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Historiography and palaeography of Sasanian Middle Persian inscriptions

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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 historians.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,

¹⁵ Strictly speaking, not all Armenian and Syriac historians 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 example²²). 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, graece, 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 Euphrates²⁴, 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" (*Ελληνικοῖς 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,

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

²⁸ "Ἐγὼ Χοσρόης, Βασιλεὺς Βασιλέων, νιὸς Χοσρού, 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 Χοσρού 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 support³³ – 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 Firūzābād (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.

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 Xoš 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 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 excursions.⁴³ For Averil Cameron however, the importance of Syriac as a mediatory

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” (*έκ 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” (*τονς 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 excursions 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

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 Manichaeian 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, Anacephalaosis* 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 i Čatrang ud Nihišn Nēw Ardashīr*, see Panaino 1999; on the literary *topos* of the cosmological interpretation of the game’s rules, see Gardner 2020.

⁵⁷ On the Manichaeian script see Durkin-Meisterernst 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 Bosphorus 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” (*γράμματα [...] Ασσύρια*) 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

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 *Ασσύρια γράμματα* 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-Muqaffā‘, known for his Arabic translations of Middle Persian texts and in particular the *Xwadāy Nāmag*.⁶⁷ Al-Muqaffā‘ 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 Azerbāijan); *dari*, the language of the court (*dar*); *pārsi* itself, the language of the Zoroastrian priests and

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-Muqaffā‘, 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‘jam 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.

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 *soryāni* 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 *kaštēh* and *nim-kaštēh*.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 *alef* as well as a lapidary style *dalet* although the orientation of the characters is confused. Its variant, the *nim-kaštēh*, was used to write scientific treatises: 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-kaštēh* script is differentiated from the seventh and last alphabet of the Persians, the *rās saharayah*, also used to write treatises 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 *śāh 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 *śekasteh* ‘broken’ describes certain styles of modern Persian calligraphy such as *śekasteh 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 *śāh 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 *Muřūj al-dahab* and the *Kitāb al-Tanbīh*, the first of which is dated to 943-944 CE. Two chapters of his *Muřūj* 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 *Tanbih*.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 Nebo⁹¹ who was originally from Mesene but brought up at the court of the king of Assyria. Most significantly, Nebo only created the Persian script⁹² *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

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.

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 *Murij* 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’

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 *Muriğ* 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.

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 *Murij* 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 *Murij* 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 ‘Adud 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. Mas‘udi 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 Firuzābād – 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

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 Firuzābād: 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.