Historiography and palaeography of Sasanian Middle Persian inscriptions

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Chapter 3

The decipherment of inscriptional Middle Persian

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

Thomas Hyde's Historia Religionis Veterum Persarum.

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

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

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[229] Voltaire 1878, 616.

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

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

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

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

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

[234] Hyde 1700, 2-3.

[235] Hyde 1700, 16, 27.

[236] Hyde 1700, 4-5.

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

The alphabets of the Zoroastrians according to Hyde.

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

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

[238] See Chapter 1.

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

[240] Anquetil Duperron 1768, 348-349.

[241] Hyde 1760, 342.

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

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

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

[242] Anquetil Duperron 1768, 394-398.

[243] Hyde 1760, 175-180.

[244] Anquetil Duperron 1771, I, 489.

[245] Sharpe 1767.

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

[247] Anquetil Duperron 1771, I, 496.

[248] Anquetil Duperron 1771, I, 497.

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

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

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

[250] Hyde 1760, 416-417.

[251] Kaempfer 1712, 319.

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

[253] Hyde 1760, 557.

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

Alexander king of kings of the Asians.

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

Hyde's Palmyrene inscriptions.

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

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

[255] Hyde 1760, 550.

[256] Hyde 1760, 549-550.

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

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

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

[258] Hyde 1760, 550.

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

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

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

[262] Hyde 1760, 555.

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

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

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

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

[263] Hyde 1760, 554-555.

[264] Halifax 1695.

[265] Wood 1753.

[266] Barthélémy 1759.

[267] Barthélémy 1759, 596.

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

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

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

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

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

[269] Barthélémy 1759, 595.

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

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

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

[270] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 170.

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

[272] Dehérain 1936, 265-269.

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

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

Alexander becomes Ardašīr.

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

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

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

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

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

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

[277] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 38.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Deciphering inscriptional Middle Persian.

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

[282] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 71.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[289] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 90.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[295] Silvestre de Sacy, 1794, 4.

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

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

[298] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 123.

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

The Middle Persian legends of the Cabinet du Roi.

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

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

[299] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 170.

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

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

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

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

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

[303] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 242.

[304] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 254.

[305] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 263.

[306] Silvestre de Sacy 1793, 244.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[312] Ouseley 1801.

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

[314] Silvestre de Sacy 1815, 204.

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

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

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

[315] Müller 1839, 290.

[316] Müller 1839, 314.

[317] Müller 1839, 317-318.

[318] Boré 1841.

[319] Boré 1841, 654.

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

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

Work on Avestan and manuscript Middle Persian takes over.

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

[320] Boré 1841, 644-645.

[321] Boré 1841, 650.

[322] de Longpérier 1840, iv.

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

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

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

[324] Olshausen 1843, 3.

[325] Olshausen 1843, 4.

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

[327] Rask 1826.

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

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

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

[328] Burnouf 1833.

[329] Westergaard 1852-1854.

[330] Westergaard 1851.

[331] Münter 1818 [1802].

[332] Münter 1818, 123.

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

[333] Silvestre de Sacy 1803, 458.

[334] Münter 1818, 126-128.

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

[336] Grotefend 1824, 344-348.

[337] Münter 1818, 33.

[338] Grotefend 1824, 332, 348.

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

[340] Silvestre de Sacy 1803, 465.

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

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

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

[342] Lassen and Westergaard 1845.

[343] Westergaard 1840 and 1845.

[344] Rawlinson 1848, 5.

[345] Rawlinson 1848, 9.

[346] Rawlinson 1848, 33.

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

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

Towards a biography of writing.

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

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

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

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

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

[351] Appadurai 1986.

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

[352] Marsh and Jones 2014.