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Historiography and palaeography of Sasanian Middle Persian inscriptions

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Introduction

“*There*. Can you see them?”

“No, I can’t see anything.”

Hussein¹ 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 Kermānshah. 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 Tāxt-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. Tāxt-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 necessities, 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 out⁶) 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, Nasta’līq and their many variants [Fig. 0.5].

In this way, the many secondary inscriptions⁷ 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 Ka’ba 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 Khalid¹¹ 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 Hājjīābād 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 Hājjīābād 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.

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 Čehlmenār 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 Hājjīābād: 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.