Historiography and palaeography of Sasanian Middle Persian inscriptions
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Chapter 5

The emergence of the Middle Persian heterographic writing system

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

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

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[527] See Chapter 4.

[528] Skjærvø 1995.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[534] Greenfield and Porten 1982.

[535] However, see Bae 2008, 138.

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

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

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

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

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

[540] Henkelman, pers. com.

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

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

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

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[542] Naveh 1970, 15-18.

[543] Henning 1958, 22.

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

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

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

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

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[546] Naveh 1970, 4-6.

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

[548] Naveh 1970, 52.

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

The Elephantine papyri and the letters of Aršāma.

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

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

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

[551] Porten 1996, 14-18.

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

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

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

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

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

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[555] On Nakhṭhor, see Henkelman 2020.

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

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

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

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

[560] Naveh 1970, 29.

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

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

Aramaic texts from Bactria: the Khalili archive.

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

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

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

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

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

Aramaic at Persepolis.

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

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

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

[565] Mairs 2016, 2043.

[566] Henkelman 2008, 81; Azzoni 2008.

[567] Henkelman 2008, 91-92.

[568] Henkelman 2008, 93.

[569] Henkelman 2008, 88.

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

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

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[571] Bowman 1970, 6-15.

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

[573] Henkelman 2017, 104; King 2019.

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

[575] Henkelman 2017, 105.

[576] King 2019, 187.

[577] King 2019, 188-190.

[578] Henkelman 2017, 104.

[579] Henkelman 2017, 105.

[580] Bowman 1970, 56-62.

[581] Henkelman 2017, 105.

[582] Bowman 1970, 45.

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

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

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

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

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

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

[586] Porten 2003, 173-174.

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

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

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

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

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

[590] Porten 2003, 175.

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

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

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

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

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[593] Naveh and Shaked 2012, 28.

[594] Naveh and Shaked 2012, 74.

[595] Driver 1954, 17.

[596] Porten 2003, 175.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[604] Naveh and Shaked 2012, 54.

The distinctly Old Persian flavour of some Aramaic documents.

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

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

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

[606] Driver 1954, 19.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[611] Naveh and Shaked 2012, 51.

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

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

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

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

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[614] Mairs 2016, 2043.

[615] Porten 1996, 386.

[616] Mairs 2016, 2044-2045.

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

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

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

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

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

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[619] Henning 1958, 24.

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

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

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

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

[624] Olbrycht 2021, 97.

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

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

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[625] Mairs 2016, 2043-2044.

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

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

[628] Gholami 2009, 3.

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

[630] Mairs 2016, 2057-2061.

The Aramaic inscriptions of Aśoka: hints of heterography?

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

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

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

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

[633] Kosmin 2014, 54-58.

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

[635] Henning 1949.

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

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

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

[637] Henning 1949, 85.

[638] Humbach 1976; Carratelli and Garbini 1964.

[639] Humbach 1972, Humbach 1974.

[640] Humbach 1976, 118.

[641] Humbach 1976, 128-129.

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

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

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[642] Humbach 1974, 242.

[643] Humbach 1974, 241-242.

[644] Carratelli and Garbini 1964, 5.

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

[646] Carratelli and Garbini 1964, 33.

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

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

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

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

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

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[649] Carratelli and Garbini 1964, 60.

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

[651] Gzella 2008, 108.

[652] Gzella 2008, 108.

[653] Naveh in Shaked 1969, 118.

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

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

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

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[654] Carratelli and Garbini 1964, 59.

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

[656] Herzfeld 1935, 47-48.

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

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

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[657] Henning 1958, 24-25.

[658] Henning 1958, 24.

[659] Humbach 1974, 237.

[660] Frye 1982.

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

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

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[661] For a summary of Altheim's readings, put forward in different publications, see Frye 1982, 86-87.

[662] Frye 1982, 88.

[663] Frye 1982, 88-89.

[664] Frye 1982, 90.

This Aramaic inscription of Darius' tomb has not been studied since and is in too lacunary a state to allow any further conclusions concerning its subject matter and date.[665] In terms of palaeography, the letters are deeply carved, well-spaced and proportioned. Based on Herzfeld's drawing, which unfortunately remains much more legible than the photographs of the rock-cut text published by Frye, the script displays a distinctly cursive style – in fact close to that corresponding to the 'extremely cursive' of Naveh's classification – that is at odds for instance with the archaising and angular style of the few examples of Aramaic-engraved coins from the early Hellenistic period described above.[666] Thus, although the *shin* presents the upside down F-shape known from the 5th century onwards and found on the coin from the Oxus hoard, it is much more curved and less angular while the *alef* presents the later, cursive cross-shape: this cross-shape of the *alef* is confirmed by Frye's photographic publication of the inscription, where the grapheme can be seen clearly in several lines.[667] The right leg of the *taw* is elongated, a feature that appears in the cursive style of the 4th century: here again, Herzfeld's drawing of this letter is confirmed by the photographs **[Fig. 5.11]**. Based on the images, the right leg of the *mem* is similarly very elongated, and according to Herzfled hand-drawing it even curves in slightly: the angular, three-pronged head of this grapheme on Mazaios' coins is far off. According to Herzfeld's copy, the *qof* is now completely open towards the bottom, a feature entirely unknown before the 4th-3rd centuries; similarly, the head of the *samekh* is curved to form two hooks rather than a cross, another distinctly later feature and confirmed by Frye's photographs.[668] Naveh mentions Herzfeld's drawing of this inscription in a footnote.[669] He dates the script to the 5th century BCE, describing it as a 'formal cursive' from that period, but as the brief palaeographic overview above shows, this is somewhat at odds both with his tables of Aramaic script-styles as well as with the later date for the rock-cut text put forward by Herzfeld, Henning and Frye. Still, it is striking that this monumental, Aramaic inscription, engraved on Darius' tomb, does not present any sign of an archaising 'lapidary' script that one might expect would have been used for such an occasion: the inscription may be seen as an

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[665] See nevertheless Bae 2003, esp. 7 and 22-23 who accepts the reading of the text as Old Persian (phonetically) written in Aramaic script.

[666] Note however that the distinctively cursive style of the Aramaic inscription from Persepolis maybe exaggerated by Herzfeld's hand-drawn copy.

[667] Naveh 1970, 46.

[668] Compare Naveh 1970, 28 and 48.

[669] Naveh 1970, 42, n. 97.

instance of Naveh's observation that the Achaemenid period saw the generalisation of the cursive style, including on hard materials.

II. The Aramaic-derived Parthian script.

Parthian numismatics: from Aramaic to Greek to Parthian

It becomes much more difficult to follow the trajectory of the Aramaic script in the former Achaemenid heartland in the following centuries because of an important documentary gap. The most significant evidence of the continued use of the Aramaic alphabet at a local level is the emergence, in the course of the Hellenistic period, of a rich mosaic of Aramaic-derived scripts. The first that will be addressed is the Parthian script, primarily because it is under the Parthians that we can observe the gradual transition from the use of Greek to the re-introduction – in the political and representational sphere – of an Aramaic-derived script used to write an Iranian language.

Because of the same documentary gap, it is difficult to pinpoint the benchmark events that led the Parthians to overcome Seleucid rule.[670] The chronology of the succession of early Parthian kings is particularly difficult to reconstruct as the early coins minted by the dynasty only mention one ruler in their legends, the eponymous Arsakes, with each king differentiating himself from his predecessor by his portrait.[671] The first turning point came in the reign of Seleukos (r. 246-225 BCE): Andragoras, the satrap of the former Achaemenid province of Parthava, declared his independence from Seleucid rule;[672] in his step, Diodotus, the satrap of Bactria, also decided to secede, in 239 BCE. Based on classical historiography, it appears that the Iranian nomadic tribe of the Parnoi/Aparnoi – the most powerful tribe in the Dahan Confederacy[673] – who had been putting pressure on the Seleucids' eastern frontier perhaps as early as the end of the fourth century, took advantage of the secession of these two eastern satrapies: led by their king Arsakes I, they defeated Andragoras in 244/243 BCE and invaded

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[670] For a recent history of early Arsakid Parthia, see Olbrycht 2021.

[671] For Parthian coinage see Sellwood 1971; Alram 2016; for Parthian history see Bivar 1983 and 1986, Frye 1984, 205-247, Schippmann 1986.

[672] Most likely in the 250s, possibly in 256, see Olbrycht 2021, 99.

[673] Olbrycht 2021, 119.

Parthava, hence their appellation.[674] It is worth noting that the secession of these provinces from Seleucid rule, as well as the full-blown 'invasion' of Parthia by the Parni has been called into question. Thus, Frye notes that Bactria's break away from Seleucid control was probably much more gradual; similarly, the Parnoi's move south may have been closer to a 'migration' than to an invasion.[675] It is also worth stressing that the Parthian dynasts dated the beginning of their era in 247 BCE, a date which remains difficult to explain but is clearly anterior to the Parnoi move on Parthava. Be that as it may, the Parthians consolidated their influence and began extending their control eastwards. Between the reigns of the Parthian kings Mithradates I (ca. 171-39/8) to Mithradates II (ca. 124/3-88/7 BCE) a series of successful military campaigns against the Seleucids established the Parthians as the dominating power in the Near East up until early 3rd century CE when the Sasanians put an end to their rule.[676]

In the first two centuries of their rule, the Parthians followed their predecessors in using Greek not only on their coin legends but also in monumental inscriptions:[677] as mentioned in the first part of this work, early travelers to Persia documented a Greek inscription at Bīsotūn apparently mentioning the name Mithradates.[678] Herzfeld later restored the text as reading 'Gotarzes, satrap of satraps, the great king Mithradates';[679] it is has been suggested that this Gotarzes is the same one mentioned in Babylonian tablets as the Parthian king who reigned for a brief period in 91/90 BC and was described as the son of Mithradates II.[680] The inscription certainly shows that Greek was used by the Parthians as a language and script of prestige in the 1st century BCE, worthy of a rock-cut inscription accompanying a bas-relief at the ancient Achaemenid site of Bīsotūn. Similarly, the typology of Parthian coins presents a linear continuity with Hellenistic models.[681] As mentioned above, at first only the name ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ – invariably in the genitive – appears, to which are gradually added various combinations of

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[674] Olbrycht 2021, 99. For a discussion of the accounts of classical authors on this subject, see Frye 1984, 206-207 and Shahbazi 1986.

[675] Frye 1984, 178-180 and 206.

[676] On early Parthian history see Olbrycht 2021 and Boyce and de Jong (forthcoming); on Greek and Aramaic inscriptions of the Arsacid period, see Huyse (forthcoming, b).

[677] At least, in the one that is extant, at Bīsotūn.

[678] The inscription was first copied by Grélot when travelling through Persia with Bembo, see above Chapter 2; and see most recently, Luther 2018a as well as Huyse (forthcoming, b).

[679] Herzfeld 1920, 35-39.

[680] Frye 1984, 215; Simonetta 2009, 170, n. 39; on the inscription and the identification of the king mentioned in it, see most recently Luther 2018a.

[681] See also Sinisi 2012 and Rezakhani 2013; on the use of Greek on Parthian coinage, see Sinisi 2012, 278-279.

epithets including ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ, ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ, ΝΙΚΑΤΩΡ, ΘΕΟΠΑΤΩΡ, ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟΣ, ΝΙΚΗΦΟΡΟΥ, ΔΙΚΑΙΟΥ, ΑΥΤΟΚΡΑΤΟΡΟΣ etc **[Fig. 5.12]**.[682] Only much later on is the name of the Parthian king who issued the coin added in the legend, beginning with Mithridates III in the second half of the 1st century BCE. The legend is typically inscribed in a square, with each epithet making up one of the four sides of the square, around the motif in the centre **[Fig. 5.12]**. Concerning the epithet *philhellene*, which first appears on the coins of Mithradates struck in Seleucia on the Tigris, Frye has commented that it probably ought to be understood as a gesture towards the local Greek(-speaking) populations, a 'sign of conciliation', rather than exactly translating a pro-Greek feeling.[683] On the other hand, the omission of the epithet *philhellene* on some issues under Artabanus III may have reflected a wave of anti-Roman sentiment among the Parthian nobility after the short reign of the Rome-educated Vonones, eventually ousted by Artabanus.[684]

Although Greek dominated numismatics for most of the Parthian period, there are some telling exceptions, dating from the very early and from the later Parthian period. Early Parthian coins bearing Aramaic legends were included in a hoard discovered in a small village in northeastern Iran and published by Abgarians and Sellwood.[685] The Parthian coins were found among other drachms struck by different Seleucid kings. The publishers note that the Parthian coins follow the weight standard that was employed by the Seleucids for their drachms. Continuity with Seleucid precedent is further indicated by the minting technique, with the coins presenting a hammered edge, as well as style, with the dotted border, typical of the obverse of Seleucid issues.[686] The choice of depicting a head rather than bust on the obverse also picks up on Seleucid minting conventions from Mesopotamia and Iran. Based on the condition of the coins and their comparison with other coin hoards, Abgarians and Sellwood estimate a date between 225 BCE and 150 BCE and organise the Parthian coins chronologically into six types. The first and second types, deemed to be the earliest, bear the legend ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ sometimes augmented with the title ΑΥΤΟΚΡΑΤΟΡΟΣ; the direction of the head on the obverse – to the right – and of the figure of the archer on the reverse – to the left – follow Seleucid precedent. Type 3 and 4 present a similar iconography but depict the head facing left and (in type 4) the

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[682] For a discussion of some of these epithets, see Simonetta 2009, 150-151 as well as Sinisi 2012, 281-286.

[683] Frye 1984, 211.

[684] Frye 1984, 237 and Sinisi 2012, 286.

[685] Abgarians and Sellwood 1971.

[686] Abgarians and Sellwood 1971, 108.

archer facing right, a change of direction which is interpreted as expressing the nascent dynasty's intention to distinguish itself from Seleucid predecessors. Most importantly, types 3 and 4 bear short legends that are, although difficult to read and interpret, undoubtedly in Aramaic script. It should be noted, however, that whether the script on these legends was already on its way to becoming a form of early Parthian is impossible to tell, as the graphemes could belong to either alphabet; the earliest dated evidence for the distinctly Parthian script is 100 BCE (see below). The legends include two letters resembling the *kaf/resh/dalet* Aramaic/Parthian graphemes; one representing either the Aramaic *nun* or Parthian *yod/zain* (although admittedly a little bit wavy) and what could either be an Aramaic *yod* or Parthian *waw* **[Fig. 5.13]**. Abgarians and Sellwood propose to decipher the word *krny*: the Kārins were an important contingent of the Parthian nobility.[687] They also note that according to classical sources the Kārin was said to be a type of general: thus, the term would be a direct translation of the Greek "Autokratos" which, in the context of Macedonian-Seleucid protocol, designated an 'elected general'. In a dedicated article, Marek Jan Olbrycht has recently discussed Arsakes' dual Greek-Iranian titulature, and rejects the association of the title *krny* on his coins with the Parthian Kārin clan.[688] While the Greek title ΑΥΤΟΚΡΑΤΟΡΟΣ derived from Hellenistic tradition, where it had come to designate in a general sense a potentate who had come to rule through a military success, the one of *krny* derived from Achaemenid tradition.[689] Indeed, although it does not appear as such in Old Persian textual vestiges, it is mentioned by Greek historiographers and, significantly, compared by them to the function of autokrator. The function of *krny* also occurs, written in Aramaic, in the Khalili archive: the term would derive from the Old Persian *kāra-* 'army' and would designate a high-ranking military commander.[690] For Olbrycht, with this dual tituallure, Arsakes I was thus explicitly establishing a connection with both the Greek and Persian ruling cultures.

Significantly, the same title *krny* reappears on the coin legends of the Persid *frataraka* king Wahbarz, suggesting the widespread use of this Achaemenid military function as a title by sub-Seleucid, local kings across the empire – perhaps it is also indicative of a similar political situation at both ends of the empire.[691]

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[687] Abgarians and Sellwood 1971, 113.

[688] Olbrycht 2013.

[689] Olbrycht 2013, 63-65.

[690] Olbrycht 2013, 65-68.

[691] David Engels seems to have been the first to make a link between the occurrences of the title *krny* on the coins of Arsakes and those of the Persid king, see Engels 2013, 55-60 and Engels 2018, 178-183. Although the

It is worth stressing that the Aramaic legends on these examples systematically appear in association with the ubiquitous ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ spelled out in Greek letters **[Fig. 5.13]**. It is therefore difficult to see the use of the Aramaic script as necessarily expressing a "desire to emphasise the anti-Seleucid nature of the young kingdom".[692] Similarly, Jozef Wolski also firmly interpreted the Aramaic legends as incarnating the Parthians' new-found independence from their Greek overlords: "les Parthes, dès le moment de leur apparition sur la plate-forme historique comme État, ont adopté, évidemment pour s'opposer à la pression de la langue grecque, l'araméen, et cela dans les légendes des monnaies des premiers Arsacides".[693] As we saw, Greek would become the sole script of Parthian coin legends for centuries. The Aramaic and Greek legends on these examples are both engraved on the reverse of the coin, which represents the figure of a seated archer on a four-legged stool; Mithradates would later take up this iconographic motif for his own issues, but hellenising it, by representing the archer seated on the omphalos rather than a stool, in a clear nod towards the Greek seated Apollo with bow. Types 3 and 4 are also distinctive in that they bear a specific monogram resembling a stylised Greek letter M, which is thought to be a mintmark: the publishers suggest it may stand for Mithradatkert, the name of the citadel of the Parthian capital Nisa.[694] The limited number of dies which the Parthian coins present further suggests that the issues were minted and intended for circulation within the province of Parthia proper. Following this, it is also possible to see the few Aramaic letters engraved on the coins as a mint-master's mark, rather than a Parthian military title.

Abgarians and Sellwood conclude from their study that the Parthian coins from the hoard were minted in the province of Parthia at the very end of the 3rd century BCE, before Antiochus III's 209 BCE expedition from Ecbatana to reconquer the lost easternmost satrapies.[695] What the few Aramaic/Aramaic-derived letters of the Parthian coin legends certainly testify to is the continued use of that alphabet at a local level in the former Achaemenid province of Parthava, 'surviving' the Seleucid period and spilling into the early Arsacid period: it shows that the Parni encountered Aramaic in the very early stages of their rise to power and included it on some of the first issues of their coins.

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date and succession of the Persid *frataraka* kings remains much debated (see following chapter), it is probably safe to say that Wahbarz would have roughly been a contemporary of Arsakes I.

[692] Abgarians and Sellwood 1971, 113.

[693] Wolski 1976, 284.

[694] Abgarians and Sellwood 1971, 114.

[695] Abgarians and Sellwood 1971, 117.

Now, Aramaic letters disappear from Parthian coinage for two centuries only to rematerialise in the later Parthian period. Indeed, from the reign of Vologeses I (ca. 51-78 CE) additional legends in Parthian script begin to make their appearance, at first sporadically and only on the drachms, and then more frequently.[696] These instances have again been interpreted as expressing anti-Greek sentiment and embodying the Parthians' affirmation of their Iranian identity. Similarly, the reemergence around this time of the title 'king of kings' as well as the choice by Gotarzes to have a monumental inscription engraved at Bīsotūn – which, as was noted, is in Greek however – would illustrate a symbolic return to Achaemenid traditions.[697] Thus, Wolski, who interpreted the epithet philhellene as a mark of the early Parthians' 'dependence' towards Seleucid rule, judged the 'Aramean legends' of the later Parthian coins as representing a sudden break in political ideology: "L'apparition sur les monnaies parthes, dès le milieu du 1er siècle de notre ère, de la légende araméenne, et cela d'une manière stable, et la disparition des légendes grecques, du reste de plus en plus barbarisées, confirment visiblement ce revirement complet des Parthes … Il est aisé de voir dans ces phénomènes l'expression d'une action voulue, d'une tendance anti-grecque, ce qui équivaut à la tendance anti-romaine en ce temps-là."[698]

Frye called Wolski's assertions into question, rightly noting that the legends in Greek do not disappear from Parthian coinage and were maintained until the very end of the dynasty;[699] in fact, the use of Greek for official inscriptions is a practice continued by the first Sasanian kings. Frye further argues that the coin legends in Parthian script were in fact nothing more than mint or mint masters' marks and have therefore been given too much importance: their appearance ought to be attributed to the gradual decline in the knowledge and use of Greek.[700] This interpretation ought to be discarded. Although the Parthian legends at first only consist in a few letters, reminiscent of the abbreviations of mint names, it is quite easy to see that they are actually abbreviations of the name of the Parthian king responsible for issuing the coin. They correspond to a new trend in coinage which sees the addition of the king's name to the legend, alongside the usual Greek epithets and the ubiquitous ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ. The first instance of letters in Parthian script is on the issues Vologeses I: on the reverse, this king's coins bear

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[696] Sellwood 1971, 225.

[697] On the Arsacids' efforts to link their dynasty to the Achaemenids and Achaemenids traditions, see Olbrycht 2013 and Olbrycht 2019.

[698] Wolski 1976, 285.

[699] Frye 1984, 228-229. It should also be noted that the title 'king of kings' does occur on Seleucid coinage.

[700] Frye 1984, 229.

the familiar Greek square legend – ΒΑΣΙΛΕωΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕwΝ (*sic*) at the top, ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥΣ ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟΣ on the left and ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ ΕΥΕΡΓΕΤΟΥ on the right; the square is closed at the bottom by ΔΙΚΑΙΟΥ – engraved more or less schematically around the motif of the king seated on his throne with Tyche handing him a palm-branch or that of the seated archer with bow.[701] On the obverse, the two Parthian letters WL are engraved behind the king's head. This king's successor Vologeses II (ca. 77-80 CE) continues the convention on some of his coins **[Fig. 5.14]**, and in one case the letters read WLM. It would have been possible to mistake these short abbreviations for mint marks were it not for the two Parthian letters PK engraved on the coins of Vologeses II's successor Pacorus II (ca. 78-105 CE) – these take the schematic form of a triangle and a curvy reverse gamma – as well as the two letters AR similarly positioned next to the king's portrait on the coins of the last Parthian king Artabanus V (216-224 CE).[702] In having the first letters of his name engraved behind his portrait, Vologeses I was actually following the example of his predecessor Gotarzes II, who had a capital Greek gamma engraved next to his portrait: the novelty consisted in using the Parthian alphabet. Now, the coins of Vologeses IV (147-191 CE) mark a new turning point and bear the king's *full* title in Parthian *wlgšy mlk'*:[703] this serves to prove that the three letters WLM on some of Vologeses II's issues was an abbreviation for the full title *WLgšy Mlk'*. On Vologeses IV's coins, the Parthian words are inserted in the usual square Greek formula made up of the familiar epithets: it forms the top side of the square, thereby blending in but also 'crowning' the Greek legend. In one coin type the legend is only in Parthian and presents the full formula *wlgšy 'ršk mlkyn mlk'*, each word forming the side of the square legend.[704] By then, a number of Parthian kings had begun to add their full titulature in Parthian script, often in conjunction with Greek epithets, a practice that was continued up until the end of the Parthian dynasty.

Palaeographically speaking, the w*aw* in these legends takes the shape of a crescent moon open to the left **[Fig. 5.14]**, and the *lamed* is a long, more or less hooked wavy line; the *shin* is remarkably close to its Aramaic precursor – it leans towards the left rather than standing upright – and does not resemble monumental Parthian as we know if from the Sasanian period. The coins also adopt the convention of representing the *mem* of MLK' schematically as a cross, a cursive shape which in Imperial Aramaic is usually reserved for the *alef*, showing that

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[701] Sellwood 1971, 215-216.

[702] Sellwood 1971, 231, 297.

[703] Sellwood 1971, 275.

[704] Sellwood 1971, 279.

Parthian had resolutely moved on from that alphabet **[Fig. 5.15]**; the Parthian *alef* on coins takes the form of an open-topped square, while the *resh*, *kaf* and *bet* are virtually indistinguishable. Certain Parthian legends are more schematically engraved than others, thus the *nun* on Artabanus V (ca. 216-224 CE)'s coins is a single vertical line and the *taw* a square open at the bottom. By contrast, Mithradates IV (140 CE)'s legends display an elegant monumental style, with the *mem* and *taw* retaining all the details of the graphemes' complex features; similarly, the lamed in Vologeses II's coins is a fork rather than only a wavy line **[Fig. 5.16]**.[705]

As mentioned, Frye believed that it is possible to witness a gradual loss of the knowledge of Greek. Beyond cases of extremely schematic and abbreviated epithets, some issues certainly present what Sellwood calls "barbarous legends" **[Fig. 5.17]**.[706] These consist in an arrangement of Greek-looking graphemes that do not correspond to any real meaning, although the epithets they are supposed to spell out can sometimes just about be guessed, as if the engraver had copied Greek prototypes but without having any knowledge of the Greek alphabet: in such examples the 'Greek' graphemes seem to have an 'aesthetic purpose', to recall the Greek square legends. Against Frye's proposal, however, it should be stressed that these 'barbarous' legends do occur relatively early on, for example on certain issues of 'debased silver' struck under Phraataces (ca. 2 BCE-4 CE), Artabanus III (ca. 10-38 CE) and Vardanes I (40-45 CE).[707] Other relatively early coin legends show spelling mistakes in the well-known formulae: thus, coins of Gotarzes II (40-51 CE) read ΑΡΣΑΝΟ rather than the expected ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ, some issues of his successor Vonones II read ΒΛΣΙΛΕΛΣ ΒΛΣΙΛΕΛΝ (*sic*), with a retrograde N) while certain legends of Vologeses II include a garbled spelling of the ubiquitous epithet *philhellene* as ΦΙΛΗΛΧΟΙΣ.[708] This suggests that 'bad Greek' may be regarded more as symptomatic of low-quality coinage or local minting rather than a decline in knowledge of Greek in favour of Parthian: many other issues struck under Vardanes I for example show perfect Greek legends, as do the coins of some of the last Parthian kings like Vologeses VI (c. 208-228 CE).[709]

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[705] Compare Sellwood 1971, 263, 279 and 297.

[706] Sellwood 1971, 174.

[707] Sellwood 1971, 174, 188, 193, 201.

[708] Sellwood 1971, 210, 212, 228.

[709] Sellwood 1971, 291.

What the Parthian coins show above all is a concomitant use of Parthian and Greek. The Greek alphabet is evidently kept as a language of prestige on coins: the fact that it is at times schematic and almost purely 'aesthetic' actually emphasises this. As such, it is probably a mistake to view the appearance of Parthian as incarnating an anti-Greek reaction. Sellwood has also suggested that it may have reflected political infighting within the tight circle of the Parthian pretenders to the throne.[710] Mainly, it was probably symptomatic of an administrative reality 'on the ground': as the different Parthian archives discussed below show, the Aramaic-derived Parthian script was a – the? – core script of administration, in some cases/areas used along-side Greek, in others not.[711] As affairs were being increasingly conducted in Parthian only, Greek 'froze' into a – quasi-aesthetic – language of prestige: it was maintained on coinage for this very reason, but the living, Parthian scribal tradition eventually began to spill over into the political and representational sphere.

The Parthian parchments of Avroman.

Other instances of the co-existence of Greek and Parthian in administration are attested. Three parchments were discovered together in a cave in the mountains of Persian Kurdistan and acquired by the British Museum in the early twentieth century.[712] Two are inscribed in Greek with one bearing an endorsement in Parthian script at the back, while the third is entirely written in Parthian script. The endorsement, although badly damaged, seems to contain a repetition of the main points developed in the Greek contract; in this regard, the document mirrors the articulation of the use of Elamite and Aramaic in some bilingual texts from the Achaemenid period. All three documents concern the sale of a vineyard, the same vineyard at least in the case of the two Greek documents. It was long assumed that the Greek documents were dated

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[710] Sellwood 1971, 220.

[711] In this respect, an interesting case is the hesitant Greek transcription of the name of Vonones. The first Parthian king of this name reigned at the very turn of the 1st century CE: his coin-legends show his name variously spelled as ΕΩΝΟΩΝΗΣ and ΟΝΩΝΕΣ before the standard transcription convention settles for the latter transcription, although ΟΝΟΝΕΣ occurs too; similarly, Gotarzes is alternately spelled ΓΩΤΑΡΖΕΣ and ΓΩΤΕΡΖΕΣ. Both the examples actually betray problems belonging to the adaptation of Aramaic-derived scripts to Iranian phonetics, with the oscillation between the short vowel 'a' and 'e' – unmarked in Parthian/Middle Persian script – and the ambiguity of the value of *waw*, which can both render the semi-vowel 'w' and the long vowel 'o': it is as if the scribes had been working from a *Parthian* spelling of the name and more or less successfully transliterated it into Greek.

[712] Minns 1915, Nyberg 1923.

to the Seleucid era – 225 and 291 of the Seleucid era – which would place them in 88/87 and 22/21 BCE respectively. The document in Parthian script bears the date *šnt 300*, although the numeral is extremely difficult to read. It is generally agreed that this dating formula refers to the Arsacid era: the parchment would thus date somewhat later than the two Greek ones, to 33 CE.[713] In a recent article, Andreas Luther convincingly argued that the dating formula of the two *Greek* documents ought to be seen as referring to the *Arsacid* era rather than the Seleucid one: this shifts forward the date of the two texts, to November 24 BCE and 43/44 CE respectively and reduces the time gap between all three manuscripts significantly.[714] Luther's emendation also makes sense with respect to the context of the find: all three documents are likely to be part of a coherent archive relating to a given vineyard. The three documents were described as "evidence of the change in the use of language for notarial proceedings" between the end of the 1st century BCE and the early 1st century CE, with the abandonment of Greek as an administrative language.[715] However, Luther's new dating complexifies the picture and suggests that Greek and Parthian were used concurrently in local administration in the Arsacid period. In this regard, it is particularly interesting to note that the parchment with the endorsement in Parthian script is the older of the two Greek-inscribed documents. For our purposes, the Parthian texts from Avroman most importantly confirm the use of the Parthian script in the context of local administration in the 1st century BCE – in conjunction with Greek – at a time when Greek was the dominant language on coins and in monumental commissions.

Palaeographically speaking, the Parthian script of the later Avroman parchment displays a regular, legible – if very difficult to decipher – cursive hand **[Fig. 5.18]**.[716] The words themselves are spaced out but the letters within them stick closely together and lean to the left with many cases of touching, but no ligatures. Their position in the word does not modify their shape apart from a few stylised finals elongated either towards the left or backwards, towards the right. A good example of this is the *alef* at the end of the word for 'month' in the first line: the head is more V-like than square, exhibiting the tendency of the second stroke to slant as in late Parthian monumental script (but not coins), while the lower horizontal stroke is stretched all the way to the beginning of the next work, ending in a stylised curved finish; it has thus

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[713] Nyberg 1923, 188-189; on the dating of the Greek parchments from Avroman, see most recently Luther 2018b, 161-169, as well as Huyse (forthcoming, b).

[714] Luther 2018b as well as Huyse (forthcoming, b).

[715] Wiesehöfer 2006.

[716] See Minns 1915, pl. III.

very much lost any resemblance to its Aramaic ancestor. Similarly, the *het* exhibits the characteristic Parthian 'zigzag' rather than the Aramaic square open at the bottom, while the *qof* has reached its monumental Parthian shape. The *yod* is heavily curved when in word-final position, with a rounded head like a comma, resembling its Middle Persian counterpart more than monumental Parthian and certainly more than Aramaic. Similarly, the *bet* is almost Middle Persian: it has lost its head entirely and is shaped more like a right angle, although the lower stroke is not as elongated as in Middle Persian, often making it look like *gimel*; it certainly does not have the reversed C-shape of Parthian inscriptions. On the other hand, the *shin* still very much resembles its Aramaic precursor and leans towards the left; similarly, the *mem* is still closer to the Aramaic form, with a long curving right leg. In this text the graphemes are well formed: the head of *resh* for example retains its concave shape, something which is completely lost in the Parthian endorsement from the same archive, which presents a much more cursive style. Nyberg notes concerning this text that the words are not separated from each other, rendering its decipherment particularly difficult; the graphemes also show a marked tendency to resemble each other.[717] While the *bet* still looks quite Aramaic – the grapheme retains its concave head – it is also possible to identify a distinctly Parthian *pe* – triangular-shaped – in the second line. What these documents show is that Parthian was essentially reaching its 'final' form – as we know it from the Parthian inscriptions of the Sasanian period – around the turn of the 1st century CE, albeit with some archaising graphemes; they also testify to the existence of a developed cursive style which presented marked simplifications and a lack of differentiation between certain grapheme groups as well as an absence of ligatures.

Now, it was not immediately clear to scholars who worked on these Parthian documents whether the text was meant to be read as Aramaic or Parthian. The Avroman parchments exhibit orthographical mistakes and suggest the beginning of a confusion between Aramaic *h* and *ḥ*, apparently used interchangeably, both in Iranian spellings and in Aramaic words.[718] This would suggest that certain letters did not represent a phonetic/spoken reality anymore. Other un-Aramaic features of this text that have been noted include 'iranisms' such as a peculiar use of the verb 'to eat' with the meaning 'to swear', recognised as being a calque of the Iranian

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[717] Nyberg 1923, 208-209.

[718] Henning 1958, 29; Skjærvø 1995, 290. The '*plene*' spelling of Parthian *hamē* 'always/together' is *ḥmy* in line 4, see Nyberg 1923, 202-204.

expression *sōgand xwardan*, 'to take an oath, to swear'.[719] The spelling of family terms with an apparently ungrammatical possessive suffix, characteristic, as we saw, from the Aśokan Aramaic inscriptions, occurs here too; because these spellings correspond to the later heterographic forms of these words, Henning deemed that the Avroman texts were written ideographically.[720] However, Skjærvø – like Gzella (see above) – argued that misspellings and iranisms were probably not enough to prove that a text is fully ideographic:[721] the transition from Aramaic to fully heterographic texts was gradual and the Avroman documents, which contain much more Aramaic than later Parthian texts, probably illustrate only a stage of that process.[722] Still, it is worth observing here that the text did not have to be "fully ideographic" (with the use of fixed 'frozen' forms and phonemic complements) to be *read* as Parthian by those who wrote it/handled it.

Most of the vocabulary in the Parthian document from Avroman have been explained as Aramaic forms, with only names of persons and places being recognisably Iranian although Nyberg has identified some 'phonetically spelled' conjunctions and adverbs like *kaδ* or *hamē* as well as possibly a verbal form, *ahē*, in the fourth line.[723] It is worth pointing out that the word *puhr* 'son' appears both in the Aramaic form BRY and also fully 'spelled out' when in the plural as *puhrān*.[724] Interestingly some names have been identified as possible compound forms, with an Aramaic element used heterographically.[725] Nyberg has also tentatively identified potential 'phonetic complements': thus the final *-t* at the end of the Aramaic form ZBN, the perfect stem of the verb 'to buy', would render Iranian *xrīt*.[726]

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[719] Skjærvø 1995, 290 but for a different interpretation of the passage see Nyberg 1923, 204-205. On the expression *sōgand xwardan* as meaning 'to swear', 'take an oath', see Schwartz 1989.

[720] Henning 1958, 29-30.

[721] Skjærvø 1995, 295.

[722] For a description of the gradual "erosion" of Aramaic over the Parthian period, see most recently Gzella 2021, 319-326.

[723] 3rd person singular of the verb 'to be', Nyberg 1923, 198-199.

[724] It is unsure whether the form *āpuhrān* is a compound form however: Nyberg prefers to view the initial *ā* as separate and rendering *apāk,* Nyberg 1923, 204.

[725] Nyberg 1923, 207; It must be said that based both on pre- and post-Parthian documents this is unusual.

[726] Nyberg 1923, 208; Henning 1958, 30; see also Skjærvø's slightly different interpretation of this form however, Skjærvø 1995, 299.

The Parthian ostraca of Nisa.

The first century BCE yielded another, much richer archive of Parthian documents. On the other side of the Caspian sea, in the Parthian capital of Nisa, a hoard of nearly three thousand potsherds inscribed in ink in Parthian script and recording transactions relating to vineyards and wine shipments was recovered; these documents are dated between 151/150 BCE and 13/12 BCE but with the vast majority belonging to the years between 80-50 BCE **[Fig. 5.19]**.[727] In arguing for an ideographic reading of the Nisa ostraca, Henning notes the apparent interchangeability between the Iranian, phonetic spelling *ḥštrp* and Aramaic *pḥt'* (already encountered in Achaemenid Aramaic documents) in set phrases like 'at the hands of the satrap'.[728] Examples of grammatically awkward phrases such as the use of masculine pronouns – in particular the demonstrative *znh*, which, as we saw 'froze' into an aramaeogram – with feminine nouns, is further suggestive of a fixed or heterographic use of some forms. Coxon similarly described the Parthian ostraca as 'ur-ideographic' texts,[729] highlighting after Henning the widespread use of absolute or unmarked Aramaic forms which do not seem to be 'integrated' in an Aramaic syntax.[730] Coxon also remarked after Diakonoff and Livshits that the phrase which systematically does display correct Aramaic syntax is the introductory formula which heads most ostraca, *bḥwth znh* "in this vessel", with the demonstrative following the noun: he describes it as behaving almost like a 'phrase ideogram', used as a whole in a stereotyped form.[731] It is worth noting that this formulaic construction would survive well after the Parthian period and introduce all Sasanian Middle Persian label inscriptions with 'this is the image of', 'this is the bowshot of', etc. As Coxon observes, there are other such examples illustrating the perennity of set formulae. In a later Parthian parchment discovered at Dura Europos and dating from the end of the Parthian period/early Sasanian period,[732] at a stage where the Parthian writing system is doubtlessly 'ideographic', Henning has noted that the long introductory greeting formula which makes up the first few lines of the text directly corresponds to the lengthy *politesses* which customarily open Aramaic missives – including a

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[727] Henning 1958, 27-28; Diakonoff and Livshits 1976-1979; Bader 1996; Livshits and Pilipko 2004; (Weber in) Hackl, Jacobs and Weber 2010, II, 492-561; Huyse (forthcoming, b).

[728] Henning 1958, 27.

[729] Coxon 1973.

[730] See similarly Bader 1996, esp. 252-253 who describes the Iranian syntax and flections of the inscriptions on the ostraca.

[731] Coxon 1973, 186-187.

[732] This document, like other later Parthian inscriptions, will be further discussed in the following chapter.

letter of Aršāma – in the Achaemenid period.[733] Thus, whereas in the rest of the Dura-Europos document the verbs bear phonetic complements, they are devoid of it within the greeting formula 'block', which ends up behaving very much like a sentence-ideograph. Now, Coxon proposes to explain the survival of archaising orthography in certain terms – like the preposition QDM – to their presence within such fixed address formulae.[734] In line with this, would it not be possible to understand the early 'freezing' of family terms such as Son, Mother, Brother in the possessive by their constant use in this form in Aramaic greeting formulae?[735] It is worth noting after Gzella that the addition of a first-person singular suffix to certain terms to form a particular title[736] – a sort of 'hypocoristic' form perhaps – is known in other languages: French Monsieur, Madame, English Milady and so on. Thus, My Brother/Sister/Mother would become 'frozen' under forms they typically appeared in address formulae.[737]

The confusion between the *h* and *ḥ*, characteristic of the Avroman texts, is not found at Nisa. This would seem to point to a more conservative scribal tradition: the Nisa and Avroman texts have been taken to illustrate two stages of the evolution of Parthian, with the latter exhibiting a 'later', more confirmed stage of the heterographic writing system.[738] Still, the Parthian ostraca are relatively close in date to the Avroman parchments, the later, Parthian text from Avroman being only a few decades later than the last ostraca from Nisa. We may also remark, however, that the Nisa ostraca were produced in the Parthian capital, which probably concentrated the empire's best-trained scribes, while the Avroman texts were found in a peripheral region of the former Parthian empire and concern more local affairs. The Parthian ostraca are also extremely concise, technical and repetitive texts which could further contribute to their relatively 'uncorrupted' use of Aramaic and the tendency towards historical spellings.

In terms of palaeography, the Nisa ostraca **[Fig. 5.19]** and the Parthian parchment from Avroman **[Fig. 5.18]** are essentially identical, which in itself is remarkable given the many different hands involved, the fact that the documents came from different regions and contexts and that they are not exactly contemporaneous. As such, they certainly testify to a centralised and strongly homogenising administration and scribal tradition. The ostraca perhaps display a slightly more cursive style, with several graphemes presenting a tendency to look alike or

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[733] Henning 1954; Coxon 1973, 198-199.

[734] Coxon 1973, 199.

[735] On this use of the possessive in Achaemenid Aramaic epistolary conventions, see Folmer 2017, 420, 423.

[736] Gzella 2008, 113.

[737] But not necessarily point to heterographic usage as such.

[738] Henning 1958, 28.

become simplified and less angular, which is unsurprising considering the highly repetitive and formulaic nature of these texts and the sheer volume they were produced in. Still, the graphemes in the ostraca remain more legible than the Parthian endorsement on the back of the older of the two Greek documents from Avroman, confirming that the tendency towards cursive writing and simplification is in this case a matter of style rather than diachronic evolution. Remarkable stylistic features shared by the Nisa ostraca and the Parthian parchment from Avroman include the elongation of certain graphemes, typically finals, either towards the bottom – sometimes crossing several lines of script – or backwards towards the right occasionally in an elegant, laced flourish. Apart from some graphemes like the *bet* – which like at Avroman retains its concave head – or *shin* that remain close to their Aramaic prototypes, most of the letters in the ostraca present their 'final' shape: the triangular *pe*, V-like *alef*, long, hooked *lamed*, zigzag *ḥet*, open *qof* or again the short, curving right leg of the *mem* are all firmly Parthian and remain stable all the way to the Sasanian period.

The curious case of Armazi.

In discussing the language and palaeography of the earliest Parthian inscriptions, it is worth considering the peculiar case of the Armazi bilingual Greek and Aramaic (Parthian?) inscription, discovered in a tomb in modern day Georgia **[Fig. 5.20]**. The version in Aramaic script, engraved beneath the Greek text, has crystallised debates concerning the language it represents: a form of corrupt Aramaic or an ideographic text in Middle Iranian.[739] Nyberg and Frye respectively saw it as representing Parthian and Middle Persian – the latter retracting his initial proposition that the inscription was in a form of Old Georgian – while Henning, who notes that the word for king appears as MLK rather than MLK' – which is the spelling of this heterogram in Middle Persian and Parthian – believed it is neither and represents another Iranian idiom.[740] That the text is at least heavily iranised is suggested by the word order, which follows Middle Iranian syntax; it even presents the use of the enclitic 3rd person singular pronoun -*š*.[741] Other arguments include the erroneous (and by now familiar) use of the oblique case for family terms such as 'daughter' *brty* when the latter is the subject of the sentence. Similarly, Metzger points to the fact that the feminine gender of the subject, the deceased

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[739] On Aramazic, see Rapp 2014; Shapira 1999; for a recent overview of Aramaic inscriptional material from Georgia see Preud'homme 2022.

[740] For a history of research concerning this inscription, see Metzger 1956, 20-21.

[741] Metzger 1956, 20.

Serapit whom the inscription commemorates, is entirely ignored in the passage which describes her beauty and laments her untimely death.

Palaeographically, the Armazi inscription is extremely interesting. Based on the Roman names it records and certain aspects of the terminology, in particular the titles of dignitaries, editors have dated this inscription to the first half of the 2nd century CE.[742] On the one hand it exhibits archaising forms of Aramaic graphemes, such as the *taw* which present a very short right leg, a *shin* leaning heavily towards the left and a *ṭet* which looks exactly like that in Imperial Aramaic; the letters are angular and stylised with several 'ticks' embellishing the end of the strokes, which is probably to be attributed to the monumental, formal context and the engraver's creativity. On the other, the *resh* displays the (uncrossed) 'seven' shape of monumental and numismatic Parthian and does not bear the curved head of the older Aramaic form, while the *yod* is exactly the same short, slightly wavy, line as Parthian. Other graphemes are altogether unusual, like the *bet* which is often elongated far towards the left, reminiscent of the Middle Persian shape, while the *lamed* is extremely elongated and left-leaning, like an inverted Middle Persian *bet*. Curiously, the *pe* is drawn in two parts/strokes, with a vertical downward line capped by an unconnected curve. The *samekh* has a peculiar wavy shape unrecorded in Naveh's study of the evolution of the Aramaic script and unlike either Parthian or Middle Persian monumental or cursive examples.[743]

III. The Aramaic-derived scripts of the Arsacid period.

A mosaic of different Aramaic-derived scripts in the Arsacid period.

The difficulty of identifying the language of the Armazi inscription and explaining the local, innovative script which it displays is illustrative of the study of a number of inscriptions in Aramaic-derived alphabets from the Arsacid period.[744] Indeed, the Parthian script was part of a mosaic of scripts that emerged in this turning-point period (2nd century BCE - 1st century CE) in the former Achaemenid territories: these recorded both non-Aramaic languages (like Middle Iranian but possibly also Neo-Elamite) as well as different Aramaic dialects. Gzella has highlighted the diversity of Aramaic vernaculars that crystallised into different branches after the fall of the Achaemenid empire and which were progressively 'promoted' to writing in

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[742] Metzger 1956, 25; see also Gzella 2021, 325-326.

[743] Metzger 1956, 20, pl. XV.

[744] For an overview of the Aramaic inscriptional material at Hatra and Palmyra, see also Huyse (forthcoming, b).

variant scripts in this period.[745] Thus, Hatra, in modern day Syria, has yielded over 600 inscriptions dating from the second half of the 1st century BCE to the early 3rd century CE; Gzella has identified the language they record as an 'Eastern Mesopotamian Aramaic'.[746] In terms of palaeography, a look at an inscription such as that recently published by Adil Hamil al-Jadir confirms a direct relationship with Imperial Aramaic **[Fig. 5.21]**.[747] It presents some innovations, such as the perfectly triangular-shaped *shin*, a very Parthian looking *bet* in one instance and more Middle-Persian one in another as well as a distinctly Parthian *aleph* and *het*.[748] Another Aramaic dialect written in its own script was Palmyrene, known from a series of inscriptions – both rock-cut and ink – ranging from the very end of the 1st century BCE to the 7th century AD **[Fig. 5.22]**. Linguistically speaking, Gzella has described Palmyrene as much more conservative than Eastern Aramaic – much closer to Official Aramaic.[749] It also presents an important number of Greek loanwords, however, and many Palmyrene inscriptions are bilingual Palmyrene-Greek:[750] historically, the oasis and trading city of Palmyra was under Seleucid control, which can account for the widespread use of Greek. As Gzella notes, the 'epigraphic habit' at Palmyra – and Hatra – also betrays important Hellenistic influences, with the "boom" of private funerary and dedicatory inscriptions, unattested beforehand. Chabot has identified three styles of Palmyrene script, a monumental, a cursive and an intermediary one.[751] In rock-cut inscriptions, both the monumental and the semi-monumental are attested, sometimes together, while the cursive hand is recorded in different media, in vertical ink inscriptions traced with a brush or reed on stucco. In contrast to cursive Parthian, the vertical ink inscriptions of Palmyra are heavily ligatured and resemble the oldest forms of cursive Syriac. In monumental Palmyrene, however, the letters are perfectly detached and there is a marked effort to calibrate the graphemes so that they are perfectly proportionate to one another, very much like Greek capitals **[Fig. 5.22]**; in the semi-cursive style the letters are markedly

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[745] Gzella 2008, 108, 127 and most recently Gzella 2021, 271-319.

[746] Gzella 2008, 109-110.

[747] Hamil al-Jadir 2006, Fig. 1 and 2; see further Gzella 2021, 271-319.

[748] After Rosenthal (Rosenthal 1978, 84) Gzella notes that the local script at Hatra may illustrate a transitional stage of the evolution from Official Aramaic to Middle Iranian scripts. Considering that most of the Parthian material is older than the inscriptions from Hatra this seems to be unlikely.

[749] Gzella 2008, 109.

[750] Even the extremely important fiscal law of Palmyra which detailed all the taxes that were to be paid on an impressive number of different goods was bilingual Palmyrene-Greek.

[751] Chabot 1922, 11-12.

less proportioned and present rare instances of ligatures. The 'conservative' nature of the Palmyrene dialect is reflected in the palaeography of its monumental script, which presents fewer innovations than the local script of Hatra: such letters as the *bet* and *kaf*, carefully made distinguishable with the more angular shape of the former, have retained their curved heads, quite lost in Parthian as well as at Hatra (and certainly at Armazi). On the other hand, the *qof* and *ṣade* have moved on from Imperial Aramaic and resemble the evolution that these graphemes underwent in Parthian. Similarly, the *'ayin* bears the addition of the leg to the right of the crescent shape as in Parthian, although this grapheme becomes much more angular in that script. In general, the monumental Palmyrene letters are markedly ornate and tend to emphasise the curves and intersections of the strokes that make up the graphemes in a deliberate flourish, where other scripts have on the contrary tended to reduce or do away with complicated junctures completely. That this was a deliberately elegant graphic register is indicated by the more cursive hand of the ink inscriptions which show much more angular and simplified strokes.

The extraordinarily wealthy trading city of Palmyra may have exercised some influence on the epigraphic conventions of its neighbours. Thus, Metzger identified in the Armazi inscription a term that frequently recurs in Palmyrene funerary inscriptions to express woe *ḥbl* 'alas!'.[752] Furthermore, the dedicatory formula which begins a great majority of Palmyrene inscriptions and which follows the structure 'this image is the one of' is a fixed expression that pervades label inscriptions in both Arsacid and Sasanian Iran.[753]

The Elymaean script(s).

A much more obscure script derived from Imperial Aramaic that emerged in this period in a former central province of the Achaemenid empire is Elymaic. It is much harder to determine what language was spoken at Elymais – whether it was a variety of vernacular Aramaic, an Iranian dialect or a late form of Elamite – and the nature of the language represented in the monumental inscriptions and coin legends of this small client kingdom of the Parthians is debated.[754] The territory of Elymais roughly corresponded to Khūzestān – Achaemenid Susiana

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[752] Metzger 1956, 24; Coxon 1973, 196.

[753] Gzella 2008, 116.

[754] For a recent overview of "Elymaic and Arsacid Aramaic", see Huyse (forthcoming, b).

– and its inhabitants are thought to have been descendants of the Elamites.[755] Sporadic mentions in Classical sources record that contingents of Elymaeans and particularly Elymaean archers joined the rebellion of the Seleucid satrap of Media Molon in 220/219 BCE, fought in Antiochus III's army in 190 BCE and in 140 BCE joined Demetrius II's failed attempt at regaining Mesopotamia from the Parthians, which led to the invasion of Elymais by Mithradates I – to what extent this indicates that Elymais was subject to either the Seleucids or the Parthians is difficult to decide; most scholars agree that Elymais was a semi-independent vassal kingdom of the Parthian empire that enjoyed some spells of independence. Thus, the fact that Elymaean coins were minted at Susa in the second half of the 2nd century BCE under Kamnaskires I and then again under Kamnaskires II in 82/81 BCE has been taken as evidence that the Elymaean kings were able to take control of this major city at least at some points in their history.[756] Furthermore, Le Rider has remarked that no Parthian coins were minted at Susa after 45 CE whereas numerous bronze drachms of Elymaean kings dated from 75 CE onwards were found in that city, again suggesting Elymaean management of the mint there.[757] The possibility remains that the vassal Elymaean kings were granted the right to mint their own coins by their Parthian overlords; as we shall see, deciding to what extent a local (vassal) king was independent because he minted his own coinage is a problem that pervades the study of the coins issued by the local kings of Persis. Nevertheless, for our purposes, it is particularly interesting to note that it is from this period onwards (second half of the 1st century CE) that legends in the Elymaean variant of the Aramaic script make their appearance on coins, to the gradual detriment of Greek. This change seems to have gone had in hand with the disappearance of the throne name Kamnaskires, which carried a notable Elymaean pedigree, to recognisably Parthian royal names.

The first Elymaean coins are inscribed in Greek and bear the legend ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΚΑΜΝΑΣΚΙΡΟΥ, following Seleucid and Parthian precedent in presenting the king's name in the genitive **[Fig. 5.23]**.[758] The Greek legends soon become corrupt, however. Orodes I's coins read ΥΡΩΔΗΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ (*sic*): beyond the erroneous spelling ΒΑΣΙLΕΥΣ (*sic*), it is also

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[755] On the history of Elymais, see Hansman 1998 and Frye 1984, 273-275; on the language of Elymais, see the recent article by van Bladel 2021.

[756] Hansman 1998; on Elymaean coins and mints see Hansman 1990 and Hill 1922, 245-288; for a catalogue of Elymaean coinage, see most recently van't Haaff 2007.

[757] Le Rider 1965, 426-428.

[758] Hansman 1990, 1; Hill 1922, 245-247.

interesting to note the use of upsilon for the initial short vowel O.[759] The Elymaean legends first appear under Orodes I's successor, Orodes II, in the second half of the 1st century: these read *wrwd mlk'*, sometimes augmented with the title/name *kmns*(?)*kyr*; as in Parthian coin legends the *mem* takes the shape of a cross, so that Hill's reading *kabnah*(*z*)*kir* for coin n. 62 can be discarded.[760] Curiously, the legends of the coins of Orodes II's successor, Phraates I, minted at the turn of the 2nd century CE, present, alongside issues in Elymaean script, a return to Greek – but these are written in retrograde: not only are the words spelled backwards but the letters themselves are reversed, as if the engravers had adapted the Greek alphabet to write it from left to right like Semitic scripts.[761] This marks the end of the use of Greek on Elymaean coinage. Now, the Elymaean legends are particularly interesting in that they display two types of Elymaean, Aramaic-derived scripts. François-Maurice Allotte de la Fuÿe who first studied them, observed that the distribution of the two variant alphabets seemed to correspond to the size – the denomination – of the coins, although it is not absolutely systematic. Thus, one variant appears more frequently on the (copper) 'drachms' and 'tetradrachms' and the other on the smaller copper denominations.[762] Allotte de la Fuÿe's initial hypothesis for this difference in script was that it was due to local minting conditions/traditions: the coins with the first type of script were struck in a different mint from those bearing the second script-style. This is somewhat supported by Hansman's more recent study of the mint marks on Elymaean coinage. He identifies two mints on the issues, the cosmopolitan city of Susa and possibly (the more provincial town of) Seleucia-on-the-Hedyphon: the early Greek-inscribed coins and most of the drachms were minted at Susa.[763] Furthermore, the variety of Elymaean script that we meet in the legends of the larger denominations corresponds to the alphabet used in the rock inscriptions at Tang-e Sarvak and Tang-e Butān (Shīmbār), suggesting the existence of a 'monumental' or inscriptional Elymaean script and a more (cursive/local?) one.

At Tang-e Sarvak, the inscriptions are accompanied by reliefs in thirteen panels which apparently show the investiture of a king by a divine being.[764] In many aspects, the sculptures are reminiscent of Parthian art, such as the presence of the figure of Herakles holding a club –

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[759] Hill 1922, 253.

[760] Hill 1922, 266.

[761] Of course, retrograde writing exists in Greece also, typically in alternating lines of *boustrophedon*, but is completely absent from Seleucid or Parthian coinage or monumental inscriptions.

[762] Allotte de la Fuÿe 1905, 41-42.

[763] Hansman 1990, 9.

[764] On the rock-reliefs of Tang-e Sravak, see Henning 1952a; Haerinck 2005; Kawami 2013.

in hellenising nudity – as well as the strict frontality of most of the figures. Other features seem to herald Sasanian iconography, such as the two bunches of hair on either side of the king's head as well as the ring of investiture; the fight on horseback showing the king riding a richly caparisoned horse, his quiver full of arrows at his side; the royal hunt scene, and the motif of the king slaying the lion, also known from Achaemenid art.[765] At Shīmbār, in the gorge known as Tang-e Butān or Gorge of the Idols, the reliefs are carved in a single panel separated into four blocks and represent variations of the same scene: to the left a nude figure with a club, again probably representing Herakles and to the right a figure in Iranian dress.[766] Between them in the first group is an altar; in the second group the figure in Iranian dress appears to be pounding something with a pestle in a long conical mortar, suggestive of the *haoma* ceremony. At the very least, these details seem to place the cult scene in an Iranian context.[767]

Henning was the first to attempt a decipherment of the inscriptions at Tang-e Sarvak and to relate their script to that of the Elymaean coin-legends **[Fig. 5.24]**.[768] He was able to identify the formula "this is the image of" and noted the proper spelling of Aramaic *br* 'son' (as opposed to *bry*).[769] This correct use of Aramaic is also characteristic of the larger Elymaean coinage, which shares with the inscriptions the first variant of Elymaean script. By contrast, the smaller denominations of Elymaean coinage, inscribed in the second variant of Elymaean script, present the faulty spelling *bry*. This led Henning to posit that the legends of the larger denominations, like the monumental inscriptions from Tang-e Sarvak, were written in 'pure Aramaic', while the smaller coins were written heterographically: "Now, as the tetradrachm shows pure Aramaic, while the cited coins with legends in faulty Aramaic belong to the 'small copper' class it is tempting to assume that the difference in language goes parallel with the difference in script".[770] The language of the smaller Elymaean coppers would be either an Iranian dialect or a surviving form of Elamite. After Henning's decipherment of the Elymaean script, Bivar and Shaked worked on the inscriptions at Tang-e Butān and showed that these provided the names and titles of the portrayed Elymaean king/dignitaries; they did not however conclude as to the nature of the language recorded.[771]

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[765] Henning 1952a, 155-163; Kawami 2013, 757-761.

[766] Bivar and Shaked 1964; Kawami 2013, 763-764.

[767] Bivar and Shaked 1964, 268-271.

[768] Henning 1952a, 166.

[769] Henning 1952a, 169-171.

[770] Henning 1952a, 166.

[771] Bivar and Shaked 1964, 271-279.

Gzella, who improved Henning's as well as Bivar and Shaked's readings in a recent article, deems the dialect recorded in the Elymaean inscriptions at Tang-e Sarvak and Tang-e Butān (Shīmbār) to be one of the more conservative examples of Aramaic in the Arsacid period.[772] It presents more traditional verbal forms and orthography: for instance, the spelling *z* for the interdental *ḍ* is maintained whereas even Palmyrene which, as we have seen, was one of the more conservative Arsacid Aramaic dialects, notes it *d*.[773] Gzella does highlight certain innovations that contrast with the 'extremely traditional garb of morphology', such as the use of *yod* for short e and *waw* for short o as well as aleph for word-medial long *ā*, a practice that is attested, as we have seen, in Achaemenid Aramaic in the transcription of Old Persian loanwords but not in a systematic way:[774] this advanced vowel letter system may point to an Iranian (Parthian) or Greek influence (see below). For Gzella, the spelling BRY in the legends of the lower denominations cannot alone point to a heterographic spelling, although he concedes that there is no evidence that an Aramaic dialect was spoken in Elymais. He concludes that a conservative, 'moribund' form of Official Aramaic at Elymais must have been used at least as a royal language for representative purposes in official commissions.[775]

In his recent and comprehensive study of the Mandaic script, Häberl describes the Elymaean script as a "historical curiosity" and an "evolutionary dead end".[776] He argues that features of the Elymaean alphabet point to a strong influence of the Parthian chancery script and even suggests that Elymaean may have derived from the latter. He highlights the fact that the appearance of coin-legends in Elymaean script corresponds to the appearance of the Parthian script on Arsacid coinage (under Vologeses I).[777] He also observes that the Elymaean legends first occur on the coins of Elymaean kings who have Parthian names (Orodes and Phraates): the possibility that these rulers were a minor branch of the Arsacid family had already been raised – and been rejected – by Allotte de la Fuÿe.[778] It is worth noting, however, that the king who first had Elymaean legends engraved on his issues, Orodes II, also used the title Kamnaskires Orodes: the name Kamnaskires, which was evidently used as a dynastic title here, at the very least confirms his (claim to a) direct connection with the earlier line of

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[772] Gzella 2008, 112.

[773] Gzella 2008, 117.

[774] Gzella 2008, 112.

[775] Gzella 2008, 121, 127.

[776] Häberl 2006, 54-55; on the Mandaic script, see also Burtea 2008.

[777] Häberl 2006, 55.

[778] Häberl 2006, 55, n.10; Allotte de la Fuÿe 1905, 42-44.

Elymaean kings. Häberl argues that the majority of Elymaean graphemes are either identical to their Parthian counterparts – namely *w*, *z*, *ḥ*, *l* and *r* – or are developments of Parthian letters that follow the cursive trend of other scripts from the region/period.[779] This observation is slightly misleading in that the Parthian *waw*, *zain*, *lamed* and *resh* – to which we could also add *kaf* – present a clear resemblance to their Aramaic precursors so that it is hard to decide whether the Elymaean shapes derived from one or the other. Furthermore, some Elymaean graphemes appear to descend directly from Aramaic without passing through a Parthian 'stage'. Thus, the *bet* of Elymaean monumental inscriptions is clearly a conservative Aramaic *bet* to which a 'diacritic' – a stroke; this makes the grapheme look like a Z – was appended to the main vertical line to distinguish it from other Aramaic graphemes like *dalet* and *resh*, which tended to resemble it in cursive writing **[Fig. 5.24]**; as such, it evolves in the opposite direction to the Parthian grapheme, which curved in towards the left. Similarly, the Elymaean *pe* is close to its Aramaic prototype, only presenting a curved continuation of the lower stroke, quite distinct from the triangle-shaped Parthian *pe*. Perhaps Häberl's study also does not distinguish sufficiently between the two variant Elymaean scripts: thus, the script on the drachm (n. 65) of Kamnaskires Orodes is indeed essentially Parthian, even monumental Parthian – with the distinctive reversed C-shape of the *bet*, the open-topped square of the *alef* etc. – whereas the legends of his tetradrachms present characteristic Elymaean features.[780] Curiously, the Elymaean *dalet* of coins (and not inscriptions) underwent exactly the same evolution – a diacritic was appended at the bottom, just as in the Parthian *dalet* – as the Elymaean *bet* of inscriptions so that the Elymaean *bet* of monumental inscriptions and the Elymaean *dalet* of coins are identical.[781] The Elymaean *dalet* of inscriptions has a wavy lower stroke at times making it look like a reverse three, analogous to the Middle Persian shape. I would also disagree with Häberl that the Elyamain *ṭet* is a ligatured version of the Parthian two-stroke grapheme:[782] it looks rather like an angular Aramaic *ṭet* and may in fact help to explain the strange Parthian evolution towards a two-stroke composition. More generally, Häberl himself notes that Elymaean, like Mandaic, Characenean and Middle Persian, is much more cursive and rounded than Parthian and Aramaic, devoid of most of the sharp angles characteristic of these two scripts

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[779] Häberl 2006, 58.

[780] Compare Hill 1922, 267 and 261 with 260 and 266.

[781] Compare Bivar and Shaked 1964, 270 and Hill 1922, 267. There is some crossover in these shapes however.

[782] Häberl 2006, 56.

and with a marked tendency towards ligatures:[783] as we have seen, even on ostraca and parchments Parthian letters remain unconnected. Nevertheless, some Elymaean graphemes do seem to be cursive evolutions of Parthian precursors: the very strange Elymaean *alef* is probably, as Häberl argues, the Parthian square *alef* with a ligature to the left. We might also add to Häberl's study that the *mem*, which takes the form of a simple cross, is exactly like the Parthian *mem* of the Arsacid coin legends, suggesting a direct influence of Parthian numismatics. The inscriptional Elymaean *nun* is a Parthian *nun* but with an additional stroke at the top, probably to differentiate it from the *lamed* which took on a very similar shape, curving in towards the left at the bottom. It is also interesting to note that the Elymaean *taw* has taken the peculiar and distinctive shape of the monumental Parthian *he*, although the simpler shape of the *taw* on Elymaean coins as well as at Tang-e Sarvak does give an idea of how this Elymaean grapheme evolved from its Aramaic ancestor.

The Characenean script.

For Häberl, the Parthian chancery script similarly either heavily influenced or was the direct parent of the Characenean script.[784] This local Aramaic-derived alphabet is documented in a very limited corpus of coins from the region of Characene or Mesene in southernmost Mesopotamia, west of Elymais. Like Elymais, Characene was a semi-independent vassal kingdom caught in the wars between the Seleucids and Parthians, which allowed it to enjoy spells of independence.[785] Similarly to Elymaean coinage, early Characenean issues – dating from the second half of the 2nd century BCE – were struck in Greek, on the model of Seleucid coinage and dated to the Seleucid era; however, there are no examples of retrograde Greek script as at Elymais, nor are there any spelling mistakes.[786] The first Characenean coin legends engraved in a local variant of Official Aramaic make their appearance from the second half of the 2nd century CE onwards, about a century after the appearance of legends in Aramaic-derived scripts on Parthian and Elymaean issues. Some of the Characenean graphemes are, however, remarkably conservative. Thus, the *he* is extremely close to its Aramaic prototype – in fact, Characenean is the most conservative of this whole series of alphabets for this grapheme **[Fig.**

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[783] Häberl 2006, 58.

[784] Häberl 2006, 53-55.

[785] Frye 1984, 275-278; Hansman 1998; for a recent, comprehensive history of Characene, see Schuol 2000.

[786] Hill 1922, 289-309.

5.25].[787] Similarly, the *mem*, although somewhat simplified is recognisably Aramaic or at the very least monumental/archaising Parthian. Three Characenean graphemes are indistinguishable from each other, the *bet*, *kaf* and *resh*: they have all become reversed C-shapes, analogous to monumental Parthian *bet* albeit a little more angular. Interestingly, these same three letters in late cursive Official Aramaic were also difficult to distinguish – often taking the simplified shape of a 7 – suggesting that the Characenean graphemes evolved uniformly from the cursive Aramaic forms; as mentioned, only the *bet* followed that evolution in Parthian, the *kaf* and *resh* taking a different route. Similarly, the Characenean *shin*, which has become a sort of horizontal eight, is probably the cursive Aramaic/early Parthian *shin* – the later Parthian *shin* is much more upright – with two ligatures at the top. The Charcenean *ṣade* and *alef*, which both become quite rounded – the *alef* is a perfect circle – are on the other hand more clearly ligatured versions of cursive Parthian counterparts.

The Mandaic script.

Before Häberl's study, it was thought that the much later Mandaic script derived from other scripts recording Aramaic dialects such as Elymaean, Palmyrene or Nabatean, with which it shares several features.[788] However, Häberl points to the fact that Mandaic uses the Aramaic *matres lectionis* as vowels in a fully developed vowel letter system which is not the case for other scripts representing Aramaic dialects – where, as we have seen, only cases of *plene* writing can be observed – strongly suggesting the influence of Parthian.[789] By contrast to Mandaic, Elymaean and Characenean present a much more 'etymologising' orthography. The early Mandaic material – which mainly consists in incantation bowls belonging to the 7th century, although some earlier inscribed amulets are also known – is quite a lot later than Parthian and other Arsacid Aramaic-derived scripts, making it difficult to identify when the script arose.[790] Nevertheless, it is possible to recognise Parthian graphemes as the precursors of most Mandaic letters, although because of their tendency to be ligatured this is not always immediately evident **[Fig. 5.25]**. The *alef* for instance is – as in Characenean – a circle, in which we may recognise the Parthian two-stemmed *alef* with a ligature at the top; the same can be said for the *samekh* and perhaps the *he*, this time with ligatures towards the bottom.

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[787] See Häberl 2006, Fig. 1 and compare Naveh 1970, 26.

[788] Häberl 2006, 54.

[789] Häberl 2006, 60-61.

[790] Häberl 2006, 53-54.

Similarly, the *shin*, which, as in Characenean, becomes a horizontal 8-shape, appears to be a heavily ligatured Aramaic/early Parthian *shin*. The *mem* is quite conservative resembling both the Aramaic and Parthian – and, again, Characenean – shapes, while the *taw* is closer to the Parthian – and Elymaean – box-shape. On the other hand, the *bet* of inscriptional Mandaic remains closer to the Aramaic original and the same could be said for the *dalet* which retains the concave head of the Aramaic prototype. The *pe* has followed a trajectory much closer to that of Middle Persian, becoming rounded (like a whorl), rather than triangular as in Parthian.

The Aramaic-derived scripts from the Arsacid period: preliminary conclusions.

The case of Mandaic apart, as this comparative overview shows, it is often hard to decide whether the local alphabets that emerged in the Arsacid period derived from Aramaic or from Parthian, since these two scripts themselves have a direct genealogical relationship: there is much overlap between late cursive Aramaic and early cursive Parthian, so that the exact prototype that inspired a given grapheme in a local script is not easy to identify. Parthian certainly exerted a strong influence. The very fact that the Elymaean script appeared on coins in the same decades as the Parthian script began to be used on Arsacid issues, as well as the very Parthian-looking graphemes of some of the earlier Elymaean larger denominations, is one illustration of this influence. Similarly, the direct borrowing of certain graphemes particular to Parthian numismatics, such as the cross-shaped *mem* in Elymaean monumental inscriptions and coins, suggests that the Parthian coins that circulated were a direct source of inspiration. Other Parthian-inspired scribal features include devices used to differentiate graphemes that had become too similar, like the 'tick' appended to the Elymaean *bet*, as well as the more systematic recourse to Aramaic *matres lectionis* to note vowels. On the other hand, the more conservative shapes maintained in local scripts, and the existence of cursive shapes that appear to have evolved from Aramaic prototypes without following the same trajectory as Parthian counterparts, suggest that these local chanceries were direct heirs of the Achaemenid Aramaic scribal tradition. In the same way that linguists speak of a dialect continuum, we may perhaps posit a sort of 'epigraphic continuum' in the former Achaemenid satrapies with more or less related scripts stemming from a common origin and presenting borrowings and analogous conventions alongside peculiar local innovations.

What this mosaic of scripts does illustrate is the rather sudden disappearance of the centralised, normalising influence of the monolithic Aramaic scribal tradition. The appearance of Greek as an important language of administration as well as the new language of prestige

for representational purposes certainly contributed to the fragmentation of this many centuries-old Aramaic scribal tradition. Greek itself, however, was uniformly abandoned as a language of administration in the course of the 1st century CE, with local mints showing a definite loss of command of Greek in the last stages of this process as well as some peculiar uses of the alphabet; Greek nevertheless did remain a language of prestige in the royal sphere at the level of empire until the end of the Parthian period, and even beyond.

Coins from Persis.

It is against this background that the emergence of the Middle Persian script in the former Achaemenid heartland of Persis ought to be understood. A series of silver coins found in excavations at key dynastic sites in Fārs – and on the markets of Shiraz – have been ascribed, based on the location of the finds, on iconography and on the legends, to a series of kings of Persis who reigned in that province as semi-independent rulers under the Seleucids and Parthians.[791] Because not a single example of this coin type was found in the many thousands of coins excavated at Susa, the coinage of Persis is believed to have been issued locally and primarily intended for local circulation.[792] As with other hoards, the first difficulty has been to assign a date for the beginning of the series and to understand the articulation between the issues. Because the Persepolis hoard contains only one issue of Seleukos I with many coins from Persis, it was suggested that the 'kings of Persis' began minting their coins immediately following the reign of Seleukos I, in the first quarter of the 3rd century BCE.[793] Methodologically, dating a hoard based on the presence or absence of single issues is exceedingly problematic; beyond the fact that the coin hoards are chance finds, Wiesehöfer has observed that certain coins, typically of important denominations, can remain in circulation/be kept for long periods of time.[794] Followed by other scholars, Wiesehöfer has therefore ventured a later date for the beginning of the Persis coinage, placing it at the turn of the second century BCE. The argument for this later dating is based on the principle that the kings of Persis must have enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy to have been entitled to strike their own coinage, and only the crumbling Seleucid rule at the end of the reign of Antiochos III could have

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[791] Hill 1922, 195-244; Alram 1986, 162-186; Wiesehöfer 1994, 91-96, 103-115; de Jong 2003; Callieri 2007, 118-132.

[792] Frye 1984, 159; Wiesehöfer 1994, 118-119.

[793] Hill 1922, clx-clxi, clxx; Frye 1984, 158-162; Wiesehöfer 1994, 115-116.

[794] Wiesehöfer 1994, 120; on this problem see also Frye 1984, 159.

provided this window of opportunity.[795] The independence of the province of Persis, which had enjoyed a special status under the Achaemenids – it was exempt from tax – as well as a considerable autonomy, is more difficult to assess for the Seleucid and Parthian periods. Furthermore, the degree to which local kings had to be independent from their overlords to mint their own coinage is a thorny issue, already touched upon above with the case of Elymais.

The Persepolis hoard was found in the ruins of the so-called 'frataraka' temple.[796] Just about 300 metres northwest of the Persepolis Terrace is a building that Herzfeld excavated in the early twentieth century and that was named the 'frataraka' temple precisely because the Aramaic legends on the first series of coins from the hoard identify the rulers who issued them as *fratarakā*. The site brought to light a number of re-used architectural elements from the Persepolis terrace, namely column-bases but also inscribed windowpanes as well as ritual utensils made of the green stone typical of the mortar and pestles described above. Among the finds were also five votive inscriptions in Greek bearing the names ΔΙΟΣ ΜΕΓΙΣΤΟΥ, ΑΘΗΝΑΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΙΑΣ, ΑΠΟΛΛΟ, ΑΡΤΕΜΙΔΟΣ and ΗΛΙΟΥ.[797] Based on paleography the inscriptions have been ascribed to the reign of Alexander or just after, when the province was governed by Peukestas, a general of Alexander appointed as satrap of Persis.[798] Either way, the inscriptions are a rare testimony to the use of Greek in the heartland of the Achaemenid empire in the period following its fall.[799] The excavations at the 'frataraka' temple also revealed a pair of reliefs depicting a male and female figure respectively and which probably formed the jambs of a stone window. The figures raise their hands, and in the case of the male figure also seem to hold a bundle of barsom: this has led them to be variously identified as a *fratarakā* king and queen, Mazdean priests or again gods (Anahita for the female figure).[800] Based on

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[795] Wiesehöfer 1994, 119-122.

[796] On the 'frataraka temple', see Wieshöfer 1994, 91-93; Callieri 2007, 51-68 and 144-145.

[797] Herzfeld 1935, 44; Frye 1984, 158-159, n. 58; Wiesehöfer 1994, 70-73; Callieri 2007; Rougemont 2012, 125-129. Herzfeld assumed that these inscriptions equated Iranian deities with Greek gods, but there is no evidence for this, see Callieri 2007, 67-68.

[798] On Persis under Peukestas, see Wiesehöfer 1994, 50-56.

[799] A bilingual Greek-Aramaic inscription was found at Pasargadae, engraved on a reused Achaemenid architectural element. It bears the name Pasargadae and is thought to have been set as a milestone. See Stronach, 1978, 160-161; Wiesehöfer 1994, 89-90; (P. Bernard in) Callieri 1995, 75-77: "on ne peut exclure une date dans le dernier quart du IVᵉ siècle et plus précisément sous le gouvernorat de Peucestas (324-printemps 316 av. J.-C.)"; Callieri 2007, 34-35; Rougemont 2012, 129-132.

[800] Herzfeld 1926, 249; Herzfeld 1935, 46-47; Ghirshman 1976, 202-203; Boyce 1979, 89; Wiesehöfer 1994, 70-72, 74-76; see also Callieri 2007, 144-145.

style, the reliefs were dated by Herzfeld to the late 3rd century BCE and by Ghirshman to the late 2nd century BCE: be that as it may, they may help push the date of the coin hoard back somewhat, towards the end rather than the beginning of the 3rd century. The site of the 'frataraka temple', as well as other apparently not unimportant building works carried out next to the Palace of Darius and which use rubble from the destroyed Achaemenid buildings as foundations, certainly indicate a relatively important reinvestment of the terrace by local lords of Persis in the post-Achaemenid period.[801] This is further illustrated as we shall see by pre-Sasanian graffiti engraved on the ruins of Darius' *tačara*.

The Persis coinage, unlike other Arsacid coinage such as Elymaean, Characenean and of course Parthian, does not present a 'Greek' stage. The analysis of the coin legends, which have been described as Aramaic 'degenerating'[802] into Middle Persian, is the subject of the next chapter.

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[801] Wiesehöfer 1994, 68-70.

[802] Hill 1922, clxi.