xwādāy* are not juxtaposed but separated by a considerable gap of unprepared rock surface as well as a crack **[Fig. 8.14]**: the name *Bōxtag dibīr* finished the last, very short sentence, while the syntagm *Kerdīr ī xwādāy* is engraved all the way to the left. Without the connective particle, the signature would read "*Bōxtag* the scribe; Lord Kerdīr", perhaps in a direct transposition of the juxtaposed seals on the original manuscript letter? It is finally worth noting that although Kerdīr's inscription is personally signed by a scribe, the high priest also describes himself as writing (*u-m ēn nāmag* […] *nibišt*) – as we saw, Šābuhr only ever *orders* documents to be written and by contrast to Kerdīr is not directly associated with the act of writing in his inscriptions.

Preliminary conclusions: the manuscript tradition behind Sasanian inscriptions and the special status of the monumental epigraphic texts.

The detailed study of this first choice of early Sasanian inscriptions highlights certain key aspects of monumental epigraphy from this period. First, it is possible to catch a glimpse of the lost manuscript Middle Persian literature if we pay attention to certain key aspects of the rock-cut texts. Some elements of the inscriptions' palaeography betray the manuscript models that were the basis for the monumental stone versions; they are testimonies to cursive forms of writing that were being used alongside the monumental, ornamental script in this period. Similarly, highlighting the key passages in the epigraphic texts where mention is made of (now lost) manuscript documents enables us to appreciate to what extent the monumental texts were conscientiously embedded within a much vaster Sasanian corpus of written documents. This corpus forms the literary and legal-administrative backdrop of the rock-cut texts. Indeed, a closer look at the types of documents referred to 'for further details' and the reasons for the author of the inscription for mentioning them, reveals the predominantly legal value of the cited manuscripts: these served to underpin the legal authority and validity of the monumental texts; the inscriptions, in turn, act as enduring stone testimonies of royal deeds, religious foundations, fiscal transactions, sealings and signatures. From these observations it is possible to infer a certain juridical role or at least administrative of the monumental stone inscriptions. Furthermore, although we have no direct evidence for it, the careful placement of the epigraphic texts on Achaemenid ruins, Sasanian bas-reliefs, royal sanctuaries, and other locales endowed with a numinous quality – such as springs and lush grottos, if only because they were

[1144] Gignoux 1991, 36, n. 115.

the site of a royal exploit or visit – is strongly suggestive of a religious/ritual role of the early Sasanian rock-cut texts. This important aspect should probably not be divorced from the legal quality of the inscriptions highlighted above: the separation of legal procedure and law is a modern one and as later, post-Sasanian legal literature amply illustrates, it cannot be applied to Sasanian Iran.

The inscriptions' allusions to key features of their physical context calls attention to the importance of a monumental text's direct environment for understanding both its significance and its author's purpose in having it engraved. Indeed, all Sasanian monumental epigraphic texts examined in this chapter directly engage with their support and surroundings, and mention, through the use of an array of adverbs and deictic pronouns, the aspects of their surroundings that are at the root of their *raison d'être*. Through such linguistic tools, but also through certain palaeographic embellishments or exaggerations, the author defines his inscription's deictic field of reference, away from which the text makes little or no sense. Among the tools that contribute to make tangible the materiality and three-dimensionality of a text are the passages where the content of the inscription alludes to the physical phenomenon of the rock-cut words. As the above study shows, such 'auto-referential' passages are pivotal moments in the structure of the text and usually contain the clues that help appreciate the author's reasons for having the inscription engraved, and gauge what he hopes his rock-cut text – or rather, the passerby's reading of them – will achieve.

Now, in certain cases, the key feature of an inscription's environment is another, older rock-cut text: the inscription makes explicit reference to this epigraphic, textual context either through the use of deixis, by citing chosen content from the older text or echoing aspects of its vocabulary and phrasing. In such instances, it is reasonable to consider inter-inscriptional referencing as examples of inter-textuality within the (sub-)corpus of Sasanian inscriptions. A careful analysis of the palaeographic, linguistic and textual relationship between a pair or series of inscriptions not only provides precious, often overlooked, insight into an author's primary purpose in commissioning a monumental rock-cut text, but also helps elucidate core aspects of the latter's significance, such as its legal value and/or religious quality. Indeed, the exhaustive overview and critical study of the intertextual referencing between KKZ and ŠKZ allowed me to highlight with greater precision the legal and financial role that the high-priest played within the royal foundations established at the site of Naqš-e Rostam.

In this way, the combined study of key aspects of Sasanian inscriptions, such as their palaeography, their references to manuscript written documents and their intricate relationship with their natural, built and inscriptional environment, not only provides precious insight into

the lost manuscript literature and scribal practice of Sasanian Iran but also throws some light on the peculiar nature and status of the rock-cut texts themselves. An exhaustive analysis of the epigraphic corpus of Sasanian Iran falls beyond the scope of this chapter. Nevertheless, a choice of inscriptions is put forward below that should serve to illustrate the core features of Sasanian monumental epigraphy just described.

V. A choice of case studies: further evidence for the documentation of the lost Sasanian manuscript tradition and the different symbolic aspects of Sasanian inscriptions.

Narseh's Paikuli: exploring the different legal aspects of inscriptions.

One of the best illustrations of the above-mentioned role of monumental inscriptions as 'stone witnesses', implying an important political, legal and archival function of these texts, is the inscription of the Sasanian king Narseh (r. 293-302 CE) at Paikuli.[1145] The troubled political context of Narseh's accession to the Sasanian throne was briefly mentioned above, with the study of this king's usurpation of his brother Wahrām I's bas-relief at Bīšāpūr. In 293, Wahrām II, son and successor of Wahrām I, dies. According to Narseh's inscription at Paikuli, Wahrām II's young son Wahrām III was crowned in secret by a shady personage named Wahnām, son of Tadros, without consulting the Sasanian elite – as we shall see, this seems to have been an important, if not the main, cause for grievance among the nobility. Narseh's inscription at Paikuli is our only source for Wahrām III's short, four-month reign. The tensions between the different political factions of the powerful Sasanian elite that had torn apart Wahrām II's reign flare up. Narseh – still according to his inscription – was in 293 far from all this political turmoil, reigning as king of Armenia. It is unclear when Narseh was crowned king of Armenia – could it have been at the accession of his nephew Wahrām II, perhaps as a consolation for the Sasanian throne? It certainly appears that the governance of this important and volatile Sasanian province – the main buffer zone between the Roman and Sasanian empires – was an honour reserved for the prospective heir to the Sasanian throne. Be that as it may, according to Narseh, the Sasanian nobles reached out to him to return to Persis and take back the throne from Wahrām III. The following will serve to highlight that the monument of Paikuli marks the very place where Narseh met the Sasanian nobles as he was on his way down from Armenia, and was the stage for the *wuzurgān*'s official pledge of allegiance to him.

[1145] For an edition of this text, see Humbach and Skjærvø 1983.

Narseh's Paikuli: the significance of place.

The reconstruction of the Paikuli monument is a thorny issue over which specialists remain divided **[Fig. 8.15]**. To this day, the site has not benefited from systematic excavations. Its history is intricately linked, as mentioned in chapter 4, to the career of the German archaeologist Ernst Herzfeld. In the dedicated and monumental work *Paikuli* published in 1924, he painstakingly embarked on the first block-by-block restoration of the true puzzle that consisted in the remains of the bilingual inscription engraved on the monument's facades. Since then, several new inscribed blocks have been brought to light and a new edition of the inscription was published by Prods Oktor Skjærvø and Helmut Humbach, with more recent addenda by Cereti and Terribili as well as Skjærvø.[1146] Herzfeld's first reconstruction of the monument was questioned by the more recent studies for being too influenced by the Ka'ba of Zoroaster, which it doubtlessly emulates:[1147] semi-engaged columns in all four corners of the monument indicate that the Paikuli monument was in fact surrounded by a pavilion. Nevertheless, researchers converge in reconstructing a tall, square, 9x9m tower-like structure with four high-relief busts adorning each of the four facades. The Middle Persian and Parthian inscription were engraved so as to be placed on the west and east sides respectively, similarly to Šābuhr's monumental inscription at Naqš-e Rostam.

The site of Paikuli is located in modern Iraqi Kurdistan, 340 km north-east of Bagdad. At first sight, it appears to be isolated on a little hill. Herzfeld thus observed, surprised, that "Paikuli lies away from any modern high road in one of the most impenetrable regions of that part of the world, and it seems rather enigmatical that we should find so important a memorial here. It was not exactly on the road connecting Ctesiphon and Ganzaca, two of the chief cities of the Sasanian empire".[1148] Nevertheless, Walter Bruno Henning, would later take up with more assurance Herzfeld's tentative observation that Paikuli was on the road to Ctesiphon – the Sasanian capital (35km south of Bagdad) – and Ganzaca, an important Sasanian town and the departure point for any Sasanian traveller on his way to Armenia.[1149] As such, the site appears to be a carefully chosen meeting-point between the Sasanian nobles arriving from Ctesiphon and Narseh on his way down from Armenia: a "half-way mark" to stage Narseh's

[1146] Skjærvø 2006; Cereti and Terribili 2012; Cereti and Terribili 2014.

[1147] Cereti and Terribili 2012, 85.

[1148] Herzfeld 1924, 8.

[1149] Henning 1952b, 517-522.

'election' and swear allegiance to him before marching together upon the capital to seize the crown.[1150]

Herzfeld and Humbach's intuition was confirmed by the decipherment of the inscription. Indeed, Narseh explicitly states at NPi§32[1151] that the monument on which his inscription is engraved was erected on the very place where he met with the *wuzurgān:* when he arrived in Asorestān 'in this place (*ēn gyāg*)' where '*this* (*ēn*) monument (*plky*)'[1152] was set up, the princes and nobles came to meet him; here they came before him, where *this* monument (*ēn plk*) is set up. The recent publication by Cereti and Terribili of newly recovered blocks further revealed that the commemorative monument was given its own name, "Perōz-Anahīd-Narseh", which should probably be read as a possessive compound, either 'Narseh, with victorious Anahīd' or 'Victorious Narseh, by the grace of Anahīd'.[1153]

Narseh's Paikuli: the importance of writing and written documents.

Like Šābuhr's inscription at the Ka'ba, Narseh's Paikuli contains long lists of names, detailing all the grandees and nobles that came to his support and joined him against Wahrām III: it evidently serves to record and remember those *wuzurgān* that came to his aid before he carried out his coup. At the end of his inscription, Narseh in fact clearly states that those members of the aristocracy who either came to his court in person [following the coup], or sent an envoy, presents, letters (*nibēg*) or 'hostages as promises/loyalty' would be guaranteed fame and other things, and would be pardoned (?) and accepted in his service[1154] – no doubt those who did not were earmarked as traitors. It is worth noting that sending a *nibēg* – a written document, perhaps a written 'pledge' – was considered enough proof of one's loyalty to be pardoned and was treated as having the same importance as coming to Narseh in person or sending a messenger. Manuscript written documents certainly play a crucial part in Narseh's narrative of his

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[1150] "When one travelled from Persia to Armenia in Sassanian times, one set out from Ganzaca in Atropatene; Narseh coming from the opposite direction, no doubt went first to Ganzaca... The shortest road from Ganzaca to Seleucia/Ctesiphon passed through the plain of Siarazur, where one reached the half- way mark...The very road along which Narseh was travelling, on the Sassanian road from Seleucia/Ctesiphon to Siarazur over the pass of Paikuli", Henning 1952b, 518.

[1151] Humbach and Skjærvø 1983, 20-22.

[1152] For *plky* as a term describing the special type of monument that was erected at Paikuli, see Henning 1952b, 518, n. 6 as well as Cereti and Terribili 2012, 78.

[1153] Cereti and Terribili 2014, 357-358, n. 42.

[1154] Humbach and Skjærvø 1983, 51.

accession to the Sasanian throne and are referred to at each important turning point of the coup's chronology. When Wahrām III was crowned, the furious (faction of the) Sasanian nobility sent a message to Narseh in Armenia: it was upon seeing the letter (*frawardag*, NPi§19)[1155] that Narseh decided to set off to conquer the throne; the verb to 'see' confirms that this was a written message rather than an oral one relayed by the messenger. After his first meeting with the nobles, Narseh himself sends a letter (*frawardag*, NPi§47)[1156] to the young Wahrām III warning him that he is marching upon him; upon receiving it Wahrām III abdicates. It is more difficult to decide where the series of exchanges that took place between Narseh and the nobility before he finally accepted the throne is written or oral.[1157] Upon his successful military coup, Narseh does not immediately seize the crown, but calls a council and sends a message (*paygām*) to the *hargbed* and other *wuzurgān* asking them whether they believed anyone to be a more worthy king in Ērānšahr than himself. There is a series of exchanges, and Narseh eventually receives a 'message and answer' (*paygām ud passox*) from the *hargbed,* landlords, princes, grandees, nobles, Persians and Parthians, saying that they cannot see a better king to rule Iran. Narseh reminds the elite that with this council and 'election' he was respecting an old Sasanian tradition, observed by Ardašīr and Šābuhr themselves. Whether the messages exchanged were written or oral, the inscription at Paikuli certainly served to record in stone the full proceedings of this council along with the names of those who took part in it. In this respect, it is worth noting Narseh's careful distinction between Persians and Parthians among the empire's grandees: this detail no doubt explains Narseh's choice of having the inscription engraved in two versions, Middle Persian and Parthian.

A final observation concerning the Paikuli inscription's palaeography ought to be made. In their recent article, Cereti and Terribili note that the letters of the inscription – which is written in the monumental, ornamental Middle Persian and Parthian scripts, familiar from the early Sasanian royal sites – are not all the same size.[1158] The sentences that were placed higher up on the monument's façade were written in larger letters than those coming in the middle of the text, while the smallest letters were reserved for the lower 'register'. The regularity of the letter sizes within their respective 'section' would suggest that this was planned (rather than the engraver running out of space): the inscription was written in perspective. Indeed, for Cereti

[1155] Humbach and Skjærvø 1983, 14.

[1156] Humbach and Skjærvø 1983, 31.

[1157] NPi§63-90; Humbach and Skjærvø 1983, 37-51.

[1158] Cereti and Terribili 2012, 86-87.

and Terribili this was evidently an optical device used to make the words placed higher up on the monument larger, to be better seen from the ground. If their suggestion is verified, this suggests the clear intention on the part of Narseh/the scribe in charge of redacting the inscription to make the engraved text readable, an aspect which has not been documented in other Sasanian inscriptions.

For the sake of the soul: Mihr-Narseh's inscription at Fīrūzābād.

Šābuhr's inscription at Naqš-e Rostam, which establishes his soul foundations and lists his endowment for their upkeep, was a telling example of the difficulty in distinguishing the legal from the religious aspects of many Sasanian inscriptions. Although the choice of support and location for his inscription, a sumptuous ruin in an ancient dynastic site, is suggestive of a sacred quality of the physical rock-cut text, we have no direct information concerning a possible ritual treatment of it – such as with blessings or libations, well attested, for instance, in the case of Assyrian royal foundation texts. Nevertheless, several examples of monumental inscriptions from Sasanian Iran explicitly belong to the religious sphere and were evidently regarded by their authors as being beneficial to their soul. Now, the following will show that it is the very fact that the physical inscription was seen or read that brought blessings upon its author.

High up in the cliff side, overlooking the (now dried) river which leads to modern Fīrūzābād, a city founded by Ardašīr I in Fārs and known as *Ardašīr-xwarrah* in Sasanian times, the grand vizier Mihr-Narseh, whose long career spanned the reigns of four Sasanian kings in the fifth century CE,[1159] had an inscription engraved to commemorate his construction of a bridge providing safe passage over the roaring waters. Mihr-Narseh's inscription is directly adjacent to a bas-relief commissioned two hundred years earlier on the same cliff side by king Ardašīr I, and which depicted the latter's investiture by Ohrmazd. The inscription begins similarly to the 'label inscriptions' discussed at the beginning of this chapter, pointing to the object which it serves to explain or describe: *ēn puhl*, 'this bridge'. The rock-cut text provides the name and title of the person, Mihr-Narseh, who had it built, and clarifies that he paid for it from his own personal funds (*az xīr ī xwēš*, MnFd§3) for the sake of his own soul (*rūwān ī xwēš rāy*, MnFd§2). This crucial piece of information is a recurring *topos* of monumental

[1159] Yazdgerd I (r. 399-421 CE), Wahrām V (r. 421-439), Yazdgerd II (r. 439-57) and Pērōz (r. 459-84); on the personage of Mihr Narseh, see Daryaee 2000; for an edition of this inscription, see Henning 1954 and Daryaee, *Sasanika*, https://sites.uci.edu/sasanika/mehr-narseh-inscription-at-firuzabad-mnfd/.

Sasanian inscriptions and carries important legal and religious implications. Thus, Kerdīr explicitly assures his readers in his own four inscriptions that he established many cathedral fires and celebrated many rites for the gods from his own personal estate (*u-m pad xwēš-iz xānag … pad xwēš xānag*, KKZ§15-16). Similarly, Šābuhr's scribe, Apsāy, who had a bilingual inscription commissioned on a votive monument dedicated to his master in the town of Bīšāpūr, clarifies that he paid for it from his own estate (*az xwēš xānag*, VŠ§10).[1160]

The (admittedly later) Middle Persian legal literature concerning the establishment of soul foundations is extremely clear that, for the founder's soul to benefit from it, he must fund it with his own personal money/estate. Indeed, in the the *Dādestān ī dēnīg*, *pursišn* (question) 7 asks whether a man who has died would receive the benefit of a pious action (*kirbag*) performed for his sake (*ōy rāy*) but that he did not provide for during his lifetime, in other words that he had not endowed: Dd.§7.2, *nē bun kerd*.[1161] The issue seems to be that the deceased did not pay for the pious action; it was performed *and provided/paid for* by somebody else *for* him. The conclusion of *pursišn* 7 is that the deceased would not benefit from a *kirbag* (it would not count in the Weighing) for which he did not give dispositions (*handarzēnīd*) or provide for/endow (*bun kerd*) in his lifetime: Dd.§7.2, *agar ōy ī be widardag andar zīndagīh ān kirbag nē framūd u-š nē handarzēnīd ud nē bun kerd u-š nē-z pad jād būd ēg-iš be ō tarāzūg nē šawēd ud nē rasēd* 'When anyone does a good deed for one who has passed away, after his death, if he who has died did not order that good deed and did not put it in his will and did not bequeath it in his lifetime and also if it was not done by means of his property, then it does not go into the balance and does not reach him'.[1162] Further down, the author reinforces this statement by confirming that, *a contrario*, one who did provide for a *kirbag* to be performed in his name with an endowment (*agar ān ī kirbag ī ōy widardag andar zīndagīh ī xwēš framūd ayāb-iš handarzēnīd ayāb bun kerdār*) would receive the full benefit of the good deed (*ī-š ruwān rasēd*, Dd. §7.5). Then only would the one who ordered the foundation of the thanksgiving services (?) (*bun ī spās framūdār*) and the owner of the good deed (*xwēšīg [ī] kirbagīh*) be certain/valid (*ēwar*).[1163]

[1160] For an edition of this inscriptions, see Ghirshman 1936.

[1161] Jaafari-Dehaghi 1998, 54-57.

[1162] Jaafari-Dehaghi 1998, 54-55.

[1163] In this respect, Dd.§7 can be linked to MHD§35. 9-17, which addresses a parallel problem, but from a different angle. The passage in the *Thousand Judgements* stipulates that if a man establishes (i.e., pays) and performs (*nihēd ud kunēd*) for the sake of the soul of *another* man, then this is as if he had established and performed services for his own soul: *ud yazišn ī pad ruwān ī mard mard nihēd ud kunēd pad-iz ruwān ī xwēš nihād ud kard bawēd*.

The inscriptions of Mihr-Narseh, Kerdīr and Apsāy thus recorded in stone and for all to see that their foundations, good works and votive dedications were made in due form and would legitimately accrue benefits to their soul. Securing this understanding was essential to another clause in Mihr-Narseh's inscription, also found in a number of other Sasanian monumental texts. The Grand Vizier concludes by entreating the passer-by *(kē pad ēn rāh āmad*) using his bridge to make a blessing in his name and for his children (*Mihrnarseh u-š frazandān āfrīn ēw kunēd*), in thanks for securing the safe passage across the river at his own expense. Mihr-Narseh's appeal to the reader is reminiscent of the closing statement of another Middle Persian inscription engraved on a large boulder in the vicinity of the city of Meškin in eastern Azerbaijan, dated to the 27th year of Šābuhr II (309-379).[1164] It commemorates the foundation of a fortress (*diz*) built in seven years by a personage name Narseh-[…], in the name of the gods and for the glory of the king of kings (*pad nām ī yazdān xwarrah ī šāhān šāh*, ŠMŠ§7-8). Like Mihr-Narseh he asks the passer-by, should the fortress please him, to make a blessing for the sake of its founder's soul (*kē tar ēn rāh bē āmad ēn diz passandād ēg Narseh*-[…] *pad ruwān āfrīn ēw kunēd*, ŠMŠ§11-14). The inscription adds, perhaps with a touch of humour, that on the contrary, should the visitor not be impressed by Narseh-[…]'s fortress, he should go make one of his own that surpasses it. The challenge made by the founder of the fortress to the reader of his inscription is reminiscent of Šābuhr's challenge at Hājjiābād and Tang-e Borāq that should the reader consider himself strong(er) armed, then he should attempt to outdo the king's bowshot.

Sacred aspects of Sasanian inscriptions: epigraphic texts and ritual performance.

That passers-by did make blessings to the authors of inscriptions upon seeing/reading their engraved texts is illustrated by a precious pair of Middle Persian inscriptions carved on the majestic ruins of the portico of Darius' *tačara* at Persepolis.

The two Middle Persian inscriptions are engraved one above the other, on the right doorjamb of the portico's entrance **[Fig. 1.1]**. The first Middle Persian inscription, the upper one in the pair, was commissioned by Šābuhr king of the Sākas, son of the king of kings

[1164] For an edition of the inscription, see Nyberg 1970 (with a photograph of this now almost entirely effaced inscription); Frye and Skjærvø 1996; Daryaee, *Sasanika*, https://sites.uci.edu/sasanika/meshginshahr-inscription/.

Hormizd, and is dated to the second year of Šābuhr II's reign (r. 309-379 CE).[1165] The author is a Sasanian prince and he has travelled 1200 km from his province to the capital, Staxr, to pay homage to the newly crowned king. On the way back he stopped at 'A Hundred Columns' (*sadstūn),* for piety/the accomplishment of pious actions (*pad kirbagīh*); he ate and drank with his companions, whose names are all recorded – not least that of the scribe, Narseh – and he had rites performed for his own soul, for that of his father and ancestors *and* for those (anonymous) individuals who built the structure: the *tačara.* With demonstrative pronouns, adverbs of place, place names and visual triggers, the inscription positions itself, temporally, geographically and spatially. The prince passed on *this* road (*ēn rāh*), between the capital and his province — a reference to the royal road that cut across the Marvdašt plain, skirting the Persepolis Terrace. His inscription's location is thus first defined according to two main imperial points of reference. The text then becomes more precise, pointing to the ruins on which it is engraved: the prince stopped 'here' (*ēdar*), at 'A Hundred Columns', in 'this building' (*im xānag*), gradually narrowing down the deictic field of reference. The name 'A Hundred Columns' is almost a metonym: the many stone columns still standing were a striking feature of the Achaemenid ruins. The structure, perhaps in a wider sense, is referred to again at the end: rites (*āfrīn*) were also made in honour of those 'who built this house/structure' (*kē ēn mān kard*). The exact meaning of the concluding formula (*yazd yād*) is difficult to determine; suffice it to say that it encapsulates the inscription's primary commemorative function by invoking the gods to remember.

The second inscription is signed by the judge Seleukos, who travels to the Sasanian court sixteen years later, all the way from Kabul. On his way he stops at 'A Hundred Columns' and sees the inscription that the Sasanian prince had ordered engraved.[1166] He has the first inscription read (out loud?, *pahipurs*-), has rites performed for the King of kings, for the Sasanian prince and for his own soul. He records his own visit to the site with a new inscription, placed right beneath the first, describing this as a 'pious action' (*kirbag*). The second inscription is also dated, but the reign is not recorded — probably precisely because this information is already contained in the first text. Thus, from the very first lines, the second inscription works

[1165] For an edition of the first inscription, see Frye 1966 as well as Daryaee, *Sasanika*, https://sites.uci.edu/sasanika/sabuhr-sakansah-inscription-persepolis-sps-i/; for a recent translation of this text see also Canepa 2018, 269. For the second Middle Persian inscription at the *tačara* see Frye 1966.

[1166] In his edition of both inscriptions, Frye assumed that Seleukos had been ordered by the Sasanian king to go to Persepolis *in order* to visit the inscription he had left there several years earlier, but this is not explicit from the second text.

with the first one, placed just above. The judge also refers to his text's location, again calling the Terrace 'A Hundred Columns'. This time however, the rites performed are not to honour those who built the structure, but to honour the author of the first text, the king of the Sākas (ŠPII§6). Remarkably, the second inscription does not 'geolocate' itself in terms of the royal road and the Achaemenid ruins as the first one had done. Rather, it locates itself spatially with respect to the first text, by pointing to it directly: (ŠPII§3), 'this inscription (*ēd nāmag*, lit. 'document') which is written above (*abar*)'.

The first text can be described as a "secondary"[1167] inscription in the sense that it does not belong to its medium, the ruins of the *tačara*, in its original state. As in the case of most secondary epigraphy, it functions as a material trace of a traveller's evanescent presence in a place of significance, capturing his response to it; the final formula suggests a reflection on the passing of time and the fleetingness of memory. Most importantly however, the two Sassanian inscriptions *together* effect the transformation of a secondary inscription *into* a primary monument. The first text is the reason for the judge Seleukos' visit to Persepolis: it has become *the monument that was visited,* and libations are performed for its author in the same way that the first text had recorded libations performed for the builders of the *tačara*, the texts' medium and the original point of reference. The first inscription has become a primary monument by the performative action of the second inscription, placed just beneath in line both with chronology and hierarchy.[1168] If the first inscription has no meaning outside its material and geographical context, the second inscription has no *raison d'être* without the first. The first

[1167] The notion of primary and secondary epigraphy was recently developed in collective volume entitled *Scribbling Through History* (Ragazzoli *et al.* 2017), dedicated to 'rehabilitating' graffiti as a constituent part of a site, monument or artwork. The authors explore the role of graffiti in 'place-making', with several case studies tracing the long-term accumulation of such writings in certain significant sites; they also address and define the so-called 'and-me phenomenon', or 'injunction of writing', the apparently universal reality according to which we tend to write where others have written (or drawn), where writing invites more writing. This work offers a valuable methodology with which to *untangle* the many writings in different languages and scripts engraved on the ruins of the *tačara* from one another, see Ramble (forthcoming, a), "Generations of writing: the secondary inscriptions of Darius' *tačara* at Persepolis".

[1168] This joins Ragazzoli's observation concerning the graffiti in the Scribes' Cave at Deir el-Bahari that signatures are in a 'relative position' to one another so that in a 'sequence of epigraphic events […] the focal point is very likely to be the centre of the panel, the first graffito that was written;' the central panel is turned into a monument 'to be seen' by the transformative power of the secondary inscriptions, Ragazzoli *et al.* 2017, 31.

inscription directly produces the second one: in this respect we can speak quite literally of 'generations of writing'.[1169]

Above all, the pair of Middle Persian inscriptions from Darius' *tačara* are suggestive of the religious honours performed before such rock-cut texts. The judge Seleukos explicitly records having the Sāka king's inscription read before performing libations and making blessings in the name of its author, suggesting that *reading* the texts or having them read was part of their ritual treatment. We may infer from these observations that, although it is much more difficult to document, monumental rock-cut texts not only played a part in the political and legal life of Sasanian Iran but in the religious and ritual one too.

[1169] This 'genealogy of writing' is only just beginning: in time, many Arabic and Persian inscriptions were added to the pair, at first next to this epigraphic group, and then further and further into the ruins, a dynamic in which writing generates writing, little by little crystallising collective memory around the ruins.

Conclusions

The research developed in this doctoral dissertation hopes to contribute to Sasanian studies in particular, and to ancient Iranian studies more generally, in three main ways. First, it offers a critical study of the history of research surrounding the decipherment of the Middle Persian script, thereby helping to define the contribution of Sasanian epigraphy to the broader historiographical debates concerning the study of Late Antiquity. Then, through the palaeographic analysis of the earliest pre-Sasanian and Sasanian Middle Persian written vestiges, it highlights the existence of an active and innovative scribal tradition that was local to Persis throughout the Seleucid and Parthian periods. This tradition presents a wealth of cursive and stylistic innovations that are generally regarded as characteristic of much later Middle Persian manuscripts. Finally, it investigates a possible model for the study of Sasanian inscriptions which takes into account the references made in these monumental texts to both (now lost) manuscript documents, as well as to key features of their natural and built environment: this helps bring into sharp focus the often overlooked legal, administrative and religious functions of Sasanian rock-cut texts.

Isolated passages in Late Antique historiography allude to "Persian inscriptions", while several historiographers from this period evidently entertained the notion of a script specifically used by the "Persians". However, whether this was only an assumption on their part, hearsay, or any real knowledge of written Middle Persian is less clear. The close examination of the relevant descriptions in the works of Roman, Byzantine, Syriac and Armenian authors reveals that any details concerning the epigraphic commissions of Sasanian kings and the alphabet used by the Sasanian administration are only fanciful literary embellishments: Late Antique historiography had little or no contact with either cursive or monumental Middle Persian. What the accounts do record are certain aspects of epigraphic practice that were characteristic of – but not exclusive to – Sasanian Iran, such as the composition of multilingual inscriptions, the inscription of boundary stones, cases of *damnatio memoriae* or again the dedication of inscribed votive objects: generally, such instances are only recorded because they were displayed by the crown outside the empire's heartland, in Armenia and Mesopotamia, and in languages other than Middle Persian, such as Greek. The closest reference to a "Persian" alphabet and writing system is Epiphanius' excursus on what is probably the Manichaean script, which he enquired about only because he considered its creator as a dangerous rival. In the main, there seems to have been a certain lack of distinction in most sources between Syriac and

‘Persian’. This echoes the similar ambiguity in earlier Greek and Roman historiography concerning what exactly is meant by ‘Syriac/Assyrian’, the adjectives often used to describe Old Persian cuneiform inscriptions. As such, Late Antique accounts illustrate the huge importance of Syriac as a mediatory language (or rather, script) in the exchanges between the Sasanian empire and Byzantium, an aspect of the linguistic landscape of Late Antique Iran that is also testified by Arabo-Persian chronicles.

By contrast, Arabo-Persian accounts dating from the early centuries after the fall of the Sasanian empire record a wealth of detailed information concerning the different languages spoken within the borders of the Sasanian empire and in particular the scripts used to transcribe the (Middle) Persian language. Some of the chroniclers were of Iranian origin and acquainted with Middle Persian; a (Zoroastrian) priest is sometimes cited as the main source for their account. Yet, the passages are often difficult to interpret and frequently slip into fantastical interpretations, suggesting that the literary landscape of Sasanian Iran and its many scripts was soon becoming the stuff of legends. Some of the better-informed accounts keep a trace of the synchronic use of different script styles in pre-Islamic Iran, and, most remarkably, present strikingly accurate explanations of the Middle Persian heterography writing system. These were to be pivotal in 19th century Western scholars’ understanding of the workings of the Middle Persian writing system.

The European rediscovery of ancient Persian inscriptions was a complex phenomenon with its own intricate history, involving aspects as disparate and seemingly unrelated as the chance documentation of Achaemenid sites, the success of travel literature in Europe, the rivalry between European learned societies (especially French and British), European missionary ambitions, and merchants’ commercial encounters with local Zoroastrian and non-Zoroastrian communities. The early European travellers to Persia who left us accounts of their expeditions were priests, noblemen and wealthy merchants; they had all received a solid education in the Classics and this was their reference for all things Persian, old and new – a standard against which they checked their observations and information systematically. Travellers relied on classical historians – whose works they physically took with them to the field – to help them to identify and interpret ancient monuments and sites as well as natural features of the Iranian topography like mountains and rivers. Against this background, the rediscovery of the legendary Persepolis spurred a contagious enthusiasm for ancient Persia, which the growing popularity for travel literature only encouraged further. Čehelmenār-Persepolis soon became a major focus of international scholarly attention, precipitating the documentation of its magnificent architectural vestiges and strange cuneiform inscriptions.

Buried in travellers' drawings of the sumptuous vestiges at the site of Naqš-e Rostam was a set of short trilingual inscriptions with Middle Persian, Parthian and Greek versions that was to be the key to the decipherment of the monumental Middle Persian script. The unknown script was variously described as Coptic or Palmyrene and the inscriptions erroneously attributed to Alexander the Great. It was also around this time that European travellers in India collected the first Zoroastrian manuscripts to reach Europe, heralding the beginning of a textual critical study of Zoroastrianism. No link was yet made, however, between the language of the rock-cut texts of Naqš-e Rostam and the Zoroastrian manuscripts deposited at the Bibliothèque du Roi by Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil du Perron (1731-1805) in 1762.

The painstaking comparison of the Middle Persian versions of the Sasanian inscriptions copied at the site of Naqš-e Rostam with their Greek counterparts allowed Antoine Isaac Silvestre de Sacy (1758-1838) to identify a first series of letters and to begin work on the Middle Persian monumental script. As his decipherment progressed, he secured a small vocabulary of Middle Persian words which firmly associated the language of the inscriptions with that of the commentaries in the Zoroastrian manuscripts, as well as those engraved on the coins dating to the reigns of the Sasanian kings. This allowed scholars to anchor the use of Middle Persian within that dynasty, bringing Iran's Sasanian history into the spotlight. It was also based on Silvestre de Sacy's breakthrough with the decipherment of the Sasanian inscriptions, and in particular his reading of formulaic Sasanian royal titulature, that Georg Friedrich Grotefend was able to lay the groundwork for determining the phonetic value of Old Persian cuneiform characters, opening the way for the decipherment of cuneiform scripts.

Still, inscriptional and manuscript Middle Persian were not considered identical, and the degree to which they were related was the subject of much disagreement. Most importantly, the Semitic-looking words in the inscriptions and manuscripts were taken to be loanwords rather than part of the language's writing system, giving way to serious misreadings and sparking a major debate in scholarship concerning the nature of the Middle Persian idiom: was it an Indo-European language with Semitic loanwords or a Semitic language presenting significant Indo-European syntactic features? Middle Persian was even brandished as an emblem of the peaceful coexistence between Semitic and Aryan peoples, born from the happy alliance between Armenians and Chaldeans (Syrians) under the aegis of Zoroastrianism.

Western scholarship's misunderstanding of Middle Persian heterography, and in particular the assumption that aramaeograms were loanwords pervaded the study of Sasanian inscriptions and Zoroastrian manuscripts all the way until the second half of the 19th century. It was the cause of serious misreadings and lay at the root of the fierce debates that polarised

scholars concerning such issues as the nature of the Middle Persian language as well as the linguistic relationship between inscriptional and manuscript Middle Persian. This is particularly well illustrated by the history of the slow but steady progress made on the decipherment of the Sasanian inscription of Hājjiābād as successive researchers tackled it. Some scholars even called into question the 'genuineness' of the suspiciously 'mixed' Middle Persian language and by extension expressed doubts concerning the authenticity of the Zoroastrian manuscripts brought back from India by Anquetil Duperron: such accusations must be understood against the backdrop of a fierce antagonism between the learned circles of France and England. European scholars' appreciation of the articulation of Aramaic (Semitic) and Iranian (Aryan) elements in Middle Persian reflects the tropes of scholarly debates and ideology in their time – predominantly the historical relationship between Semitic and Aryan peoples – while the forced readings of key terms betray a strong Christian bias. It was eventually the close collaboration with experts of the Zoroastrian scriptures in India for the publication of Middle Persian glossaries of aramaeographic forms, and in particular the first-hand witnessing of the reading of manuscripts by priests in the second half of the nineteenth century which finally provided the key to unlocking the mechanisms of heterographic writing for Western scholarship.

As it became clear, the heterograms (or aramaeograms) in Middle Persian, which for so many centuries were thought to be 'loanwords' by Western scholarship and had proved so difficult to apprehend, were not borrowed into the language but inherent to the writing system and directly linked to the history of its emergence. The Middle Persian script derives from Imperial Aramaic, which was extensively used for administrative purposes in the chanceries of the Achaemenid empire. Middle Persian did not only inherit the shape of its graphemes from the Aramaic alphabet. Imperial Aramaic came along with a distinctive administrative protocol, conventions for writing letters and contracts with their precise fixed formulae. These are central aspects of the mechanisms that gave rise to the heterographic Middle Persian writing system. The nineteenth century debates concerning the nature – Semitic or "Aryan" – of Middle Persian are reflected to some extent in more recent studies which highlight the difficulty of determining, in the case of early Parthian and Middle Persian (and Elymaean) texts and inscriptions, whether these present 'corrupted', faulty, Aramaic or already a form of heterography. What such controversies illustrate is the difficulty in distinguishing a language from its writing system.

The appearance of Greek in the Seleucid period as an important language of administration as well as the new language of prestige for representational purposes contributed

to the fragmentation of the many centuries-old monolithic Aramaic scribal tradition. The latter did not disappear, however: although only very few traces of it remain for this period, evidence suggests that Aramaic continued to be used locally in administration, and in some rare cases, for representational purposes (on coinage) also. Greek was eventually uniformly abandoned as a language of administration, progressively disappearing in Iran in the course of the 1st century CE and giving way to a mosaic of Aramaic-derived Iranian scripts, anchored in provincial chanceries. One such script, Parthian, dominates the scene: it gained an imperial status with the rise to power of the Parthian Arsacids and benefited from the normalising influence of a centralised administration. Nevertheless, the more conservative shapes maintained in local scripts such as Characenean and Elymaean, and the existence of cursive shapes that appear to have evolved from Aramaic prototypes without following the same trajectory as Parthian counterparts, suggest that these local chanceries were direct heirs of the Achaemenid Aramaic scribal tradition. It is against this background that the first traces of the Middle Persian script in the former Achaemenid heartland of Persis must be examined.

Very few written vestiges have survived from pre-Sasanian Persis. Our understanding of the use of Aramaic in Persis and the evolution of this alphabet from the fall of the Achaemenid empire until the beginning of the Sasanian period rests entirely on a corpus of locally struck coins, to which can be added two inscribed silver vessels. One of the more remarkable characteristics of the Persid coinage is that the Greek alphabet apparently never made its way into the coin legends, setting it starkly apart from the Parthian, Elymaean, and Characenean numismatic issues. Historical evidence suggests that Persis was not spared Seleucid and Parthian domination, and there is no reason to believe that the Persid kings chose to have their legends engraved in Aramaic either out of rejection of Greek or out of lack of access to this language and script. Persis, the ancient heartland of the Achaemenid empire, had enjoyed a special administrative status at least up until Seleukos I (r. 305-281); it was also an old imperial administrative hub and likely hosted an important local chancery which had maintained a strong Aramaic heritage. A close study of the palaeography of the Persis coins and pre-Sasanian engraved silver vessels, as well as its comparison with other regional Aramaic-derived scripts from this period, reveals the emergence of a flourishing scribal tradition: it presents local innovations, with the effort to differentiate, through the use of diacritics, certain graphemes that had become virtually indistinguishable; the synchronic existence of different shapes for the same grapheme; and the juxtaposition of different script-styles – archaising, ornamental, cursive, detached and linked – within a given legend. Most importantly, the introduction of certain features such as simplifications, linked graphemes and

proto-corrupted forms, can only reasonably be explained as reflecting manuscript practice. As such, the close study of the scant written material from pre-Sasanian Persis serves to highlight the existence of a rich and lively local manuscript tradition which has left no vestiges because of the perishable media it was written on.

From the ruins of Dura-Europos were recovered a number of parchment fragments, ostraca and ink dipinti which can be securely dated to the first decades of the Sasanian empire. Not only are they the earliest written vestiges that can be attributed to this period: they are also some of the only manuscript remains of Sasanian Iran. The important archives of administrative Middle Persian documents and the Zoroastrian religious texts that have survived all belong to the very late or post-Sasanian era. The absence of manuscript material for this period has contributed to misleading scholars' understanding of Late Antique Iranian writing practices, often leading to the assumption that Middle Persian palaeography gradually evolved from the highly ornate, monumental inscriptional style recorded in Sasanian royal inscriptions, to the cursive and characteristically ligatured hand known from the Zoroastrian manuscripts.

The extant written material from Dura indicates that both Parthian and Middle Persian were used in day-to-day scribal practice in the context of early Sasanian royal chanceries – whether some or all scribes could write both languages is a question that must remain unanswered at present. Remarkably, the texts present a marked tendency towards ligatures and stylistic embellishments. These are most striking at the beginning and at the end of lines: in often-occurring words or letter pairs, especially towards the end of words or texts, the scribe's hand appears to have favoured links between graphemes and avoided lifting his writing instrument. Such features have no counterpart in the Parthian documents from the same finds, indicating that even in this early period, they were particular to Middle Persian cursive. Above all, the Middle Persian manuscript vestiges from Dura show different versions of the 'standard' cursive hand of the early Sasanian period. In this way, cursive, formal cursive, numismatic, inscriptional Middle Persian – with many intermediary forms creatively interwoven in single inscriptions by scribes, such as a 'ligatured inscriptional' style, well illustrated by the dipinti – are better regarded as different but synchronically used graphic registers rather than a diachronic evolution from the latter to the former.

The careful palaeographic study of the pre-Sasanian and early Sasanian written material serves to outline the rich and prolific now lost manuscript tradition of Sasanian Iran. In the main, the inscriptions commissioned by Sasanian kings and important dignitaries constitute the

only primary written sources for this period[1170] and therefore dominate the textual and palaeographic research dedicated to it. Yet, if we are to reconstitute Late Antique Iranian scribal practices, the first step is to acknowledge that inscriptions were only a fraction of the written output of the Sasanian empire.

Now, the rock-cut texts themselves allow us a glimpse into the vanished Sasanian manuscript literature. The inscriptions record a wealth of specialised terminology to refer to manuscript texts, testifying to a dynamic administrative and legal scribal activity in this period. Elements of the inscriptions' palaeography also betray the manuscript models that were the basis for the monumental stone versions, and are testimonies to cursive forms that were being used alongside the lapidary, ornamental script in this period. Furthermore, the recurring references to manuscript documents and archives reveal that these formed the political, legal, administrative and even religious backdrop to the monumental inscriptions: rock-cut texts were conscientiously inscribed within a much broader Sasanian landscape of manuscript sources. The question remains what role monumental inscriptions played within this textual landscape and what special status they enjoyed with respect to other Sasanian written sources. The manuscript documents alluded to certainly served to underpin the legal authority and validity of the monumental texts; the inscriptions, in turn, acted as enduring stone testimonies of royal deeds, religious foundations, fiscal transactions, sealings and signatures. From these observations it is possible to infer an administrative and juridical role of the monumental stone inscriptions.

To go further in determining the specific significance of rock-cut texts, it is necessary to take a closer look at certain key passages in which the content of the inscription alludes to the physical phenomenon of the engraved words. Such 'auto-referential' passages are pivotal moments in the structure of a rock-cut text: they contribute to making tangible its materiality and three-dimensionality and allow its indexation to its environment – as such, they are specific to monumental inscriptions. The allusions to key features of their physical context calls attention to the importance of a rock-cut text's direct environment for understanding both its significance and its author's purpose in having it engraved. Aspects of the inscriptions' surroundings that are mentioned include Sasanian royal bas-reliefs and sanctuaries, ancient ruins, soul foundations, springs and lush grottos endowed with a certain numinous aura, as well as other, older inscriptions in their vicinity. Such aspects of the monumental texts' natural and

[1170] Along with seals, that are not examined in detail in the context of this study: these sources are problematic because of their lack of provenance, context and date.

built environment are strongly suggestive of a religious and ritual role of the early Sasanian rock-cut texts – an aspect that should probably not be divorced from their legal and administration functions.

A more complete picture of the now lost manuscript Sasanian tradition would be gained from the systematic study of the remaining Sasanian written vestiges that have not been discussed in this dissertation, such as masons' marks, later funerary inscriptions and seal legends. These present a wealth of script styles and peculiar palaeographic features used synchronically that would contribute to further enriching our understanding of Sasanian manuscript practice. Similarly, the systematic examination of the entire corpus of Sasanian inscriptions that survives and that continues to be documented as new finds are published will refine the nature of the administrative and legal status of monumental texts in Late Antique Iran and help us to confirm their role in Sasanian religious life and ritual practice.

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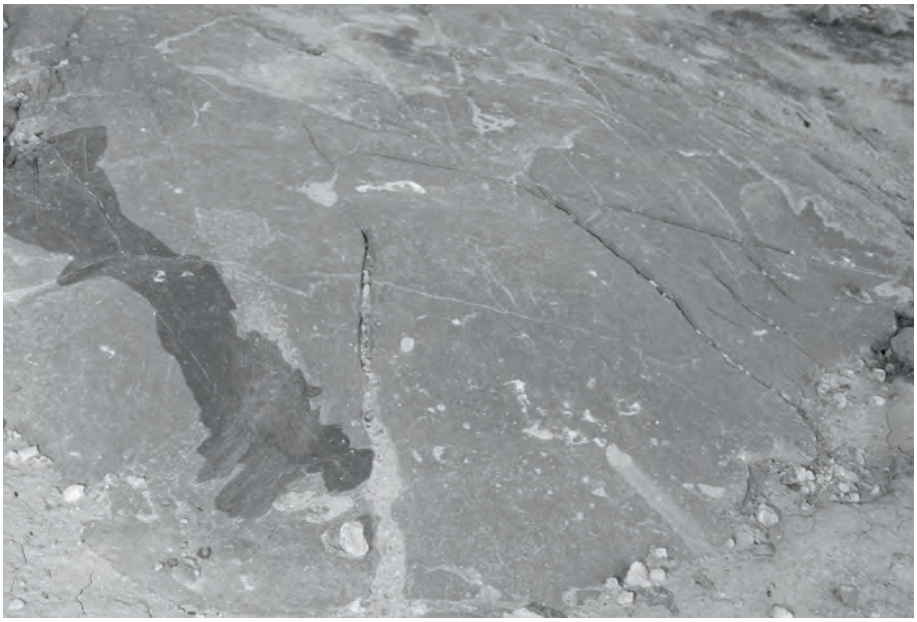
Figures

Fig. 0.1, One of three Middle Persian inscriptions at Taxt-e Tāvūs. Photo by the author.

Fig. 0.2, Thermal spring lake at the site of Taxt-e Suleymān. Photo by the author.

Fig. 0.3, Trilingual cuneiform inscriptions of the Achaemenid kings Darius and Xerxes at the site of Ganjnāmeh. Photo by the author.



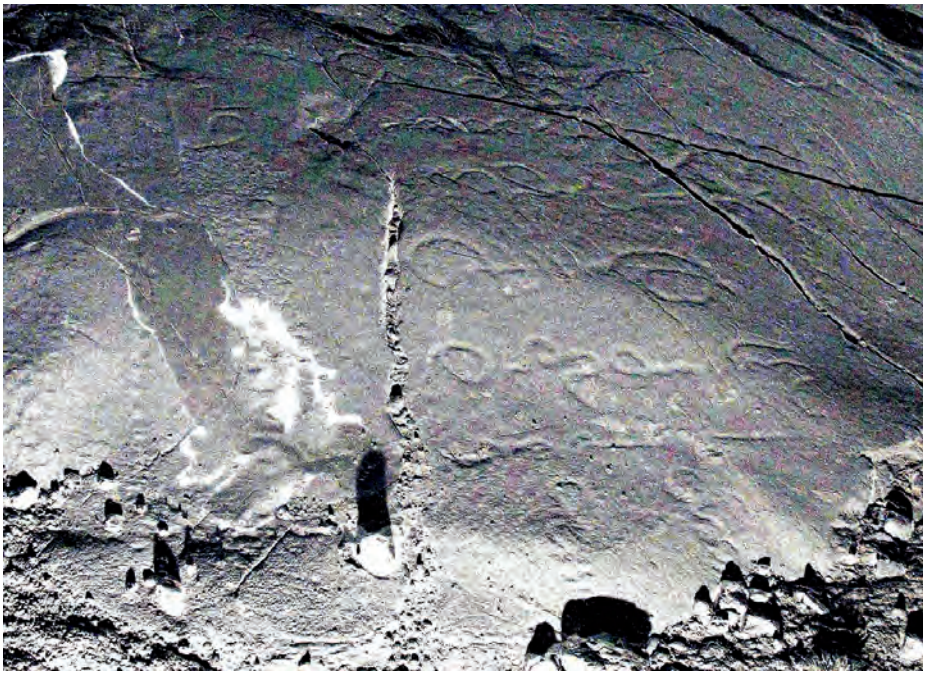


Fig. 0.4, ‘Before and after’ image of a Middle Persian inscription at the site of Pasargadae showing the results of RTI photography: in the first image, the inscription is barely visible; in the second image, processed with RTI, the Middle Persian inscription appears. Photo by the author.

Fig. 0.5, The ‘generations of writing’ engraved on the ruins of Darius’ *tačara* at Persepolis. Photo by the author.

Fig. 0.6, The great ‘Gate of all nations’ of Persepolis. Photo by the author.

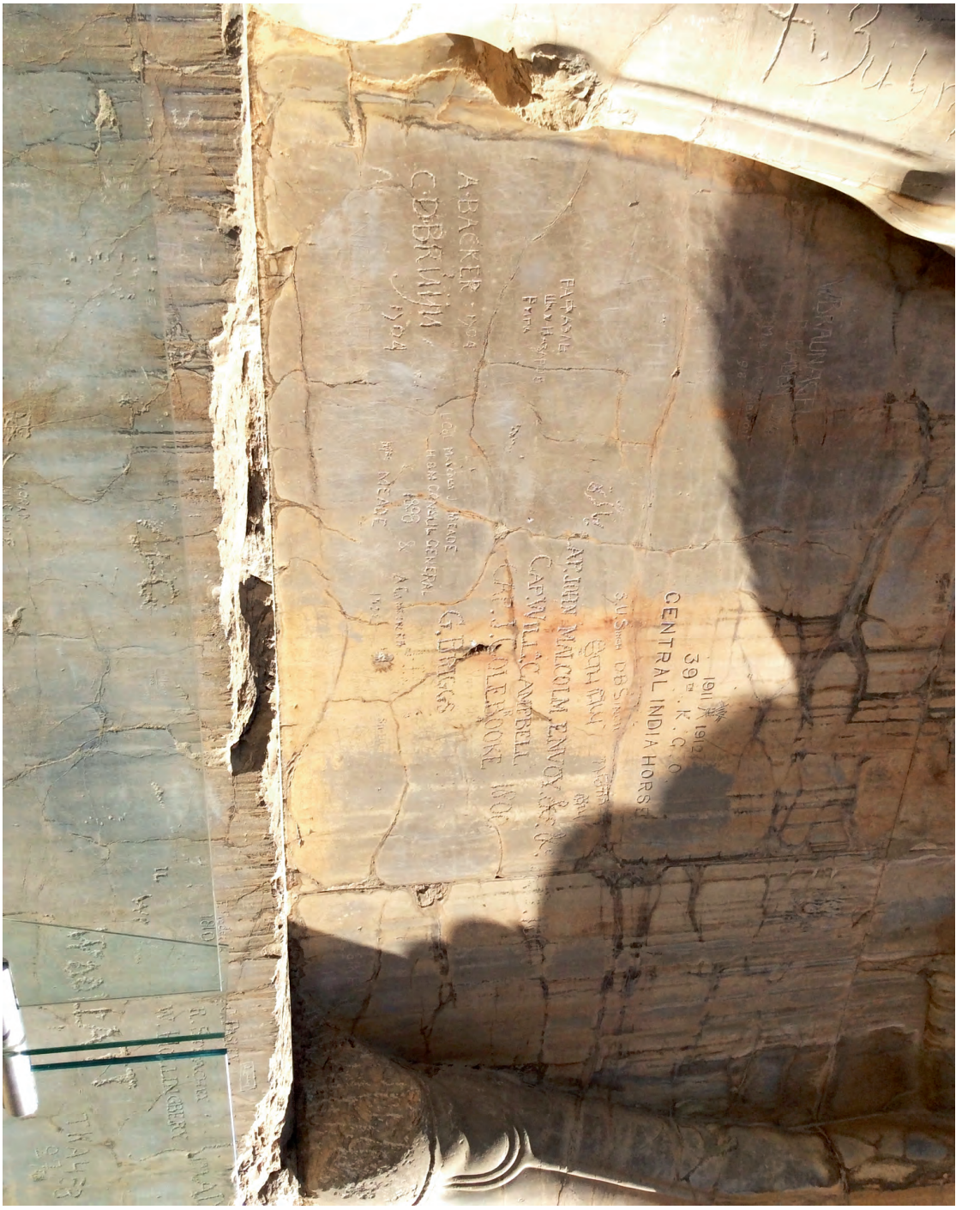


Fig. 0.7, Graffiti inscribed at the Gate of all nations at Persepolis. Photo by the author.

Fig. 0.8, Achaemenid cruciform tomb and Sasanian bas-relief at the sire of Naqš-e Rostam. Photo by the author.

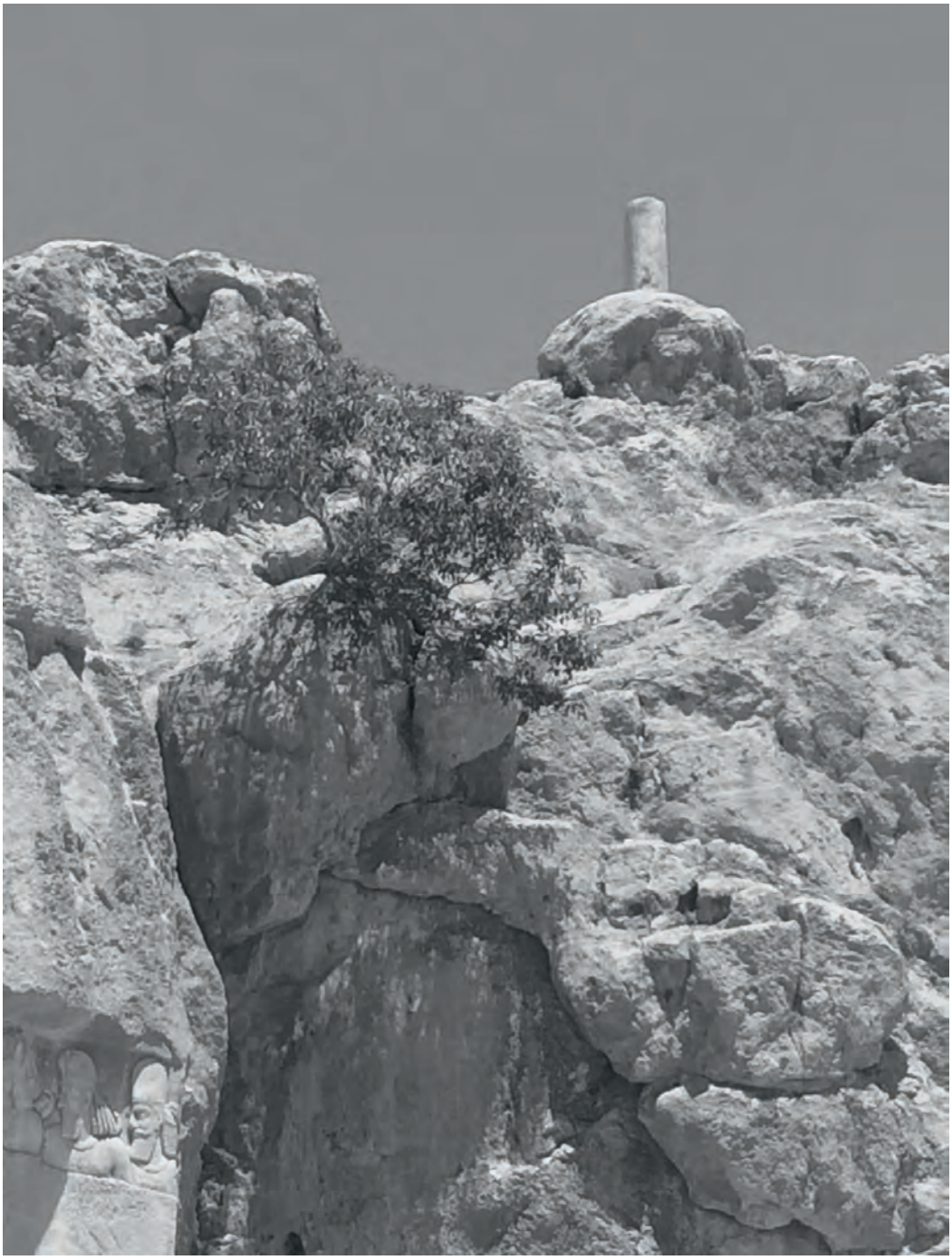


Fig. 0.9, Free-standing ossuary on top of the cliffsidem visible from the ground at Naqš-e Rostam. Photo by the author.

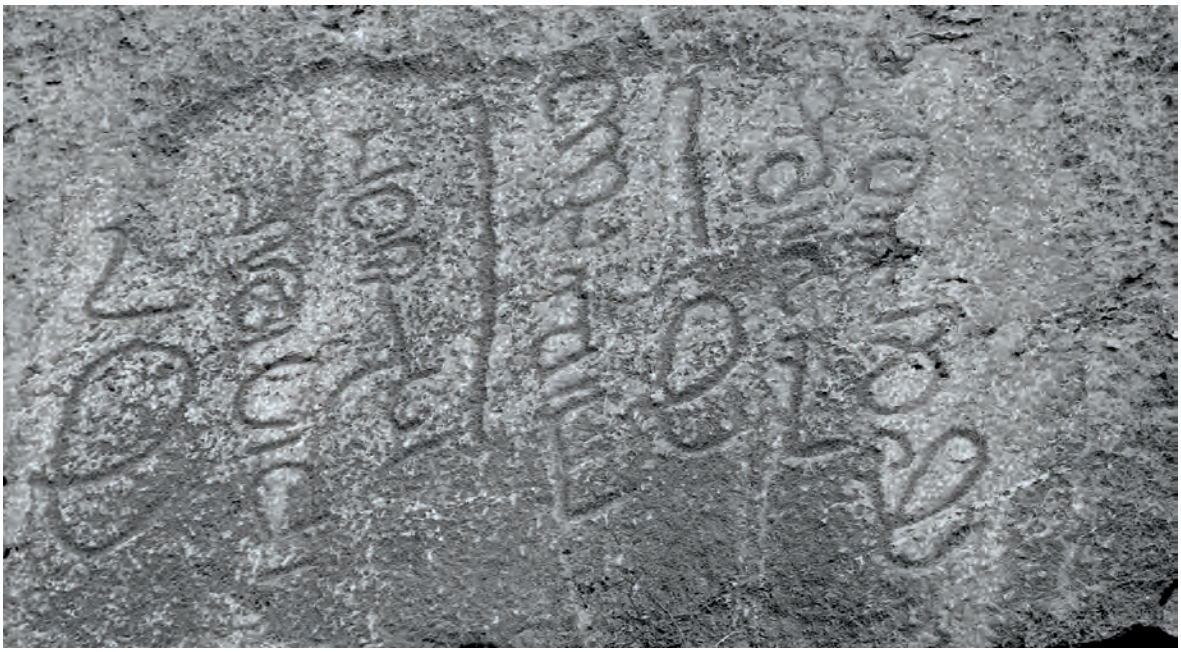


Fig. 0.10, Middle Persian private inscription by the (now dried) spring of Maqsūdābād. Photo by the author.

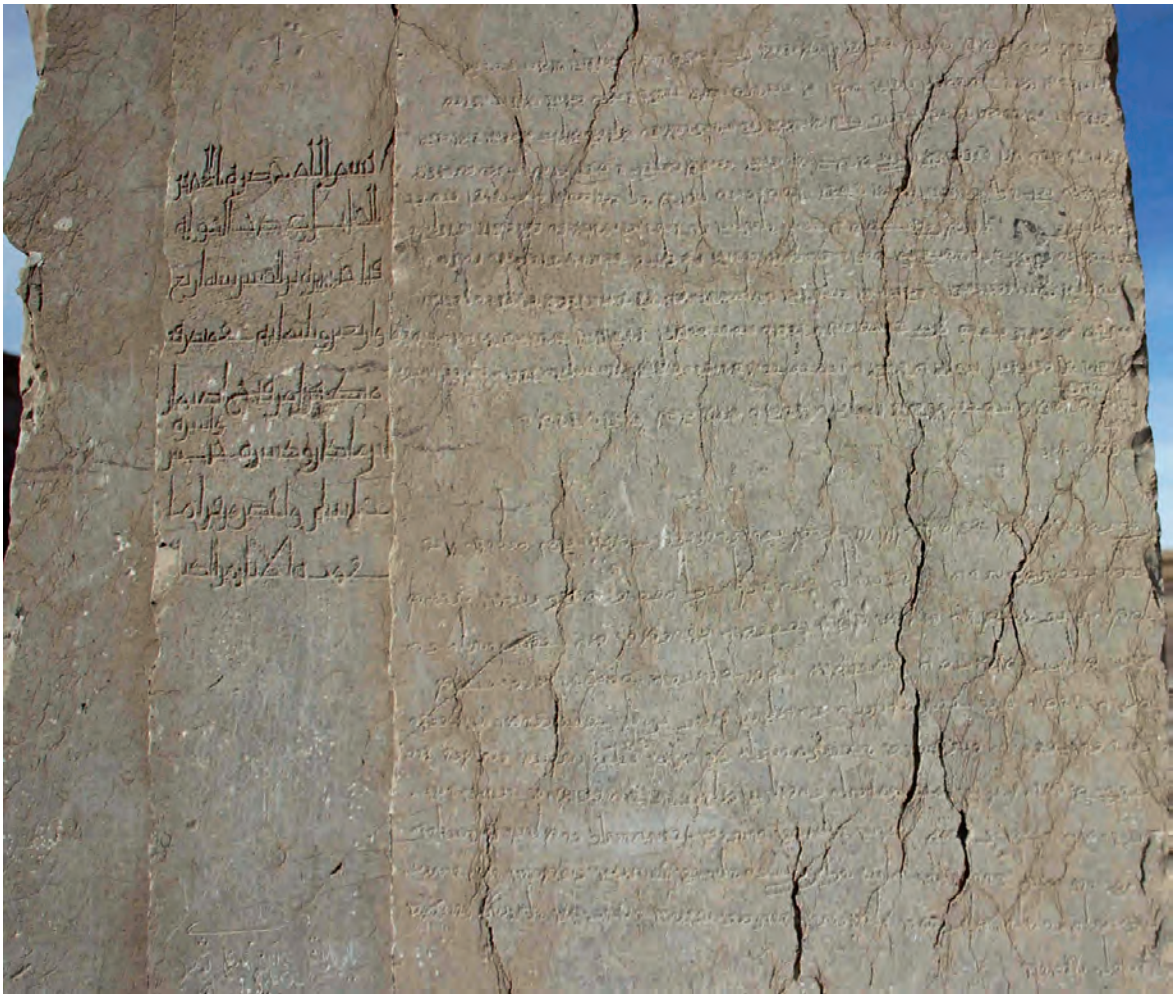


Fig. 1.1, Middle Persian Sassanian inscriptions (3rd century CE) and ‘Aḍud al-Dawla Arabic Kufic inscription (10th century CE); *tačara*’s southern portico, Persepolis. Photo M. Abedi.

CHAP. XI.

A Letter from Don GARCIA SILVA FIGVEROA *Embassador from* PHILIP *the Third King of* Spaine *to the* Persian, *written at* Spahan, *or* Hispahan, *Anno* 1619. *to the Marquesse of* Bedmar, *touching matters of* Persia.

WEaried with travelling both by Sea and Land, but otherwise well, I came at length from Ormuz *into* Persia. *Which having wandred ouer; at the Kings appointment, I went to* Hispahan: *where I endure a tedious irksome delay, being euen tyred with so vnpleasant a life, as I here leade. For whatsoeuer Writers report of that great and ancient Monarchie of the* Achæmenides, *this is mine opinion; That there is nothing in all this Countrey to be found so good, but that it comes short of the least commoditie in our* Europe. *And besides that euery thing here is so crosse to our fashions, that I am without all conuerse with men; here are not so much as any bookes (the reading whereof might somewhat refresh a mans minde in so great solitarinesse) except a few Pamphlets intreating of* holy Confession, *and* Navarr's Summes, *which the Monkes of Saint* Augustine *vse.*

Hispahan *is the noblest Citie of this Kingdome: and, though it lye but in one and thirtie degrees and a halfe of Northerly latitude; yet, by reason of the subtile piercing ayre, the cold is sharper, then by the climate or situation one would imagine. Now, in all this Kingdome you can scarse see any print of Antiquitie: all the houses being built of vnburned bricke, or earth rammed vp betweene two boards; too slight stuffe to last many dayes, much lesse many yeeres.* Hispahan. No antiquities

Notwithstanding, there are yet remaynings most of those huge wilde buildings of the Castle and Palace of Persepolis, *so much celebrated in the monuments of ancient Writers. These frames doe the* Arabians *and* Persians *in their owne language, call* Chilminara: *which is as much as if you should say in* Spanish, Quarenta columnas, *or* Alcoranes: *for so they call those high narrow round steeples, which the* Arabians *haue in their Mesquites. This rare, yea and onely monument of the World (which farre exceedeth all the rest of the Worlds miracles, that we haue seene or heard off) sheweth it selfe to them that come to this Citie from the Towne of* Xiria, *and standeth about a league from the Riuer* Bradamir, *in times past called* Araxis *(not that, that parteth* Media *from the greater* Armenia) *whereof often mention is made by* Quintus Curtius, Diodorus *and* Plutarch: *which Authors doe point vs out the situation of* Persepolis, *and doe almost leade vs vnto it by the hand. The largenesse, fairnesse, and long-lasting Matter of those Pillars, appeareth by the twentie which are yet left, of alike fashion; which with other remaynders of those stately Piles, doe moue admiration in the minde of beholders, and cannot, but with much labour, and at leisure, be layed open. But since it is your Lordships hap to liue now at* Venice, *where you may see some resemblance of the things, which I am about to write of, I will briefly tell you, that most of the Pictures of men, that, ingrauen in marble, doe seele the front, the sides, and statelier parts of this building, are decke with a very comely cloathing, and clad in the same fashion, which the* Venetian Magnifico's *goe in; that is, in Gownes downe to the heeles, with wide sleeues; with round flat caps, their haire spred to the shoulders, and notable long beards. Yee may see in these Tables some men sitting, with great maiestie, in certayne loftier chayres, such as vse to bee with vs in the Quires and Chapter-houses of Cathedrall Churches, appointed for the seates of the chiefe Prelates: the feete being supported with a little foote-stoole neatly made, about a hand high. And, which is very worthy of wonder, in so diuers dresses of so many men; as are ingrauen in these Tables, none commeth neere the fashion which is at this day, or hath beene these many Ages past in vse through all* Asia. *For though out of all Antiquitie we can gather no such Arguments of the cloathing of* Assyrians, Medes *and* Persians, *as we finde many of the* Greekes *and* Romanes: *yet it appeareth sufficiently, that they vsed garments of a middle size for length, like the* Punike *vest, vsed by the* Turkes *and* Persians *at this day, which they call* Aljuba, *and these,* Cauaia: *and Shashes wound about their heads, distinguished yet both by fashion and colour from the* Cidaris, *which is the Royall Diademe. Yet verily in all this sculpture (which though it be ancient, yet shineth as neatly, as if it were but new-done) you can see no picture, that is like or in the workmanship resembleth any other, which the memorie of man could yet attayne to the knowledge of, from any part of the World: so that this worke may seeme to exceede all Antiquitie. Now, nothing more confirmeth this, then one notable inscription cut in a Iasper-table, with Characters still so fresh and faire, that one would wonder, how it could scape so many Ages without touch of the least blemish. The Letters themselues are neither* Chaldæan, *nor* Hebrew, *nor* Greeke, *nor* Arabike, *nor of any other Nation, which was euer found of old, or at this day, to be extant. They are all three-cornered,* Persepolis and her remaynes. Inscription of vnknowne letters, in fashion of a Delta.

but

Fig. 2.1, First page of García de Silva y Figueroa's letter announcing his rediscovery of Persepolis, in Samuel Purchas' monumental *Pilgrimes* (1625), Figueroa 1625, 1533.

Fig. 2.2, Illustration of the ruins and portico of Persepolis – on which are perched a "monstrous" elephant and rhinoceros – in Thomas Herbert's *Travels*, Herbert 1638, II, 145.

Inquiries for Suratte,

and other parts of the East-Indies.

THough these Quæries have been already dispatcht for India, *and some of them even received an Answer, yet, because 'tis altogether necessary, to have confirmations of the truth of these things from several hands, before they be relyed on, it was thought fit, rather to publish the* Inquiries *alone, for a more certain and full Information, than now to joyn* such Answers *thereunto.*

The *Inquiries* are these; as the Relations publisht by *Purchas*, *Linschoten*, and others, concerning those parts, have given occasion to propose them.

1. Whether it be true, that Diamonds and other Pretious Stones, do grow again after three or four years, in the same places where they have been digg'd out?

2. Whether the Quarries of Stone near *Fettipore*, not far from *Agra*, in the *Mogol*'s Dominions, may be cleft like Loggs, and sawn like Planks, to ceel Chambers and cover Houses therewith? Likewise, Whether about *Sadrapatan*, on the Coast of *Coromandel*, there be a Stone of the like nature, so as, setting a Wedge upon it, one may cleave it with a Mallet as thick and as thin, as one pleaseth?

3. Whether upon the same Coast of *Coromandel*, about *Tutucorin*; and upon that of *Ceylon*, at *Manar*, and *Jafanapatan*, they fish *Pearls*, as good as those about *Ormus*? Whether those Pearls are the better, the deeper they lie? What is the greatest depth, they are known to have been taken at? And whether it be true, that some of the Natives there, can stay under Water half an hour, without any Art?

4. Whether the Iron in *Pegu* and *Japan*, be far better than ours; and if so, what is to be observed in the melting, forging, and tempering of it?

Fig. 2.3, First page of the *Inquiries* section of the *Philosophical Transactions* for the year 1667, *Philosophical Transactions* 1667, 415.

Inquiries for Persia.

1. WHat are chiefly the present Studies of the *Persians*; and what Kind of Learning they now excell in?

2. What other Trades or Practices, besides *Silk*-and *Tapistry*-making, they are skilled in?

3. VVhether, there being already good Descriptions in *Words* of the Excellent Pictures and Basse Relieves, that are about *Persepolis* at *Chimilnar*, yet none very particular; some may not be found sufficiently skill'd, in those parts, that might be engaged to make a Draught of the Place, and the Stories there pictured and carved?

4. How they make that Plaister, wherewith in those parts and in *India*, they line their *Tanks* or *Cisterns*, and which, when dry, shines like Marble, and is much harder?

Other *Quaries*, concerning the Air, VVaters, Minerals, Vegetables, Animals, *&c.* peculiar to *Persia*, may be taken out of those *General Heads* of Inquiries, *for a Natural History of a Countrey*, printed in *Numb.* 11. and out of those *Articles* of *Inquiries concerning Mines*, publisht in *Numb.* 19. to which we refer the *Reader*.

As to the Inquiries proper for Turkey, *they also are already publick.* See *Numb.* 20.

Inquiries
For Virginia *and the* Bermudas.

1. COncerning the Varieties of *Earths*; 'tis said, there is one kind of a *Gummy* consistence, white and cleer: Another, white, and so light, that it swims upon water: Another, red, call'd *Wapergh*, like *Terra Sigillata*. Quære, what other considerable kinds are there? And to send over a parcel of each.

2. VVhat considerable Minerals, Stones, Bitumens, Tinctures, Drugs?

3. VVhat hot Baths, and of what Medicinal use?

4. VVhat is the Original of those large Navigable Rivers, which

Fig. 2.4, The *Inquiries for Persia* published in 1667 by the *Philosophical Transactions* and which triggered Samuel Flowers' expedition, *Philosophical Transactions* 1667, 420.

I. *A Letter from* Mr. F. A. *Esq*; R. S. S. *to the Publisher, with a Paper of* Mr. S. Flowers *containing the Exact Draughts of several unknown Characters, taken from the Ruines at* Persepolis.

SIR,

I Here send you some Fragments of Papers put into my hands by a very good Friend, relating to antique and obscure Inscriptions, which were retrieved after the Death of Mr. *Flower*, Agent in *Persia* for our *East-India* Company; who, while he was a Merchant at *Aleppo*, had taken up a Resolution to procure some Draught or Representation of the admired Ruines at *Chilmenar*, pursuant to the third Enquiry for *Persia*, mention'd in the *Philosophical Transactions*, pag. 420. *viz. Whether there being already good Descriptions in Words of the Excellent Pictures and* Basse Relieves *that are about* Persepolis *at* Chilmenar, *yet none very particular, some may not be found sufficiently skilled in those parts, that might be engaged to make a Draught of the Place, and the Stories their pictur'd and carved.* This Desire of the Royal Society, as I believe, it hinted at a Summary Delineation, which might be perform'd by a Man qualify'd in a few days, taking his own opportunity for the avoiding much Expence, (which you know they are never able to bear:) So I cannot but think Mr. *Flower* conceived it to be a business much easier to perform then he found it upon the place, where he spent a great deal of Time and Money, and dying suddainly after, left his Draughts and Papers dispersed in several hands, one part whereof you have here, the rest its hoped may in some time be recovered, if Sir *John Char-*

Fig. 2.5, Francis Aston's (?) letter to the publishers of the *Philosophical Transactions* in 1693 concerning Flowers' mission to Persepolis, *Philosophical Transactions* 1693, 775.

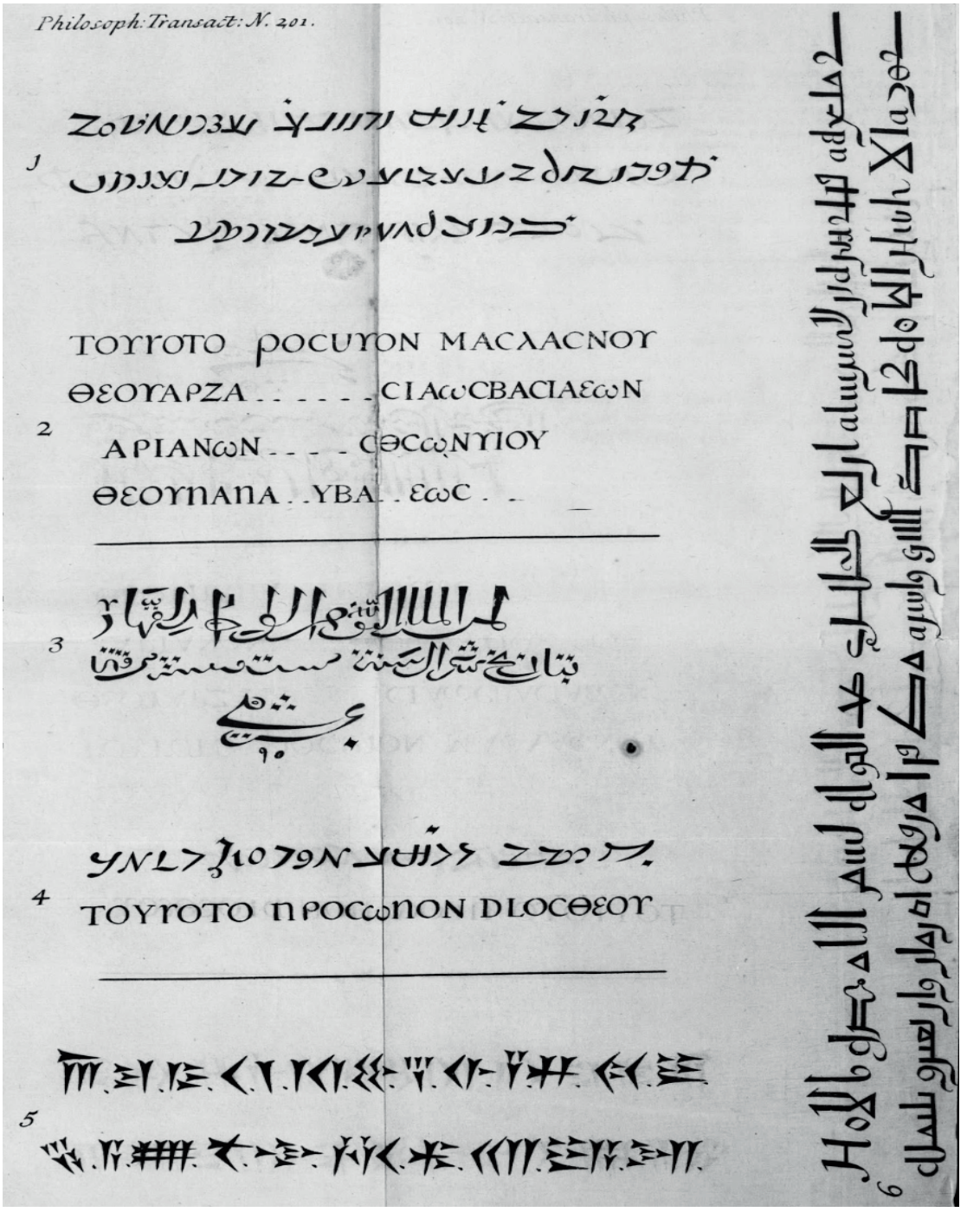


Fig. 2.6, Samuel Flowers' drawings of the inscriptions of Persepolis: the first Sasanian inscriptions to reach Europe and be published, *Philosophical Transactions* 1693, 777.

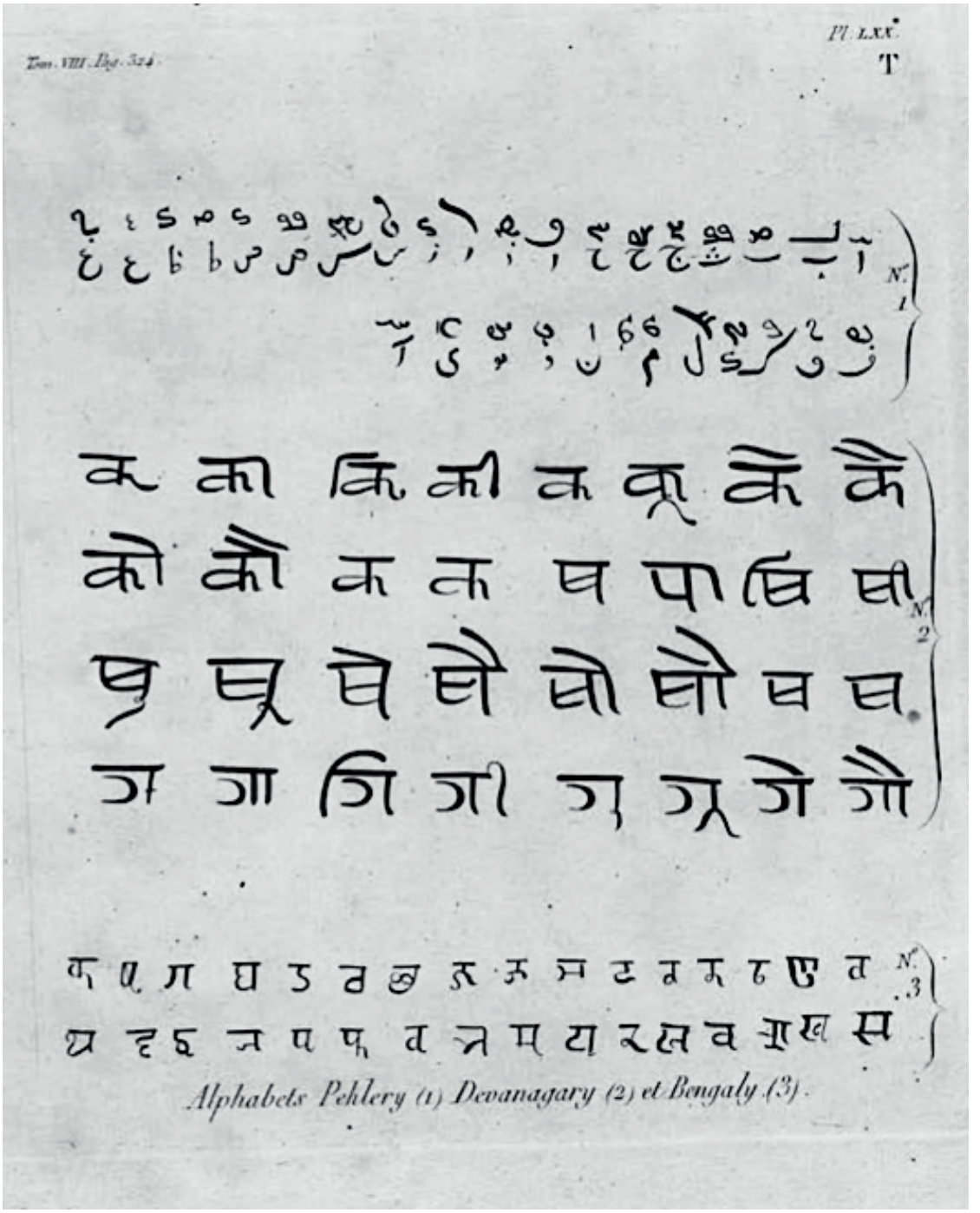


Fig. 2.7, The alphabet of the 'Modern Zoroastrians' according to Jean Chardin, Chardin 1811, Atlas, Plate T/Plate LXX.

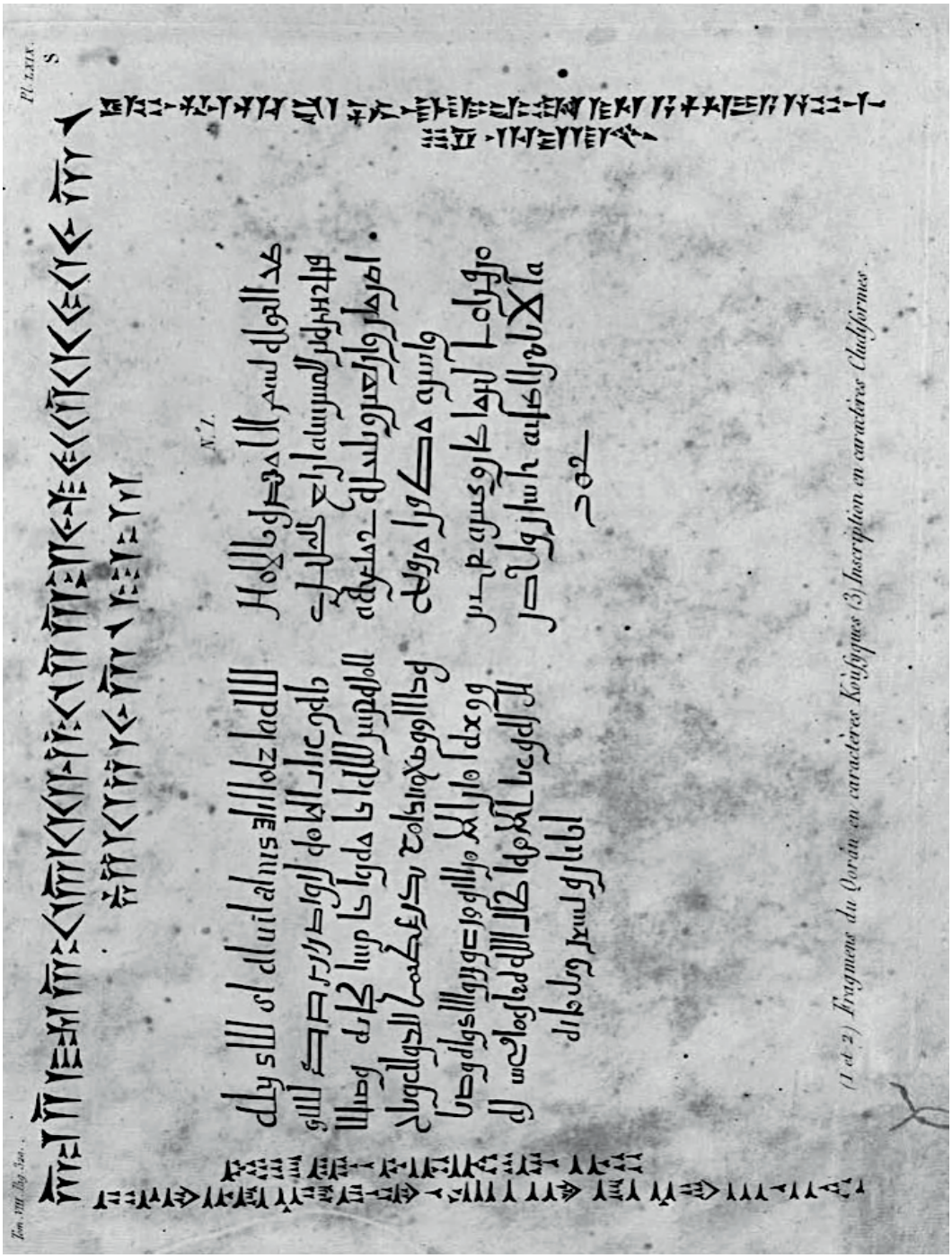


Fig. 2.8, The writing of the 'Ancient Zoroastrians' of Persepolis (compare Bembo's copy of cuneiform inscriptions, **Fig. 2.10** below) according to Jean Chardin, Chardin 1811, Atlas, Plate S/Plate LXIX.

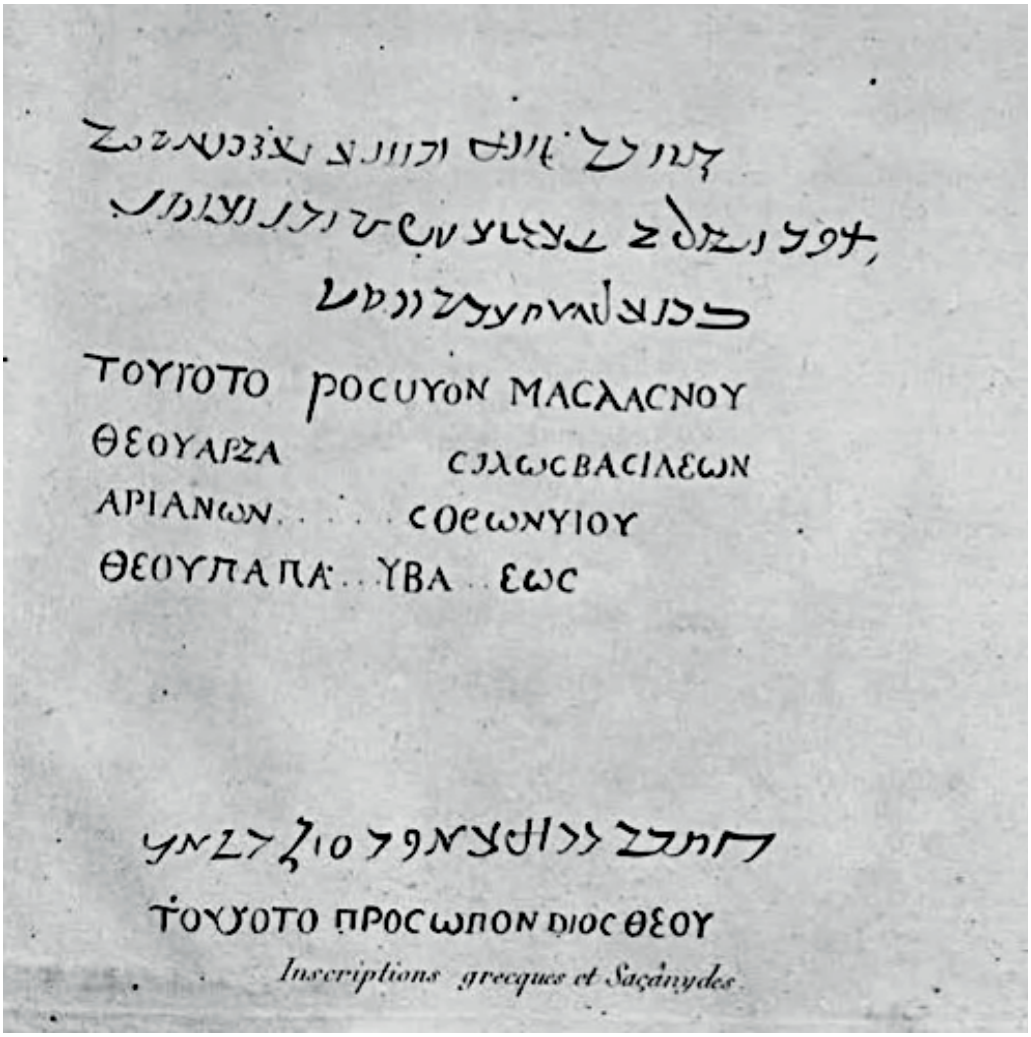


Fig. 2.9, The Greek and 'ancient Syriac' inscriptions at Persepolis/Naqš-e Rostam in Chardin 1811, Atlas, Plate LXXIII.

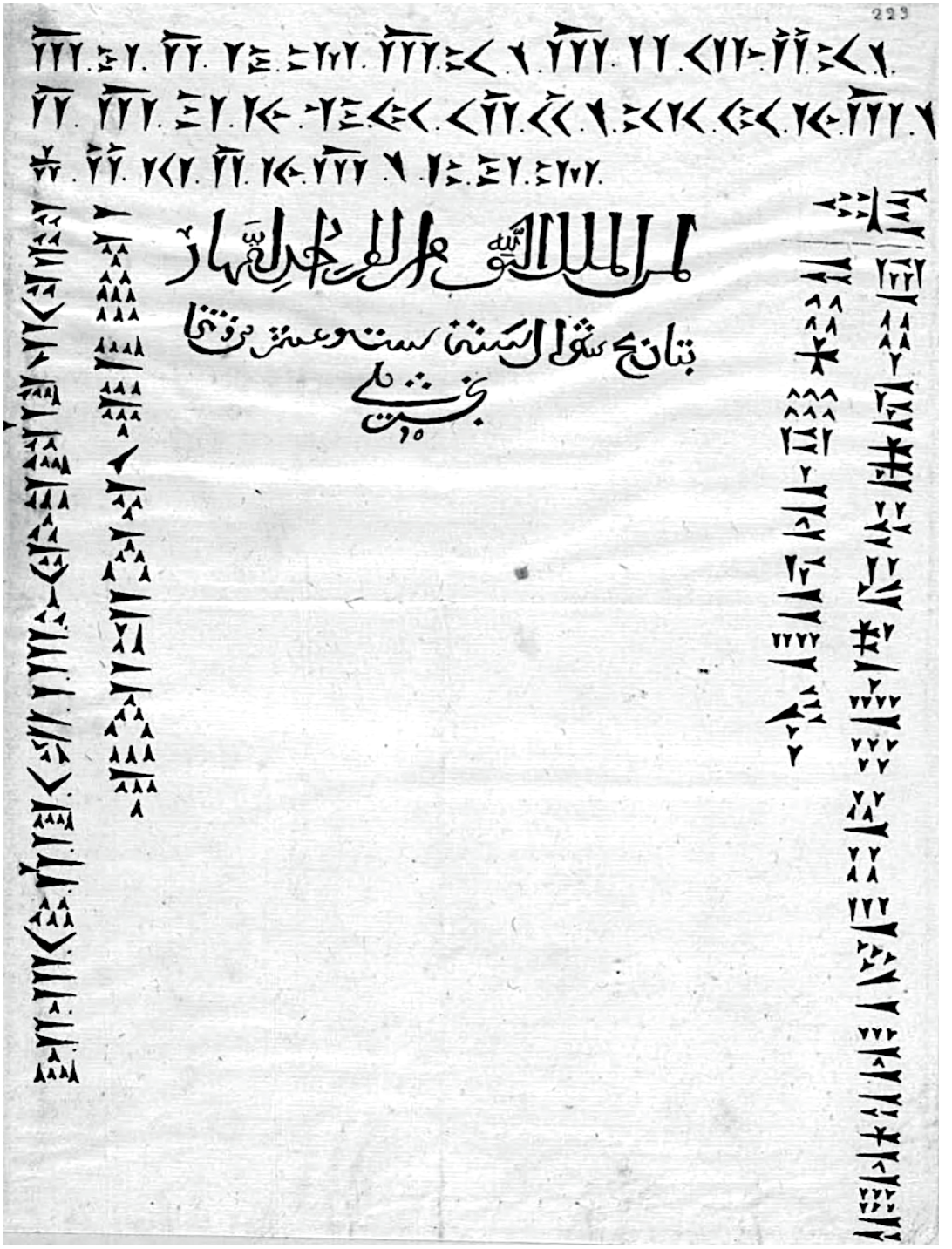


Fig. 2.10, The ancient inscriptions of Persepolis in Bembo's *Viaggi*, Welch 2007, 361.

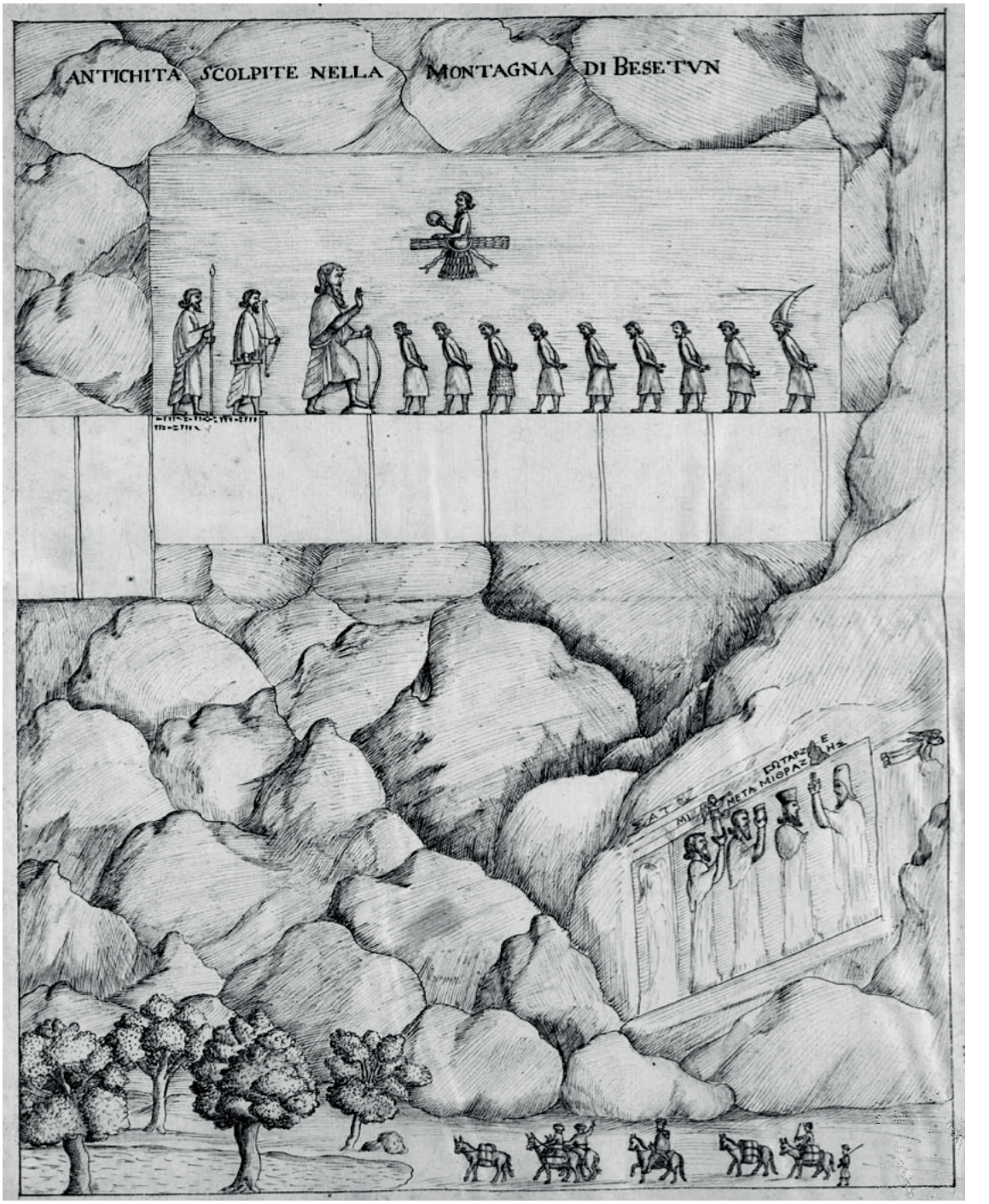


Fig. 2.11, Darius' relief at Bīsotūn with the Greek inscription of Mithridates as drawn by Grélot, in Bembo's *Viaggi*, Welch 2007, 373.

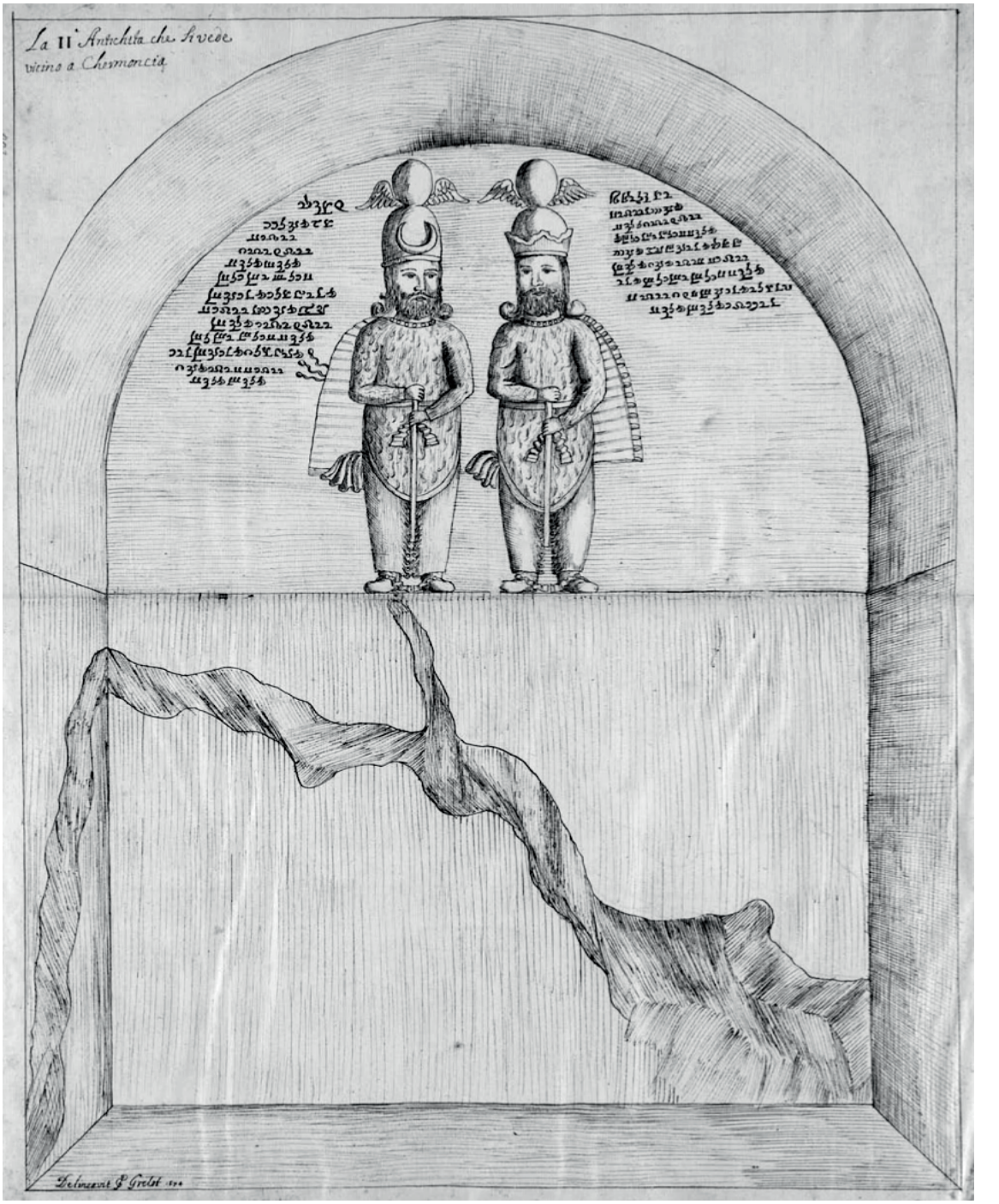


Fig. 2.12, Sasanian reliefs and Middle Persian inscriptions of Tāq-e Bostān as drawn by Grélot, in Bembo's *Viaggi*, Welch 2007, 381.

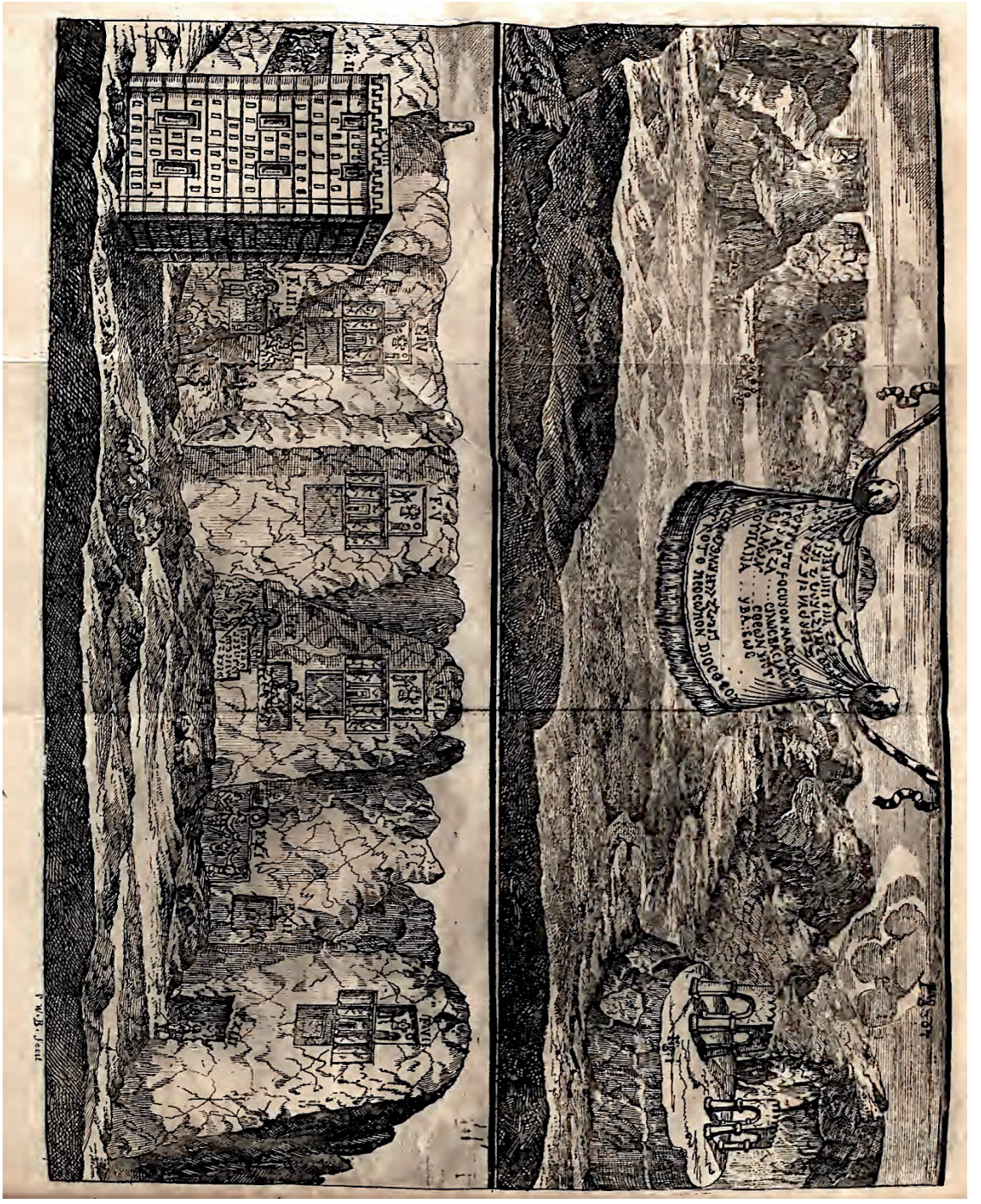


Fig. 2.13, Panoramic view of the site of Naqš-e Rostam with Flowers' Sasanian inscriptions drawn in the central cartouche, Kaempfer 1712, II, 307.

Fasciculus II. 319

ſpectatur redimitus coronâ heros eques, dextrâ elevatâ frenum, ſiniſtrâ ingentem gladii ſpeciem tenens. Pepla à tergo fluctuant; toga prælonga eſt, vetuſtate exeſa. Tergum premit tabula rupi inſculpta, poſteriorem equi partem tegens, quam obiter aſpectam, facilè quis pro ſyrmate paludamenti habeat. Ante Regem comparent viri duo, unus genu dextro innixus, alter erectus, forma corporis & habitu penè per vetuſtatem abolitis. Tabula compreſſam viginti linearum Inſcriptionem continet, non eam profectò, quam Dn. *Sam. Flowerus* Angliæ intulit, à Clariſſimo *Hydeo* in Appendice laudati Operis citatam, ſed prorſus aliam; neq; enim ullibi in hâc figurarum Ruſtamicâ univerſitate aliud Inſcriptionis veſtigium conſpicitur. Characteres articulum pollicis longitudine non excedunt; compreſſi ſunt, altè exſculpti & atro colore tincti, adeoque ſatis conſpicui, modò non eroſi. Ipſæ lineæ arctæ ſunt & ad finem tabulæ (cujus inferior pars longior eſt) ubiq; productæ,

Fig. 2.14, Drawing of Kerdīr's Middle Persian inscription at the site of Naqš-e Rostam, with the passage in Kaempfer's travelogue mentioning Flowers' inscriptions and Hyde's work, Kaempfer 1712, II, 319.

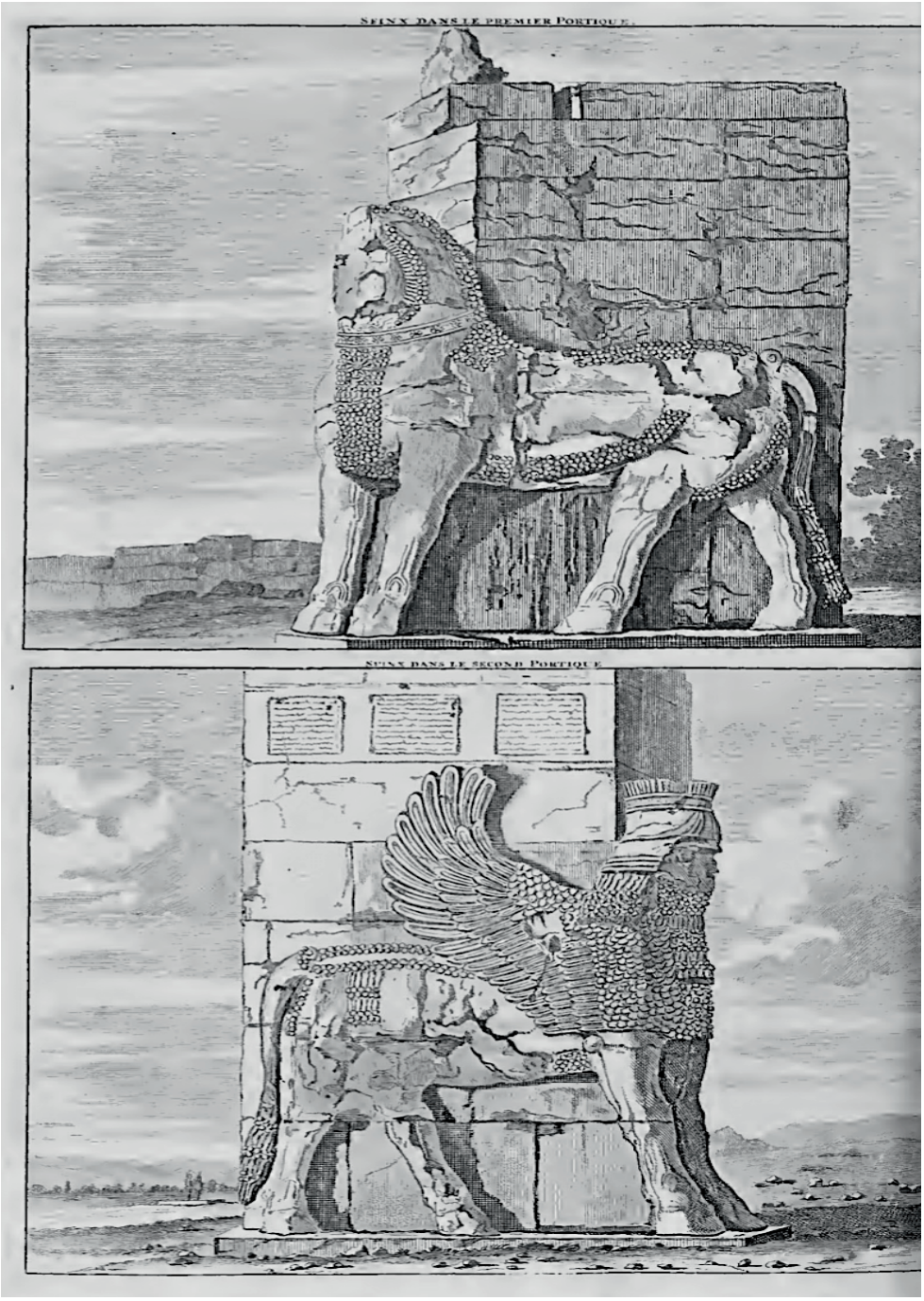


Fig. 2.15, Cornelis de Bruijn's etching of Darius' Gate of all Nations at Persepolis, indicating the location of the cuneiform inscriptions (compare Herbert's, **Fig. 2.2**), de Bruijn 1718, II, pl. 122 and 123.

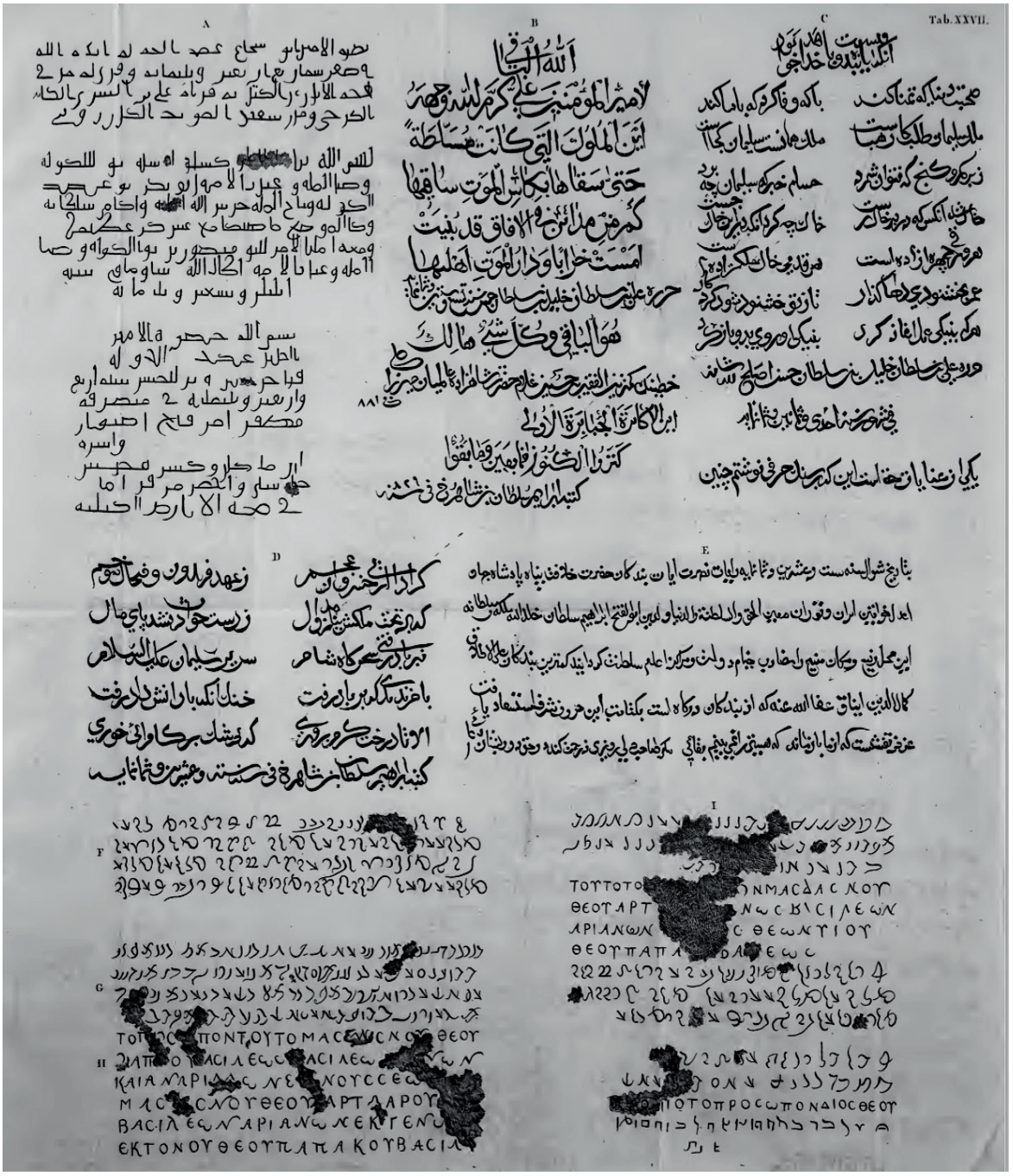


Fig. 2.16, Niebuhr's drawings of the inscriptions of Persepolis, which were to be the basis of Silvestre de Sacy's decipherment of Middle Persian, Niebuhr 1780, II, pl. XXVII.

PEHLVI.	PERSAN.	FRANÇOIS.
Metera.	Baran.	Pluie.
Mia.	Ab.	Eau.
Medina.	Scheherestan.	(Ville), lieu rempli de Villes.
Mata.	Dehhé.	Village, gros bourg.
Mena.	Schaegan.	Qui convient, qui appartient.
Meschmeschia.	Heloui iaani schirin.	Doux.
Mânman.	Djam.	Verre, gobelet.
Maschah.	Roghan.	Huile.
Maschia.	*Id.*	*Id.*
Morav.	Parendéh.	Volatile.
Mezda.	Moï.	Cheveux.
Menda.	Sokhan.	Parole.
Medjmedjia.	Tchoz iaani zan andam.	Membre de la femme.
Malkoura.	Scheheriar.	Roi, chef de Ville.
Malka.	Schah.	Roi.
Mas.	Méh.	Grand.
Modar.	Mohor.	Empreinte de cachet.
Mota.	Banouï.	Femme du maître de la maison.
Magoé.	Mobed.	Mobed (second ordre de la Hiérarchie Parse).

Fig. 3.1, Excerpt from Anquetil Duperron's *Vocabulaire Pehlevi, Persan et François*, Anquetil Duperron 1771, II, 516.

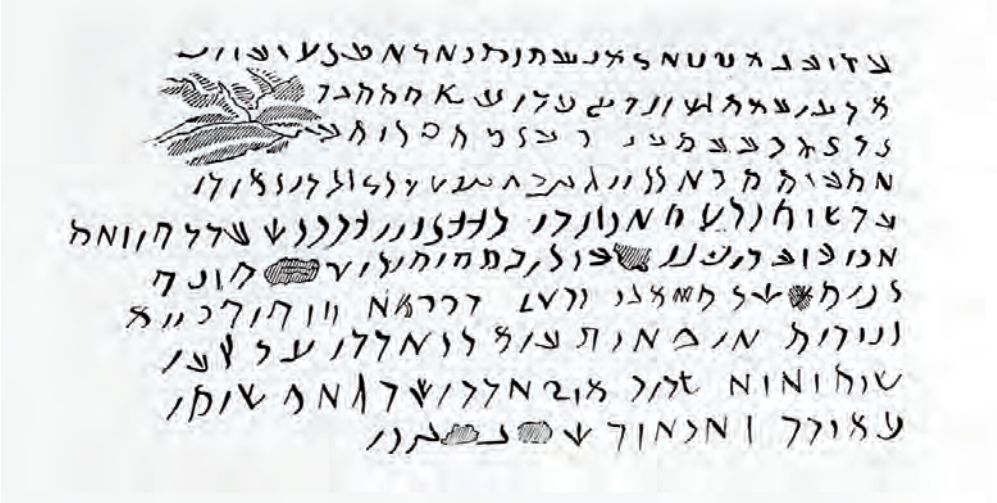


Fig. 4.1, The very first drawing of the (Parthian version of the) Hājjiābād inscription, by James Morier, Morier 1818, 81.

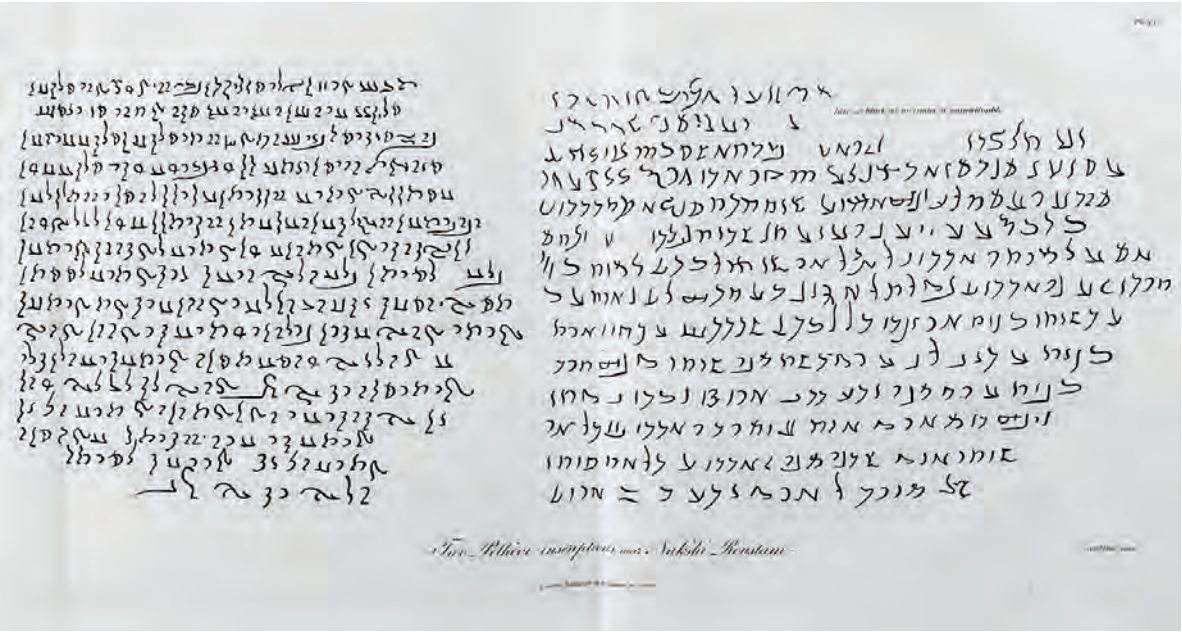


Fig. 4.2, Copy of the Hājjiābād inscriptions by Robert Ker Porter, Ker Porter 1821, I, pl. 15.

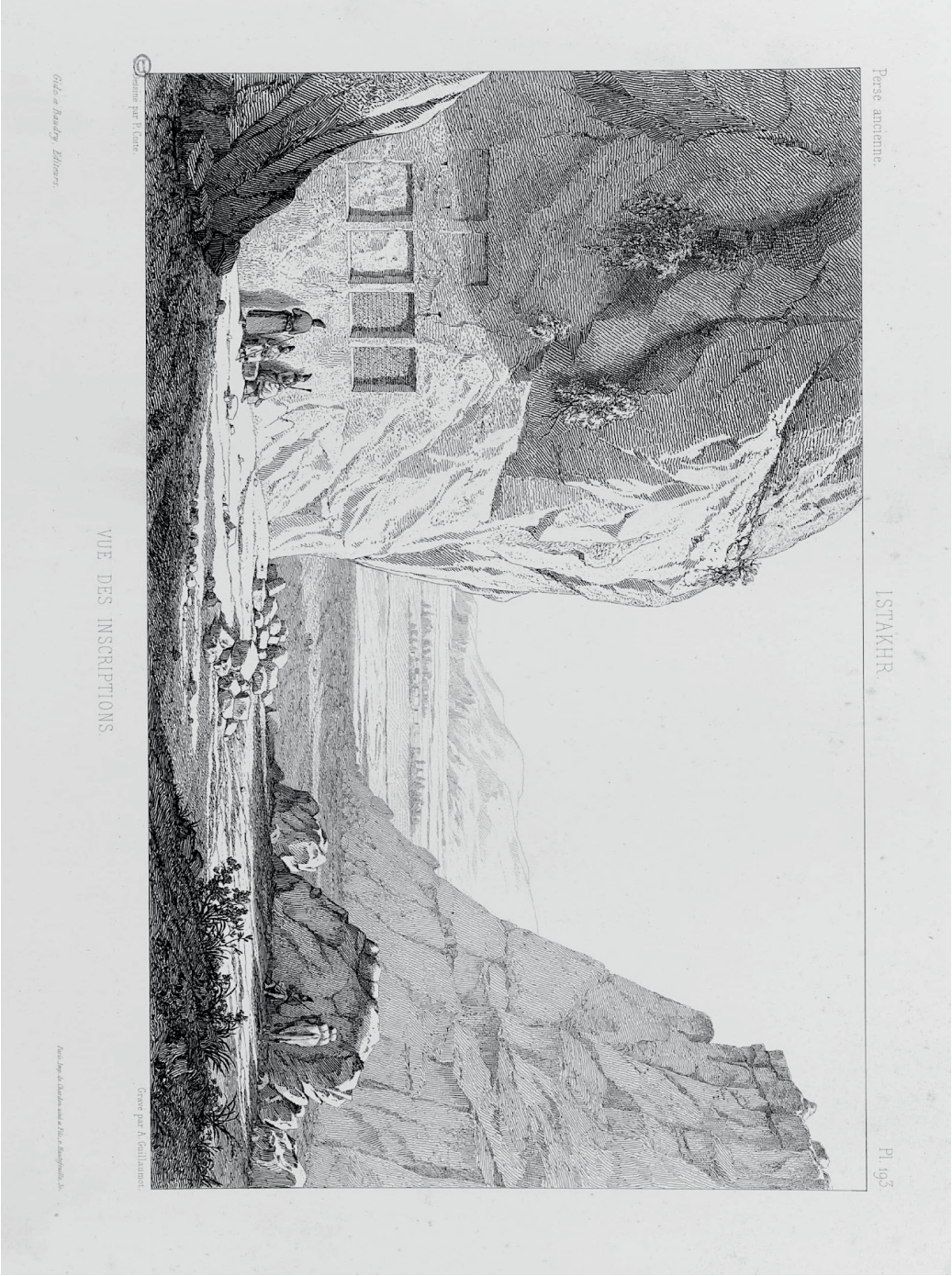


Fig. 4.3, Panoramic view of the cave of Hājjiābād by Flandin and Coste, Flandin and Coste 1851, *Planches*, IV, pl. 193.

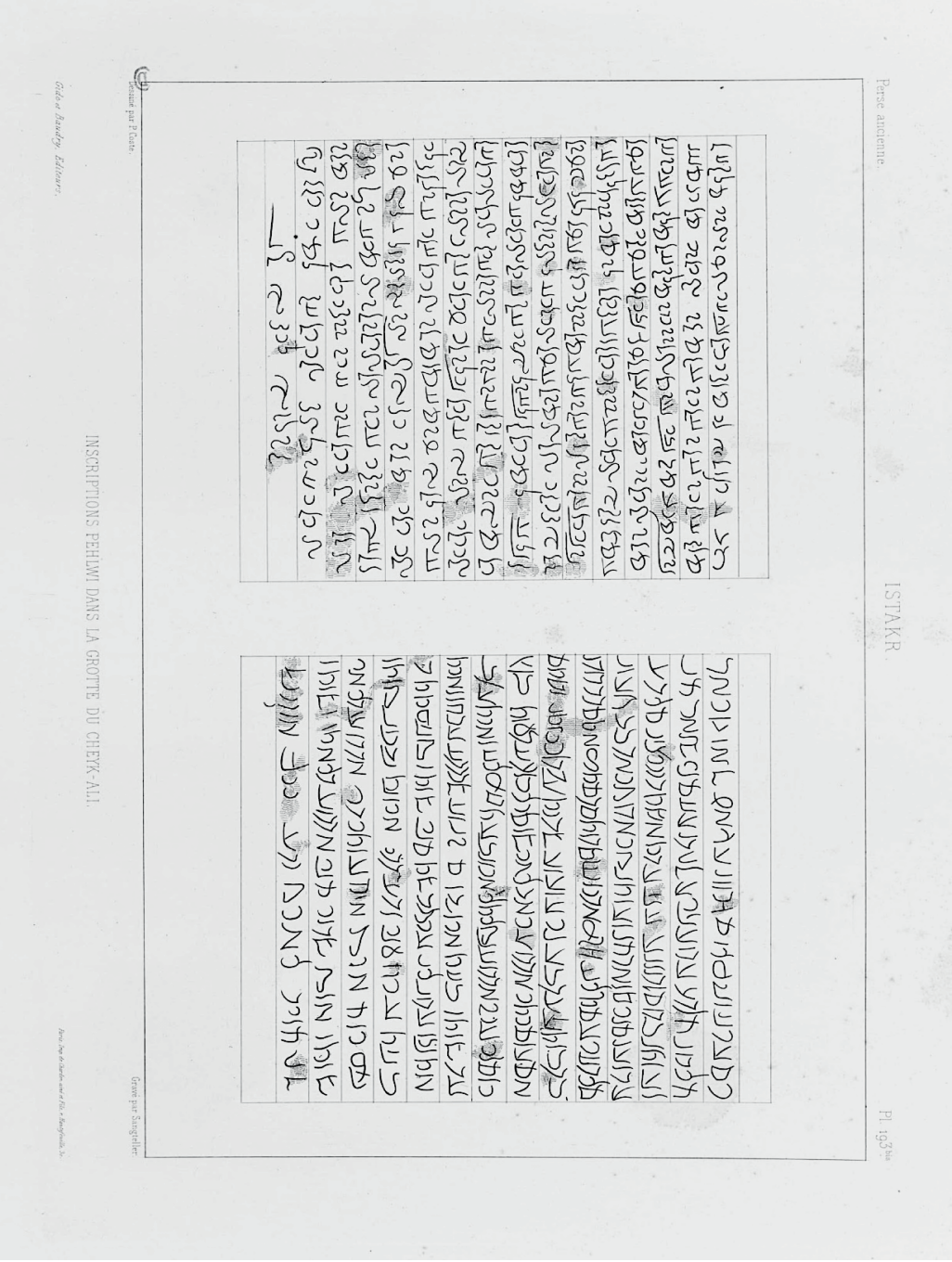


Fig. 4.4, Detail of the Hājjiābād inscriptions by Flandin and Coste, Flandin and Coste 1851, *Planches*, IV, pl. 193 *bis*.

PARALLEL TRANSLATIONS OF THE HÁJÍÁBÁD INSCRIPTION.

(For text see page 74 and the Photograph.)

CHALDÆO-PEHLVI VERSION: Representations of the person of the

SASSANIAN VERSION: *Representations of the person of the Zoro-*

Zoroastrian divinity,[2] Sapor, King of Kings of Arians and Anarians,

astrian divinity, Sapor, King of Kings of Irán and Anirán, of

of divine origin from God, son of the Zoroastrian divinity, Ardeshír,

divine origin from God, son of the Zoroastrian divinity, Artahshatr,

King of Kings of Arians, of divine origin from God, grandson of divine

King of Kings of Irán, of divine origin from God, grandson of divine

Papak, King. And of multitudes of men, Lord, mighty, the

Papak, King. Also Lord of many races, sole mighty (one) of the high

obeyed of Satraps, Military chiefs, Nobles. And YE mighty

Satraps, and Military commanders, and Nobles. And YE mighty

(one) and bringer of joy among the people of the world, and God of

(one) also bringing joy (salvation?) to the people of earth, also God of

Justice he (is), Lord of the Creator, the high Creator, the Seed (of)

Might he (is), Lord of the Creator, the heavenly Creator, the Vicar of

the FIRST of Gods, the Spirit he (is). . . . . over the Jews sole

the high God of Gods, the Seed. And Lord who of the Archon of the

Lord created YE (are). . . . . of the order of the chosen Jews

Jews sole Lord of Lords he (is). Supreme Lord of the Jews "without

ye (are). Of a certainty the Master, the Divine Lord [first in rank]

the law" he (is). And, of a certainty, the Master, Heavenly Lord (first

created Jesus of divine aid THE Lord thou (art) bringing mercifully

in order) Lord . . . . . of divine aid he, who well brings joy

joy to the people of the world. And THE GOD he (is) Lord, abound-

among the people of the earth. And THE God, that is Godlike, great

ing in good. And THE Heavenly Lord he (is) Lord, oh Increase

in goodness. And the heavenly Lord that (is) Lord on high, master

of good aid, Lord of Lords.

of aid Lord.

Fig. 4.5, Šābuhr as supreme Lord of the Jews: the first attempt at a full translation of the Hājjiābād inscriptions, by Edward Thomas, Thomas 1868, 98-99.

Having thus given a full commentary on both texts of the inscription, I propose the following translation of S.:

'This is the edict of me, the Ormazd-worshipper, the divine being Sapor, the king of kings of Irân and non-Irân, of heavenly origin from God; the son of the Ormazd-worshipper, the divine being Ardeshîr, the king of kings of Irân, of heavenly origin from God; the grandson of the divine being Bâbek, the king. As we shot this arrow, then we shot it in the presence of the satraps, the grandees, peers and noblemen; we put the foot in this cave; we threw the arrow outside that it should reach that target; the arrow (was) flying beyond that (target); whither the arrow had been thrown, there was no place (to hit), where if a target had been constructed, then it (the arrow) would have been manifest (?). Afterwards it was ordered by us: 'an invisible target is constructed for the future (?); an invisible hand has written: 'do not put the foot in this cave, and do not shoot an arrow at this target, after an invisible arrow has been thrown at this target'; such wrote the hand'.

Fig. 4.6, Šābuhr's arrow: Martin Haug's translation of the Hājjiābād inscription, Haug and Hoshengji Jamaspji, 64.

Fig. 4.7, The very first photograph of the Hājjiābād inscription, by Franz Stolze, Andreas and Stolze 1882, II, pl. 126.

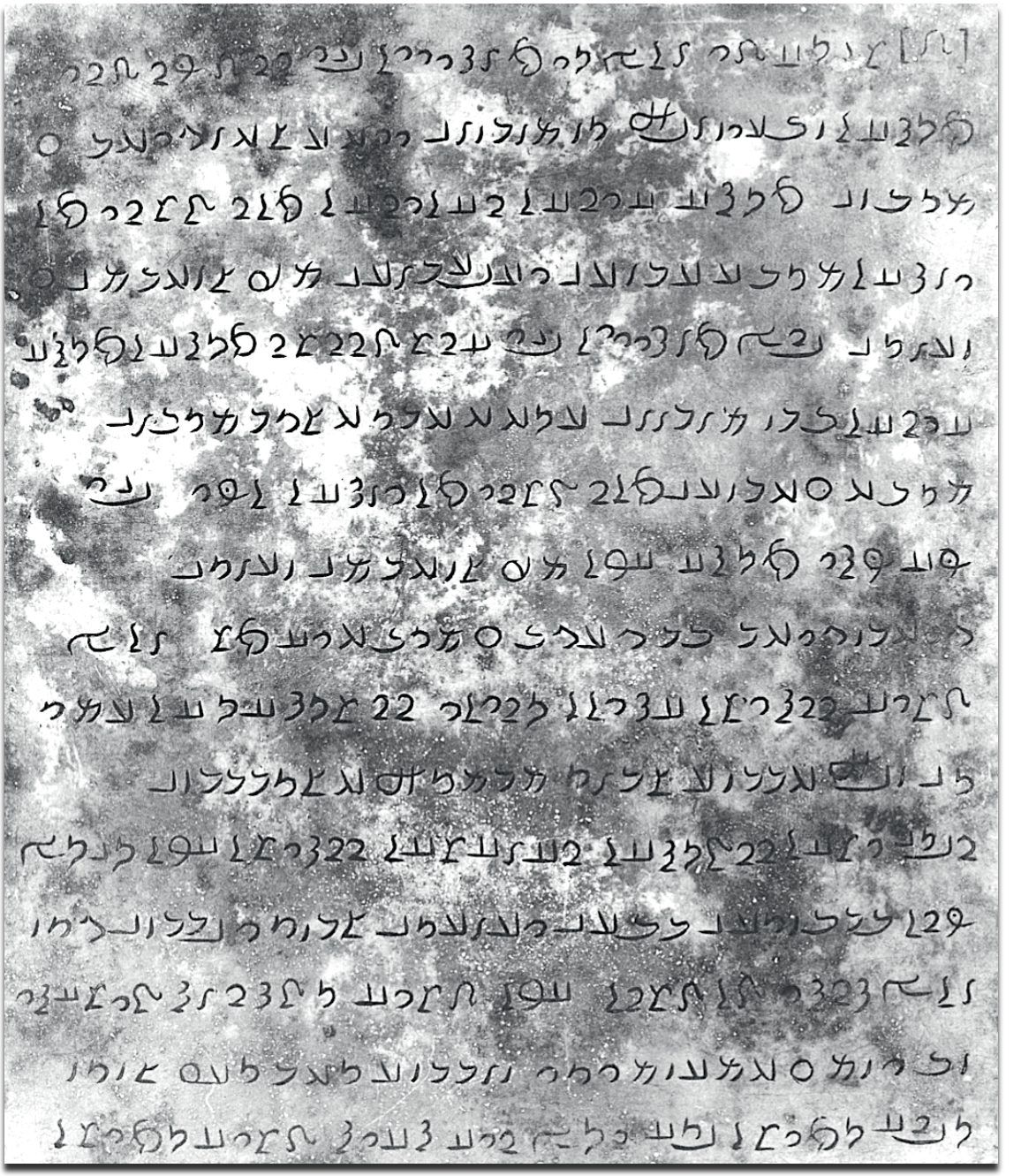
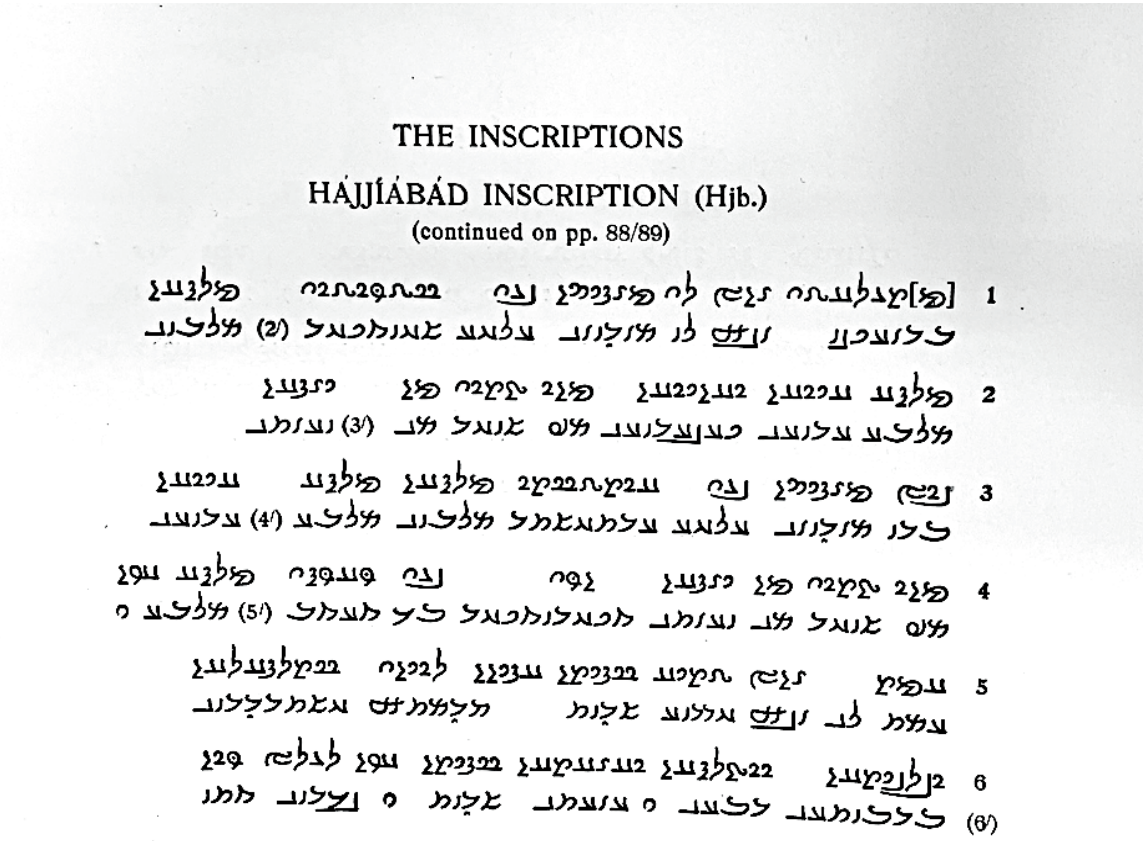


Fig. 4.8, A forged copy of the Middle Persian version of the Hājjiābād inscription, engraved on a bronze plaque after Herzfeld's drawing of the text, Private Collection, after Shaked 1990, 270.

Fig. 4.9, A forged copy of the Parthian version of the Hājjiābād inscription, painted on a ceramic bowl, Babylonian Collection, Yale, after Skjærvø 1990, 290.



THE INSCRIPTIONS

HÁJJÍÁBÁD INSCRIPTION (Hjb.)

(continued on pp. 88/89)

Fig. 4.10, Ernst Herzfeld's hand-drawn copy of the Middle Persian version of the Hājjiābād inscription which for later engraved on a silver plate by a forger (compare **Fig. 4.8** above), Herzfeld 1924, 270.

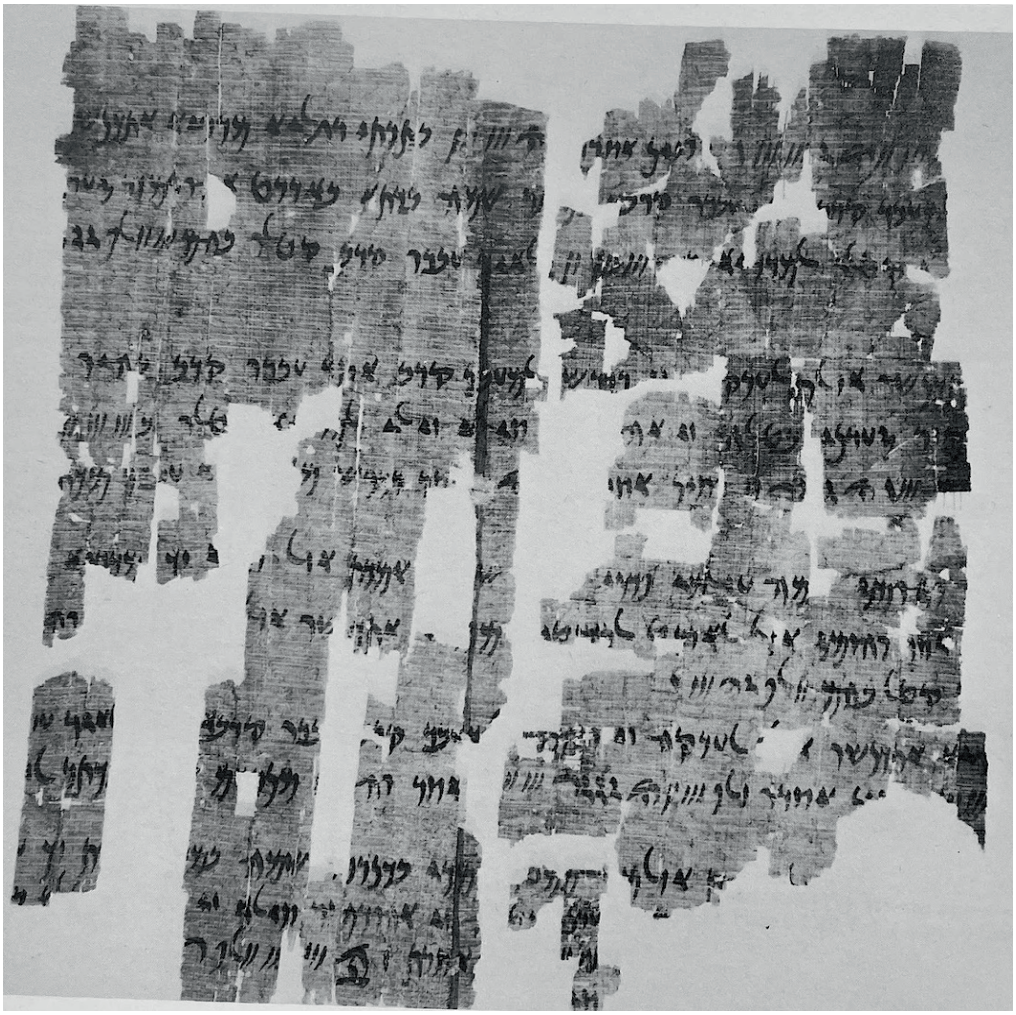


Fig. 5.1, Papyrus fragment from the Aramaic version of Darius' Bīsotūn inscription, Greenfield and Porten 1982, pl. 8.

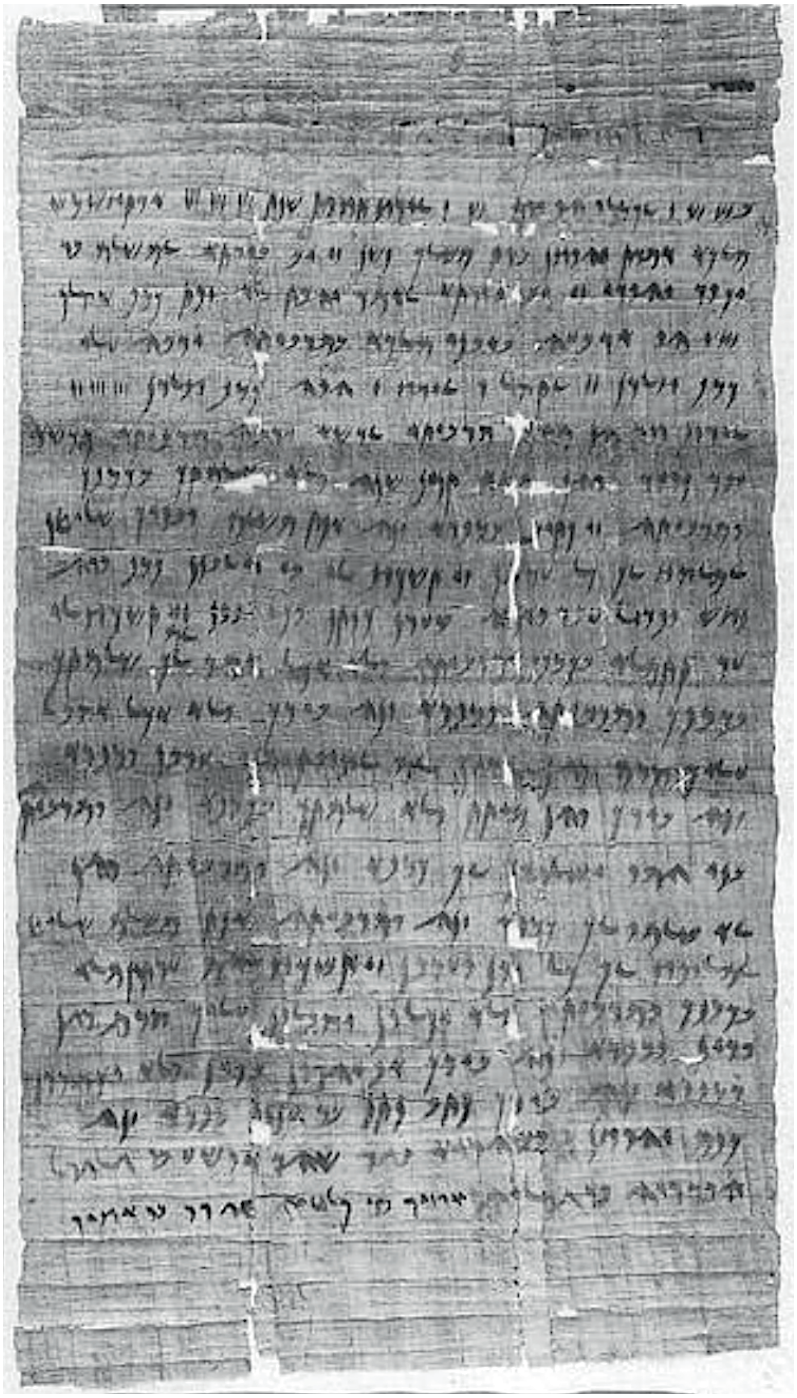


Fig. 5.2, Aramaic papyrus from Elephantine. Loan document from ca. 487 BCE (Cowley 1923, TAD 4.2; Porten 1996, Document B48), Porten 1996, pl. 3.

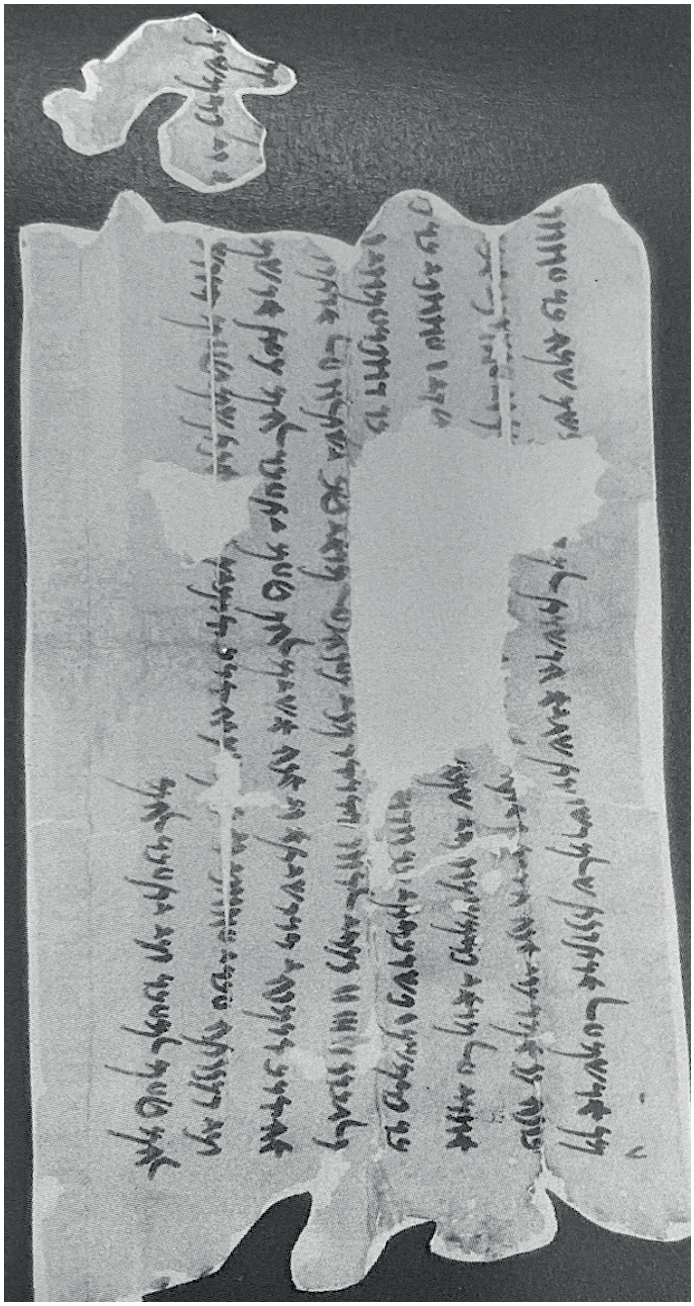


Fig. 5.3, Aramaic letter from Aršāma to Artawant (Document TADAE A6.3; Bodleian Library), Ma and Tuplin 2020, 387, pl. 40.

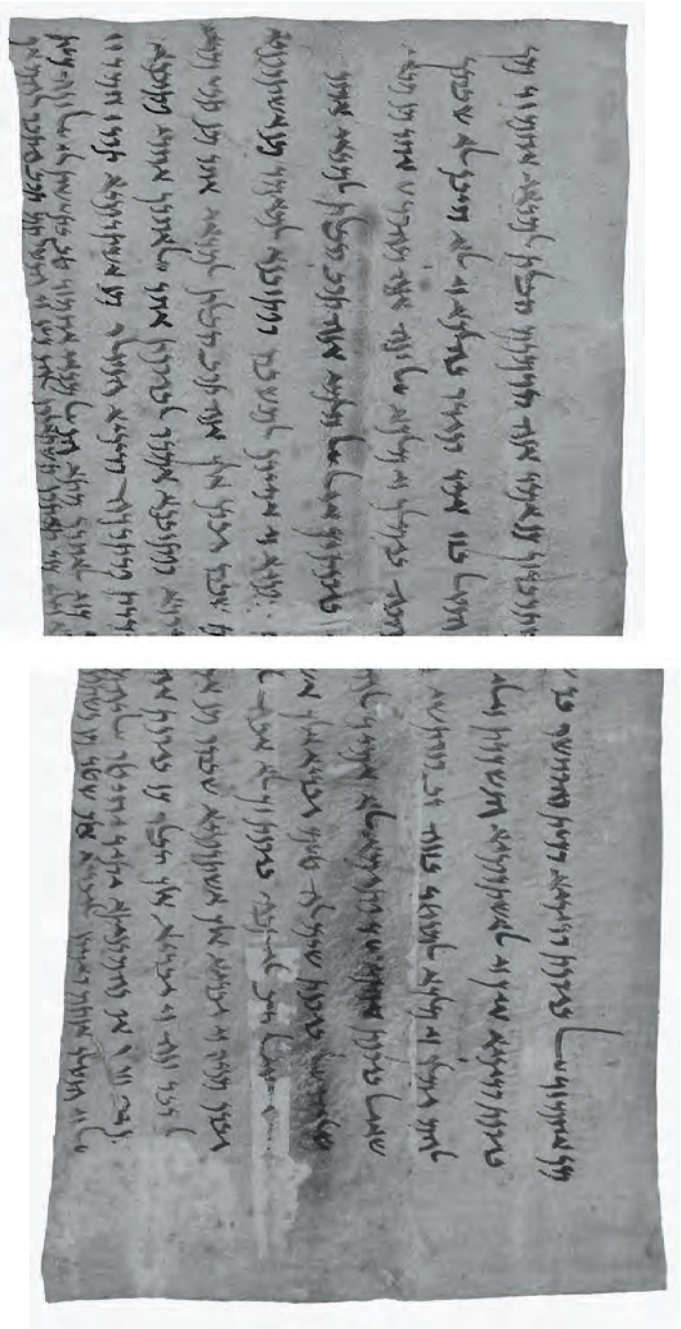


Fig. 5.4, Document A1 (Recto) of the Khalili archive (Letter from Akhvamazda, Satrap? of Bactria): example of the Aramaic script from the Achaemenid chancery in Bactria; note the word *frataraka* (*prtrkh*) in the middle of line 8, Naveh and Shaked 1970, 64-65.

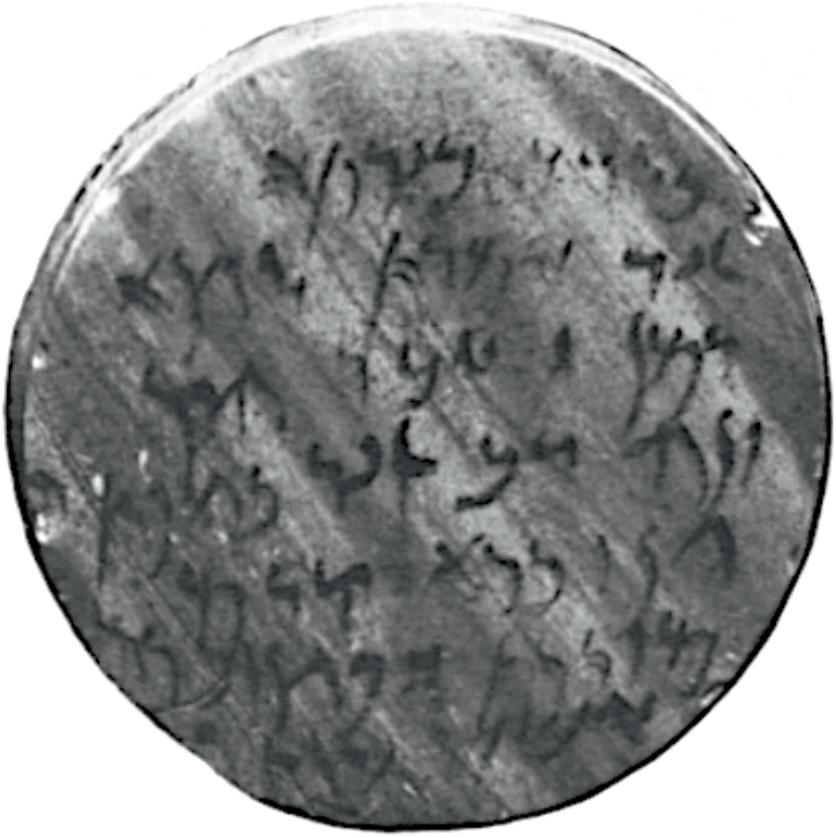


Fig. 5.5, Head of pestle in green chert from Persepolis with an Aramaic inscription; note the Iranian loanword *gnzbr'* (treasurer) that begins line 5, Bowman 1970, pl. 10 n. 39, 109.

Fig. 5.6, Coins of Mazaios, satrap of Babylon between 331 and 328 BCE, Alram 1986, pl. 11, n. 350 (obverse) and n. 352 (reverse).

Fig. 5.7, Coins of Waxšwar, Seleucid satrap of Parthia and Hyrcania, Alram 1986, pl. 12, n. 382 (obverse) and n. 383 (obverse and reverse).

Fig. 5.8, Reverse of a tetradrachm of Seleukos I showing a throned Zeus, from Seleucia on the Tigris (305-300 BCE), Newell 1938, pl. 3, n.6.

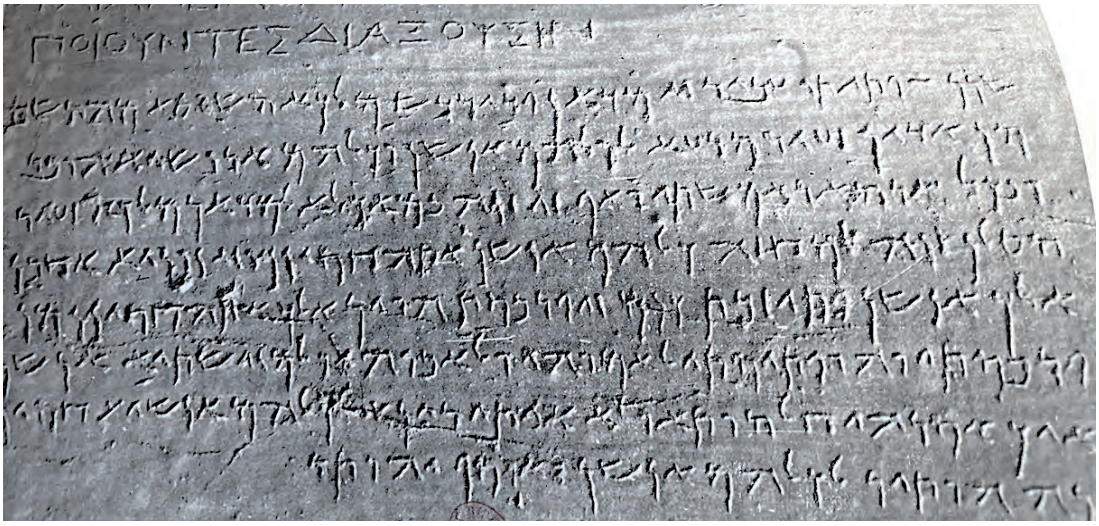


Fig. 5.9, Aramaic version of the Aramaic-Greek bilingual inscription of Aśoka at Kandahar I, Carratelli and Garbini 1964, 20-21.

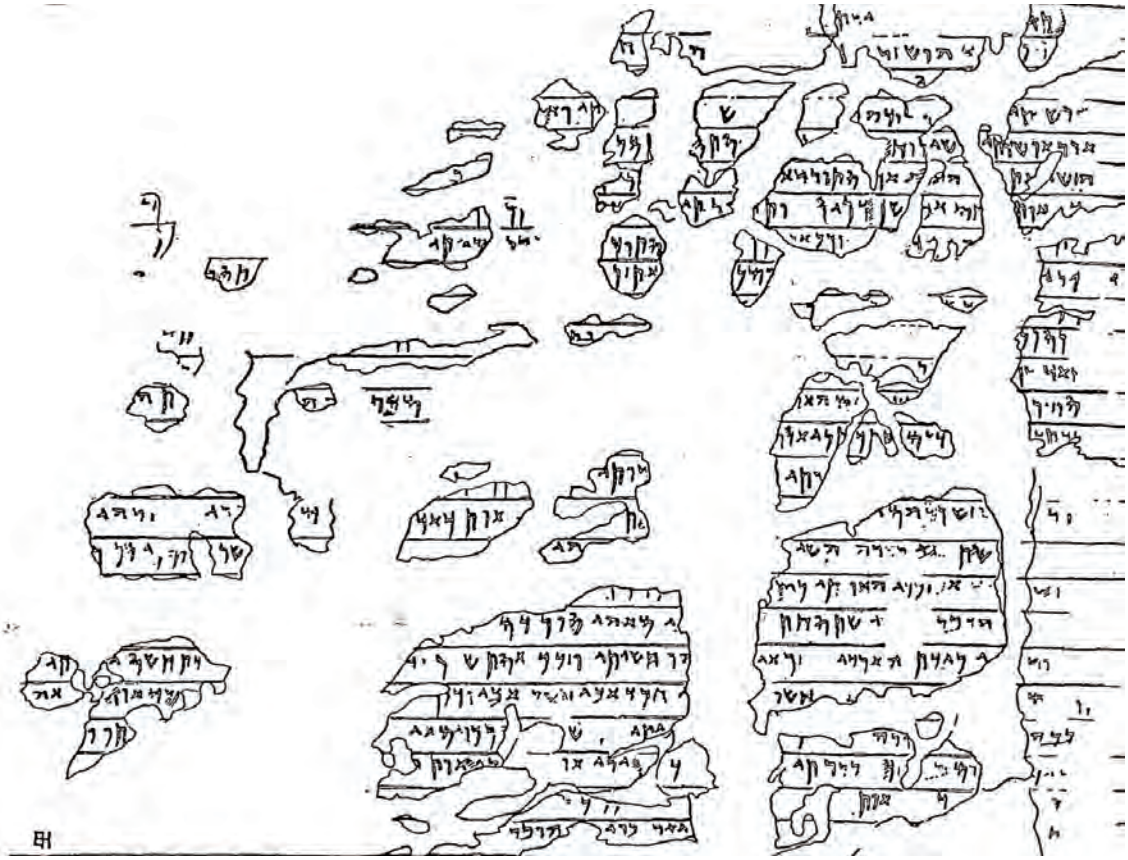


Fig. 5.10, Ernst Herzfeld's hand-drawn copy of the Aramaic inscription at Naqš-e Rostam, Herzfeld 1938, Fig. 6.

Fig. 5.11, Photograph of the Aramaic inscription at Naqš-e Rostam taken in 1968 by Mortaza Rostami and published by Richard Nelson Frye, Frye 1982, pl. 8.

Fig. 5.12, Coin reverse of Mithradates III, Alram 1986, pl. 13, n. 394 (reverse; top) and n. 395 (obverse; bottom).

Fig. 5.13, Drachm of Arsakes I with the dual Greek-Iranian legend “Arsakou-*krny*” (after Sellwood), Olbrycht 2013, 66, Fig. 3.

Fig. 5.14, Obverse of coin of Vologeses II, with the Parthian letters WL behind the king's portrait, Alram 1986, pl. 13, n. 407.

Fig. 5.14, Reverse of coin of Osroes II, note the cross-shaped *mem*, Alram 1986, pl. 14, n. 421.

Fig. 5.16, Coin of Mithridates IV, showing an elegant Parthian semi-monumental script, Alram 1986, pl. 13, n. 416.

Fig. 5.17, Coin of Pacorus II/Parthamaspates, showing an example of what Sellwood called ‘barbarous’ Greek legends (c. 116 CE), Sellwood 1971.

Fig. 5.18, Parthian parchment from Avroman dated to 33 CE, Minns 1915, pl. III.

Fig. 5.19, Parthian ostraca from Nisa, both dated to 72 BCE. Note the archaising, un-ligatured *bet* beginning ostracon 1158 (left) and the ligatured reversed C-shaped *bet* beginning ostracon 1159 (right), Diakonoff and Livshits, pl. and, n. 1158 and 1159.

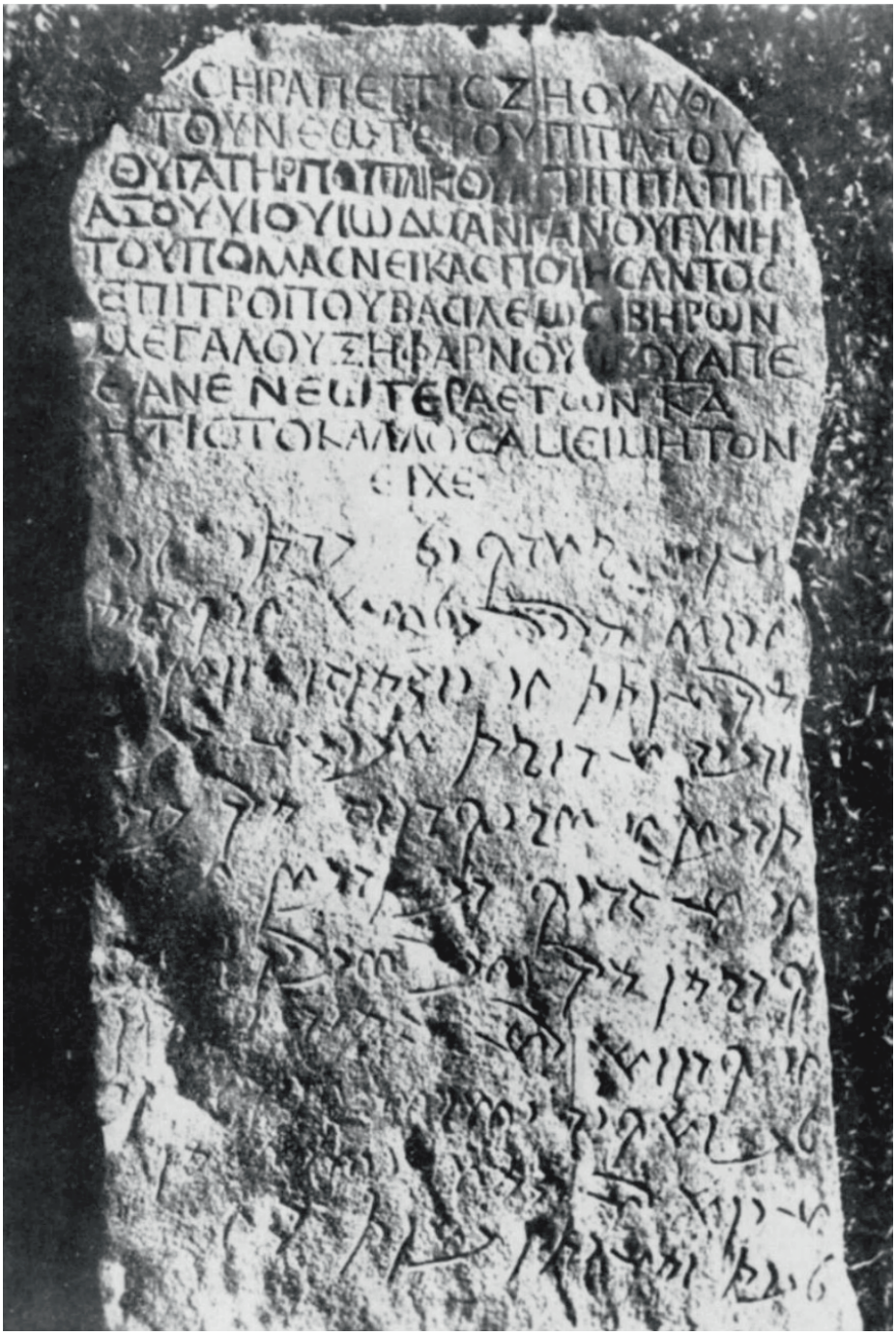


Fig. 5.20, Bilingual stela from Armazi, Georgia, Metzger 1956, pl. 15.

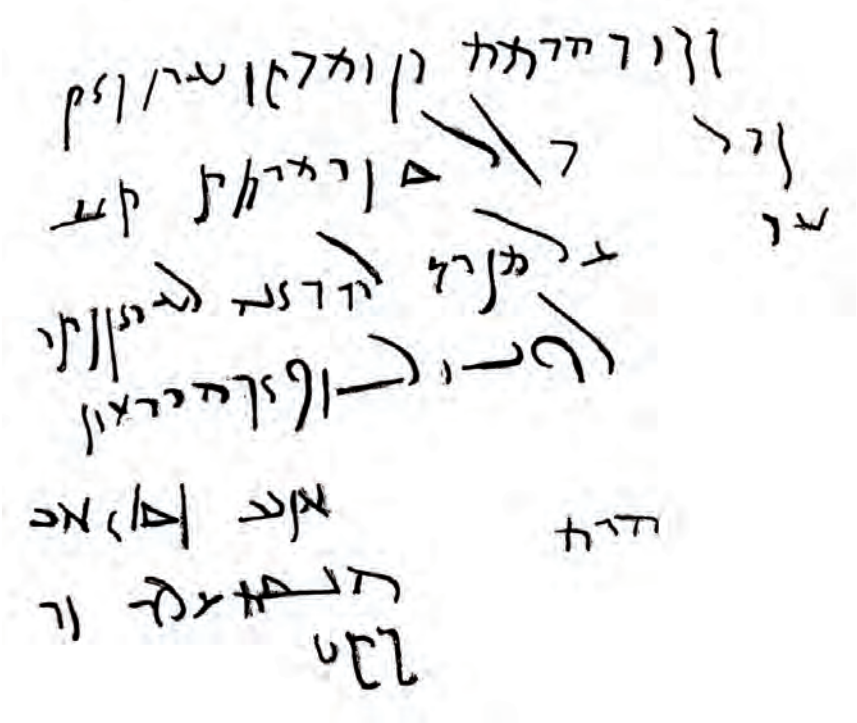


Fig. 5.21, Hand-drawing of an Aramaic inscription from Hatra, Hamil al-Jadir 2006, Fig. 2.

Fig. 5.22, Monumental Palmyrene script on a funerary stela from Palmyra, Chabot 1922, pl. 26.

Fig. 5.23, Coin reverse of the Elymaid king Kamnaskires I showing a Greek legend, Alram 1986, pl. 14, n. 429.

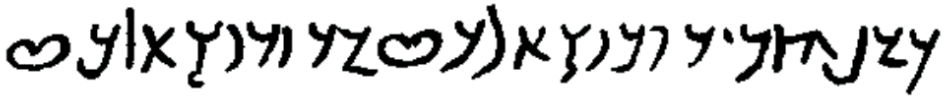


Fig. 5.24, Hand-drawing of the legend on the tetradrachm of the Elymaean king Kamnaskires Orodes. It is an instance of the Elymaean 'monumental' script and shows a correct spelling of Aramaic term *br* 'son'. It reads: KBNSKYR WRWD MLK' BR WRWD MLK', "King Kamnaskires Orodes, son of King Orodes", Henning 1952, 164.

Fig. 5.25, Charles Häberl's comparative tables of the different Aramaic derived scripts, Häberl 2006, pl. 1.

Fig. 6.1, Early coin of the *frataraka* king Baydād, Alram 1986, pl. 17, n. 511.

Fig. 6.2, Reverse of later coin of the *frataraka* king Baydād, Alram 1986, pl. 17, n. 515.

Fig. 6.3, Coin reverse of the *frataraka* king Wādfradād II, Alram 1986, pl. 18, n. 546.

Fig. 6.4, Coin reverse of the Persid king Dārēw II, Alram 1986, pl. 19, n. 565.

Fig. 6.5, Coin of the Persid king Nāmbed, Alram 1986, pl. 20, n. 600.

Fig. 6.6, The so-called Ka‘ba of Zoroaster at Naqš-e Rostam. Photo by the author.

Fig. 6.7, Legend on the coins of the Persid king Ardaxšīr, Alram 1986, 166.

Fig. 6.8, Coin reverse of the Persid king Dārēw I, Alram 1986, pl. 18, n. 554.

Fig. 6.9, Coin of the Persid king Wādfradād III, Alram 1986, pl. 19, n. 561.

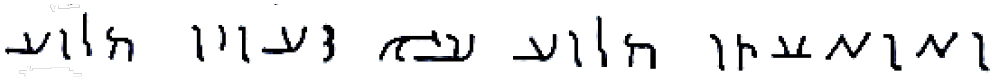


Fig. 6.10, Legend on the coins of the Persid king Wahšīr, Alram 1986, 174.

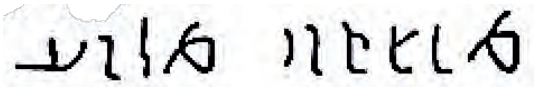


Fig. 6.11, Legend on the coins of the Persid king Mančihr II, Alram 1986, 182.

Fig. 6.12, Coin of the Persid king Šābuhr, Alram 1986, pl. 22, n. 654.

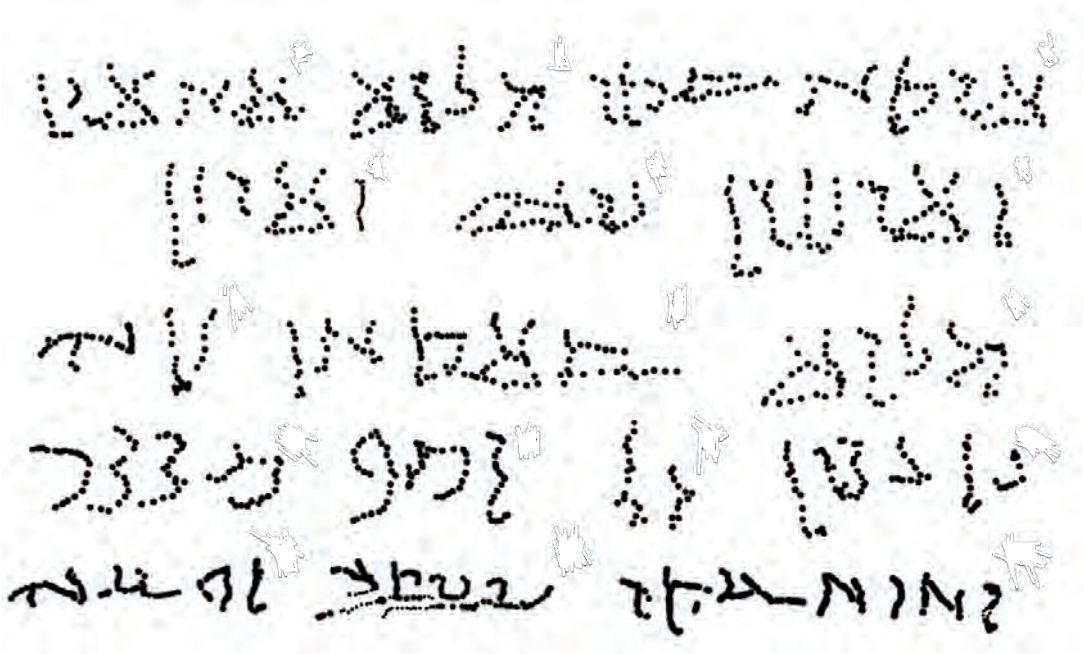


Fig. 6.13, Pointillé inscription on a pre-Sasanian silver vessel (Persis I): ’rtḥštr MLK’ ’Ḥ’yn d’rynkn d’ryn MLK’ štḥw ZNH YNGDWN zl KSP s-20-20-10 wḥwḥštr BRBYT’ NPŠH (transliteration by Nicholas Sims-Williams), Sims-Williams 2021, 614-615, Fig. 3.

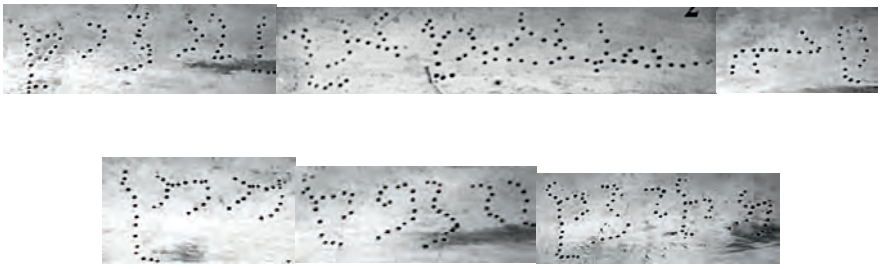
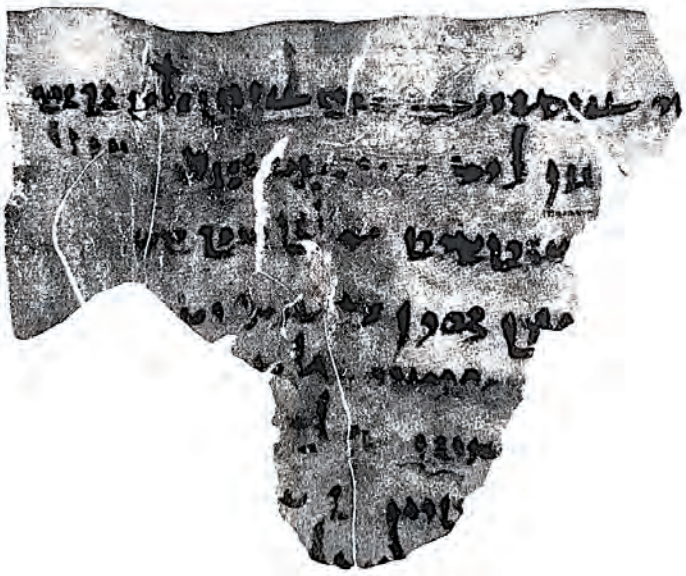


Fig. 6.14, Excerpt from the pointillé inscription on a pre-Sasanian silver vessel (Persis II): ZNH š’tḥw nwydyt mtrdt wrdpt ssn […] (from top right to bottom left, transliteration by Nicholas Sims-Williams), Sims-Williams 2021, 611-612, Fig. 2.

Fig. 6.15, Proto-corrupted form of the arameogram BYN, pointillé inscription on pre-Sasanian silver vessel Persis II, Sims-Williams 2021, 611-612, Fig. 2.

Fig. 7.1, Fresco known as the 'Battle mural', found in a private home at Dura Europos, Goldman and Little 1980, 285, Fig. 2.

Fig. 7.2, Smaller parchment fragment with Middle Persian writing from Dura Europos, Altheim and Stiehl 1952, Fig. 31.



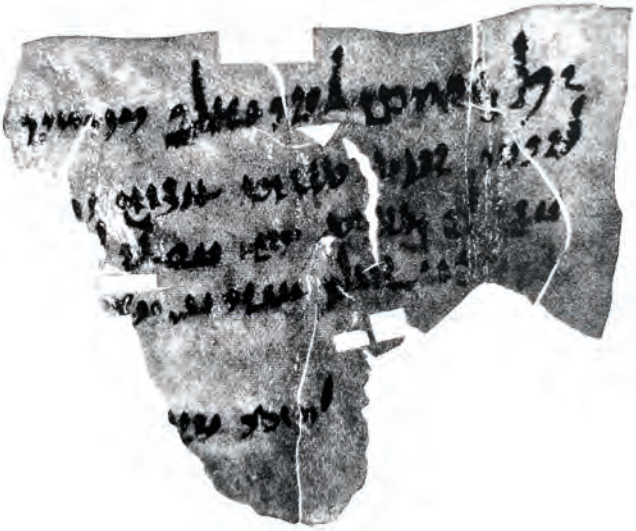


Fig. 7.3, Recto and Verso of the larger parchment fragment with Middle Persian writing from Dura Europos, Altheim and Stiehl 1952, Fig. 4 and Fig. 3 (note that the recto and verso are incorrectly swapped around in Altheim and Stiehl 1952).

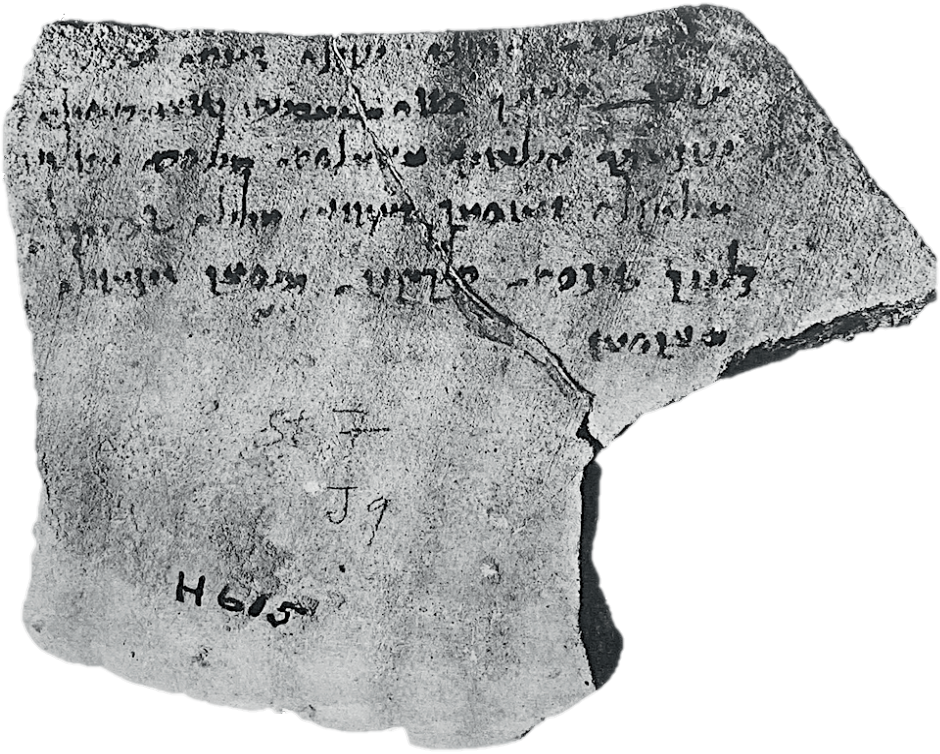


Fig. 7.4, Middle Persian inscribed ostracon from Dura Europos, Frye Pl. XXVII, Fig. 24.

Fig. 7.5, Parthian parchment from Dura Europos, dated to the Sasanian occupation of the city, Altheim and Stiehl 1952, Fig. 1.

Fig. 7.6, Parthian ostracon from Dura Europos, dated to the Sasanian occupation of the city, Harmatta 1958.

Fig. 7.7, Detail (I) of Middle Persian dipinto from the synagogue of Dura Europos, Frye 1968, pl. I.

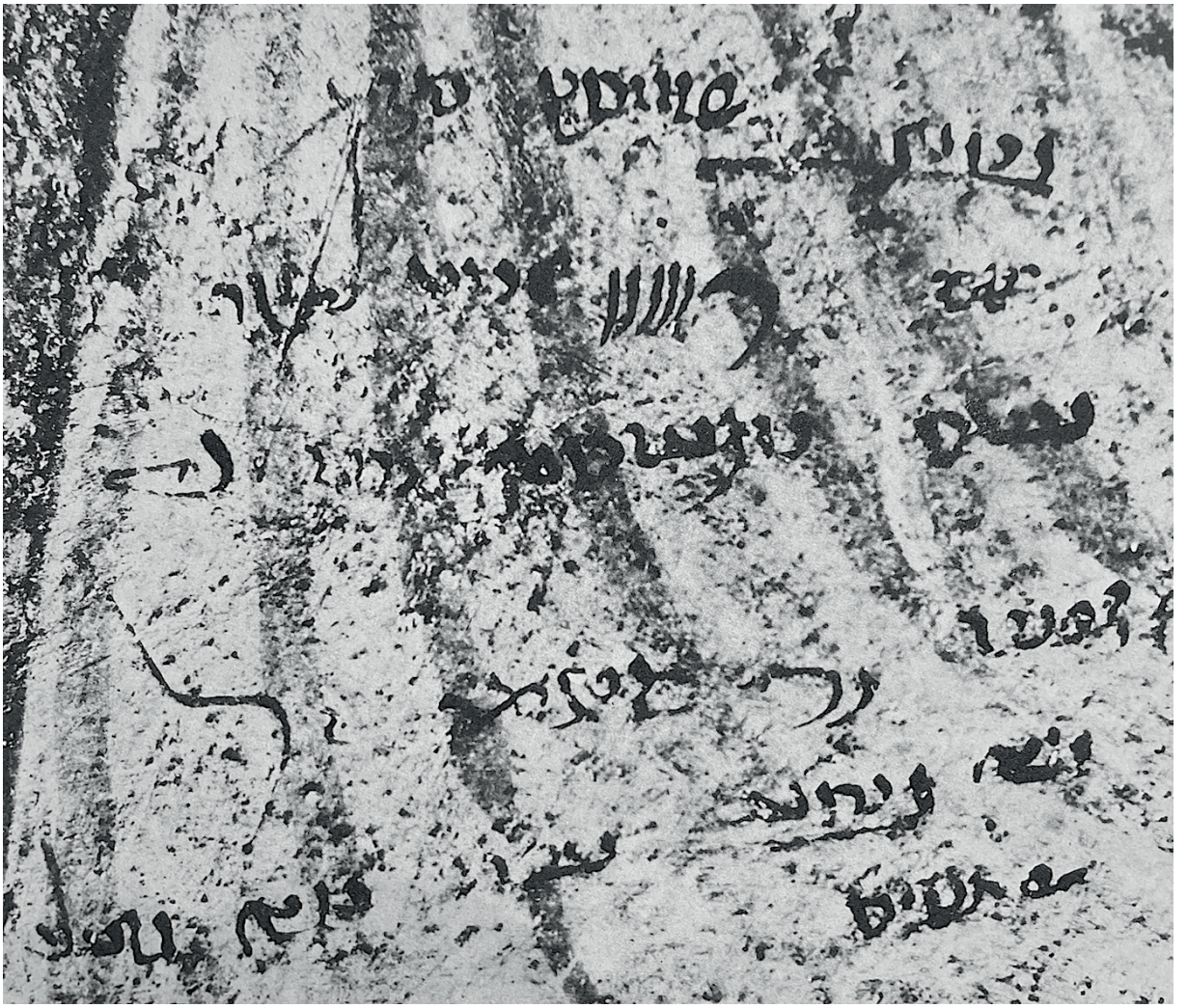


Fig. 7.8, Detail (II) of Middle Persian dipinto from the synagogue of Dura Europos, Frye 1968, pl. I.

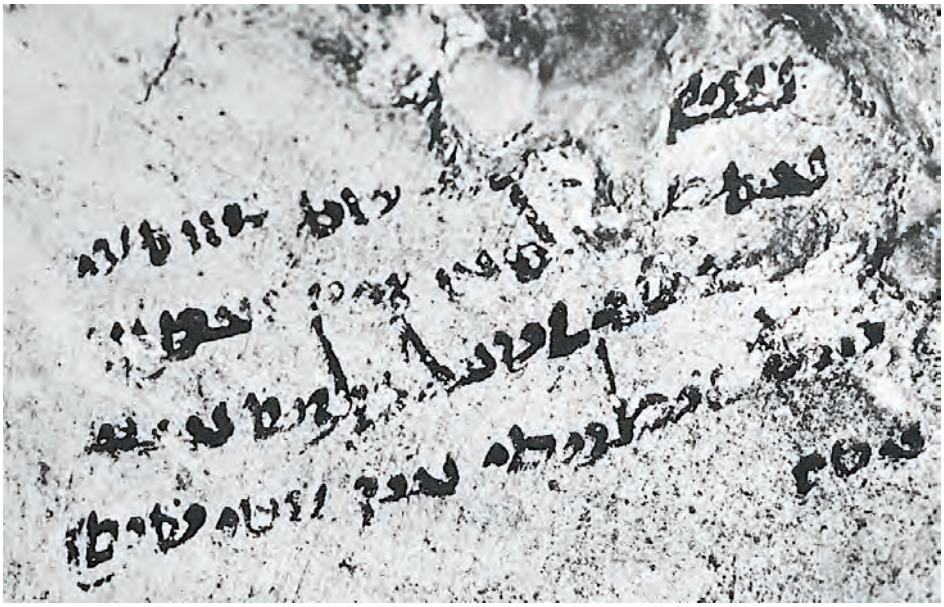


Fig. 7.9, Middle Persian dipinto from the synagogue of Dura Europos, Frye 1968, pl. X.

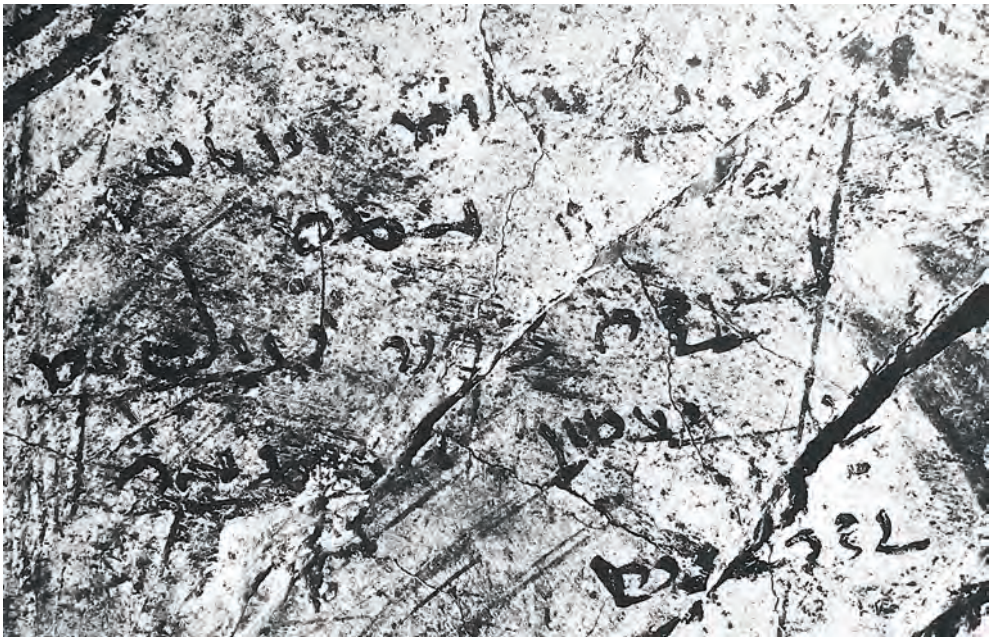


Fig. 7.10, Middle Persian dipinto from the synagogue of Dura Europos, Frye 1968, pl. V.

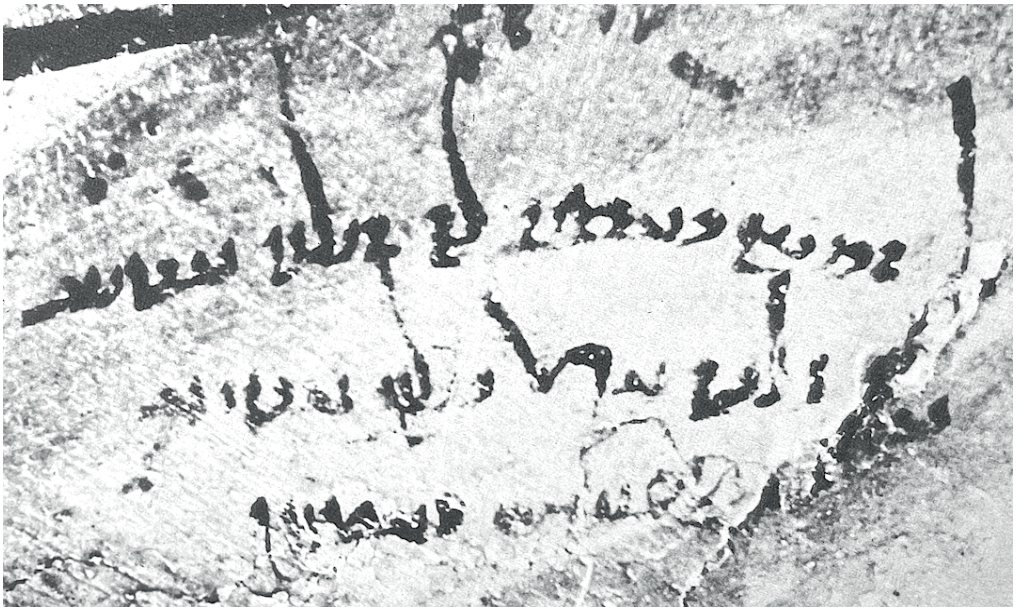


Fig. 7.11, Middle Persian dipinto from the synagogue of Dura Europos, Frye 1968, pl. XII.

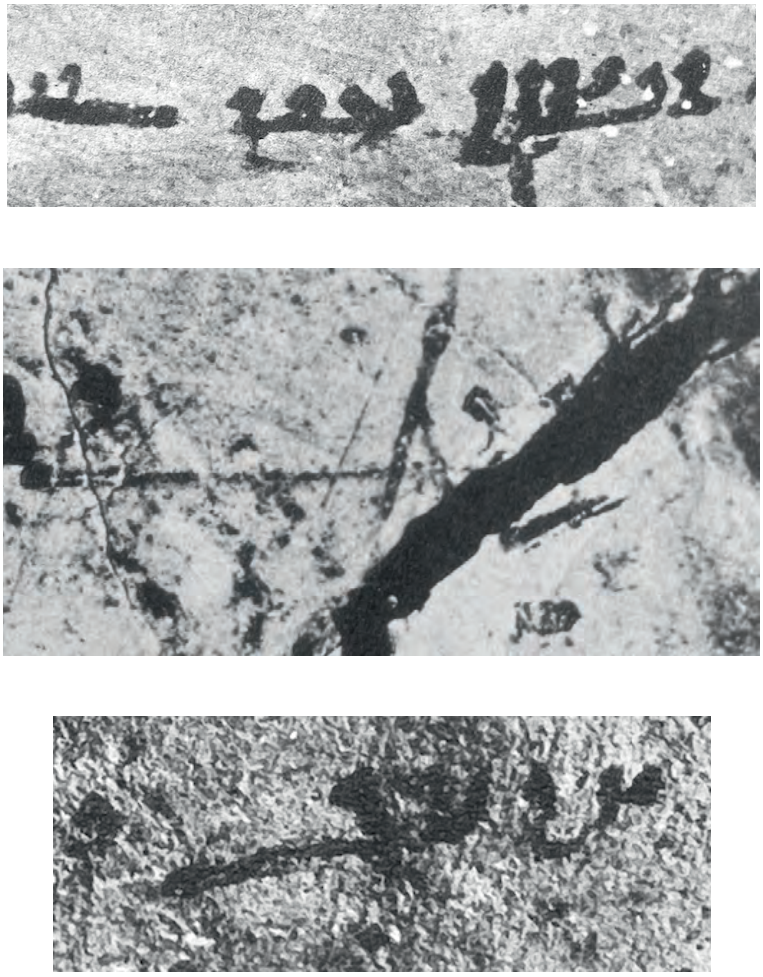


Fig. 7.12, Details of Middle Persian dipinti and ostracon from the synagogue of Dura Europos showing 'proto-corrupted' forms of the aramaeograms AYK (top) and BYN (middle and bottom), Frye 1968, pl. XI, V, XXIV.

Fig. 7.13, Detail of Middle Persian graffito from the synagogue of Dura Europos, Frye 1968, pl. XXXIII.

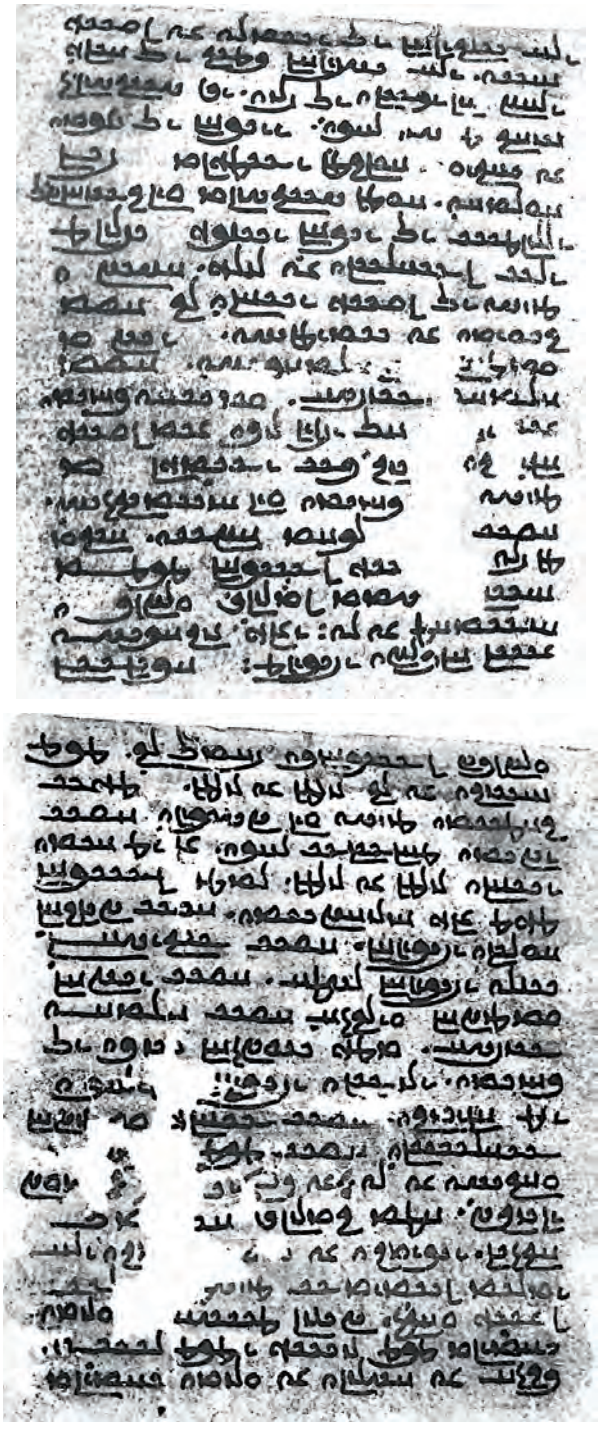


Fig. 7.14, Recto and verso of Fol. 9 of the Pahlavi Psalter, Andreas and Barr 1933, Tab. 9.

Fig. 8.1, Investiture scene of Ardašīr at Naqš-e Rostam. Photo by the author.

Fig. 8.2, Trilingual Parthian – Greek – Middle Persian inscription on the horse of Ardašīr at Naqš-e Rostam. Photo by the author.

Fig. 8.3, Trilingual Middle Persian – Parthian – Greek inscription on the horse of Ohrmazd at Naqš-e Rostam. Photo by the author.

Fig. 8.4, Trilingual Parthian – Greek – Middle Persian inscription of Šābuhr I at Naqš-e Rajab. Photo by the author.

Fig. 8.5, Bas-relief and label inscription of Wahrām I (/Narseh) at Bīšāpūr. Photo by the author.

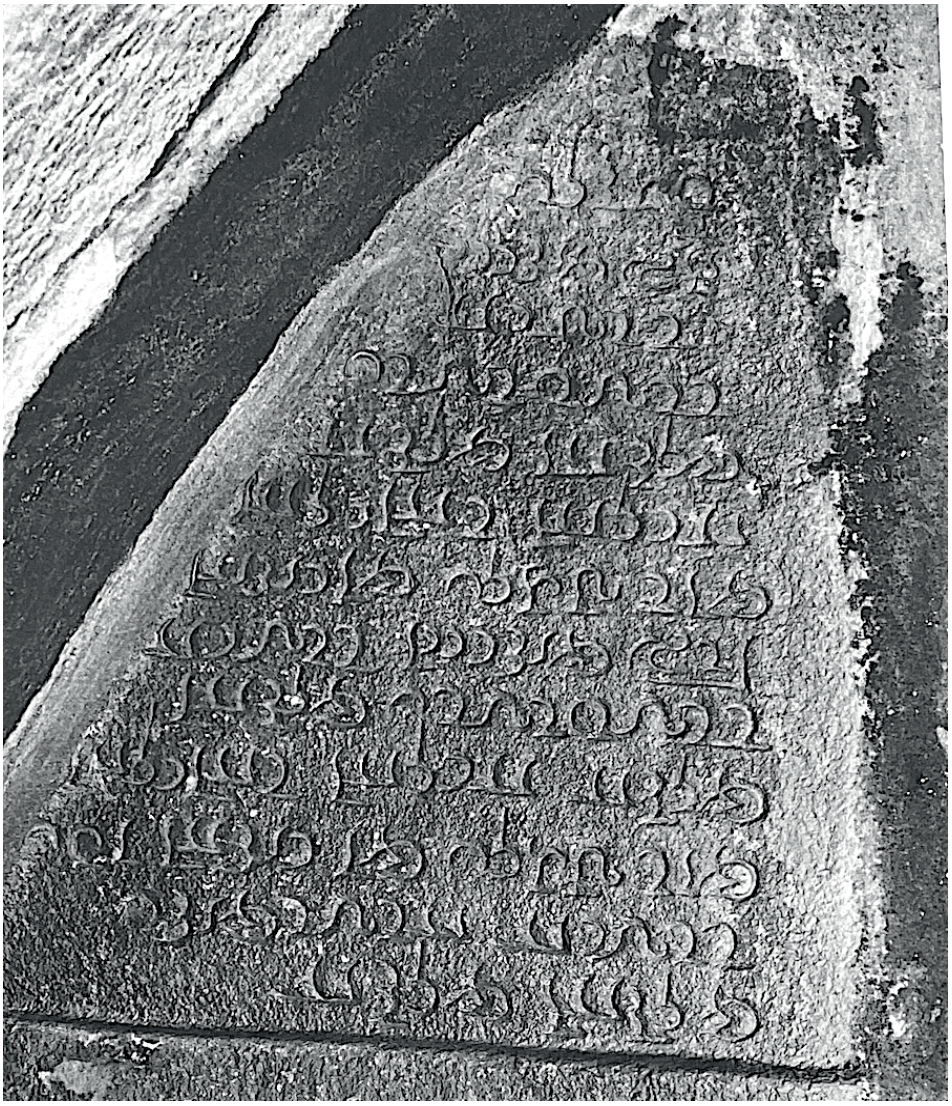


Fig. 8.6, Label inscription of Šābuhr II at Tāq-e Bostān, Fukai and Horiuchi 1969-1984, II, pl. 72.

Fig. 8.7a, Middle Persian inscription of Šābuhr I at Hājjiābād. Photo by the author.

Fig. 8.7b, Parthian inscription of Šābuhr I at Hājjiābād. Photo by the author.

Fig. 8.8, Rocky recess of Tang-e Borāq. Photo by the author.

Fig. 8.9, Middle Persian inscription of Šābuhr I at Naqš-e Rostam. Photo by the author.

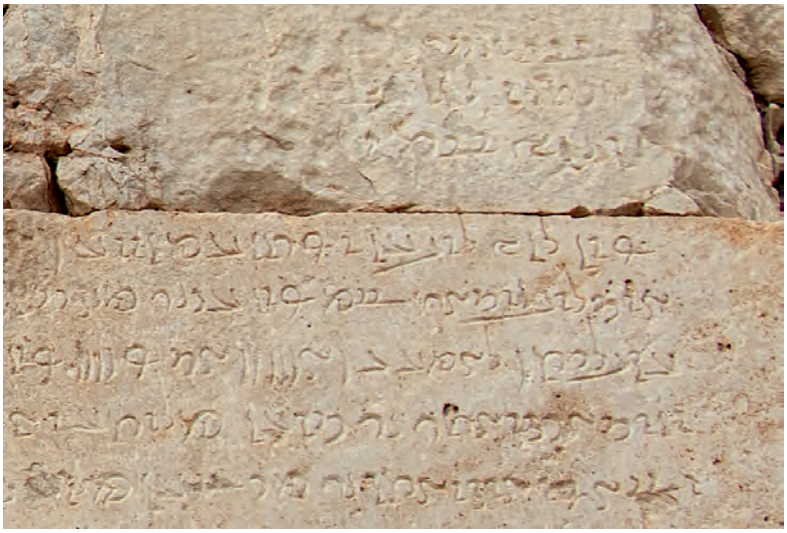


Fig. 8.10, Detail of the Middle Persian inscription of Šābuhr I at Naqš-e Rostam. Photo by the author.

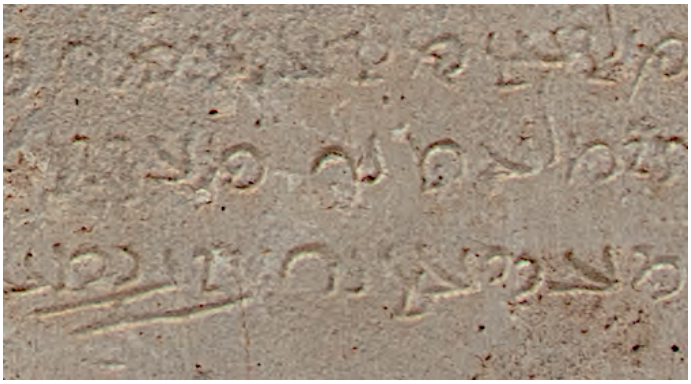


Fig. 8.11, Detail of the Middle Persian inscription of Šābuhr I at Naqš-e Rostam, example of ligatured heterogram ZY. Photo by the author.

Fig. 8.12, Triumph of Šābuhr I at Naqš-e Rostam. Photo by the author.

Fig. 8.13, Detail of the inscription of the high priest Kerdīr on the Ka‘ba at Naqš-e Rostam. Photo by the author.

Fig. 8.14, Inscription and relief of the high priest Kerdīr at Naqš-e Rajab. Photo by the author.

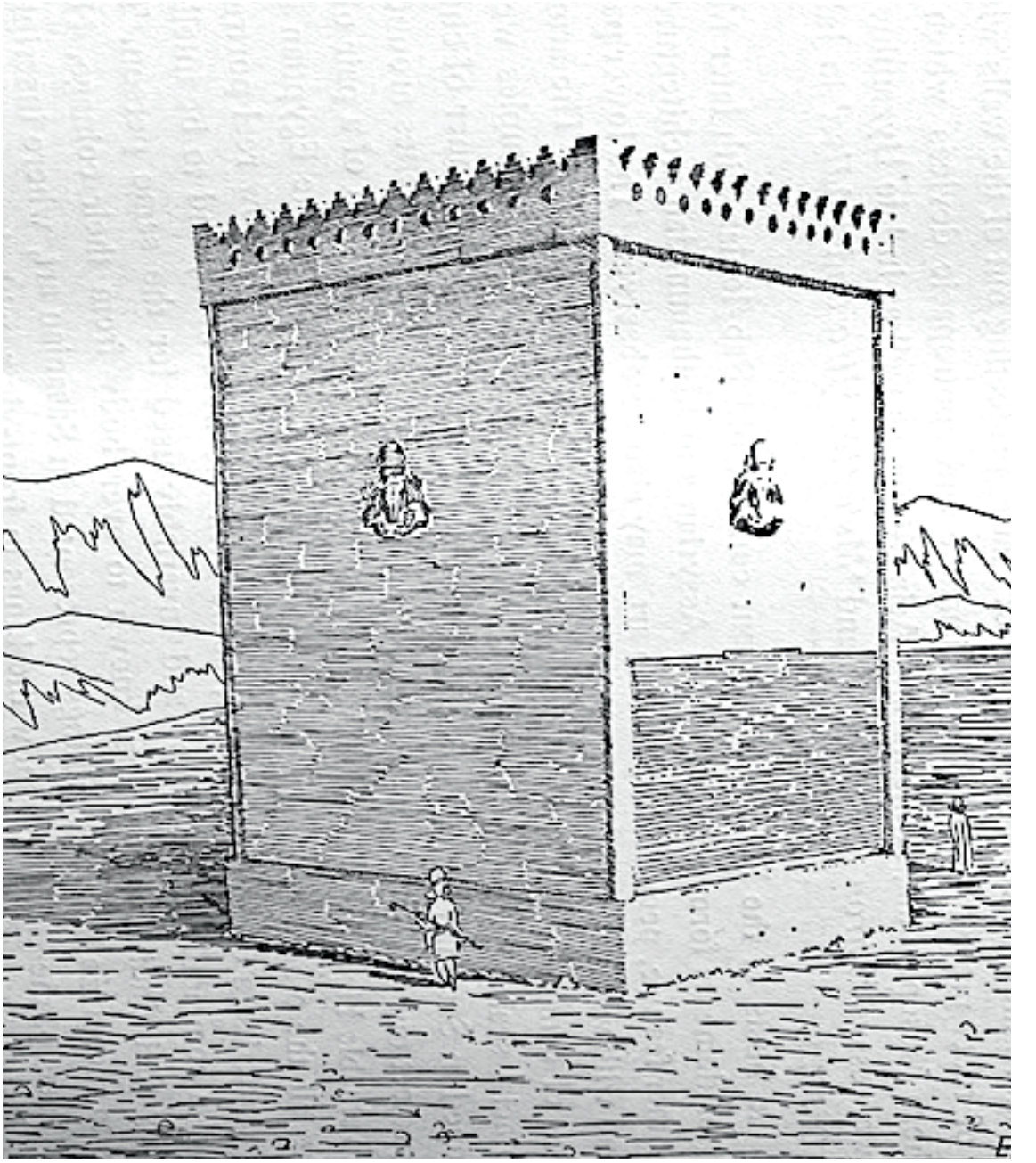


Fig. 8.15, Reconstruction of the monument of Paikuli by Herzfeld, Herzfeld 1924, I, 7.