Historiography and palaeography of Sasanian Middle Persian inscriptions

Ramble, O.K.C.

Chapter 6

Pre-Sasanian Middle Persian inscriptions: investigating the local scribal tradition(s) of Persis

I. Pre-Sasanian Persis: elements of its history and presentation of its corpus of coins.

Investigating the 'Dark Ages' of Persis.

So scant are the sources concerning the political and administrative history of Persis in the Hellenistic period[803] that this era is sometimes referred to as the 'Dark Ages' of the province.[804] Yet, during these five hundred and some years,[805] when Persis was under Seleucid and then Parthian rule, the writing system evolved from Imperial Aramaic – widely used, as we saw, within the Achaemenid administration – to a 'new', fixed and standardised alphabet, as displayed in the very first inscriptions of the Sasanian kings. This alphabet recorded the mother-tongue of the Sasanian kings, known as Middle Persian, and made a significant recourse to aramaeograms (see the diachronic study in Chapter 5 for the different theories as well as some suggestions concerning the gradual formation of these word-masks). Archaeological campaigns carried out at the foot of the Persepolis terrace in the 1930s – which unfortunately, as Pierfranceso Callieri has remarked,[806] were not as methodologically rigorous as one could have hoped, making the analysis of the different post-Achaemenid strata particularly difficult – as well as rare anecdotes concerning Persis in classical historiography are of some help in reconstituting the political history of the province under the Seleucids and Parthians. Mainly, however, our understanding of Hellenistic Persis, and certainly our appreciation of the use of Aramaic in Persis and the evolution of this alphabet until the beginning of the Sasanian period, rests on a corpus of locally struck coins, to which we may add two inscribed silver vessels.

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[803] The Hellenistic period is here understood, as it is more generally when discussing the history of ancient Iran, to comprise the time between the fall of the Achaemenids and the rise of the Sasanian dynasty in the 3rd c. CE.

[804] After the title of Wiesehöfer's 1994 work *Die 'dunkle Jahrhunderte' der Persis*.

[805] Depending on whether we consider that Alexander, with his 'persophile' satrap Peukestas, actually only really continued Achaemenid policy with regards to this province; as we saw in the previous chapter, the archives from Bactria certainly did seem to record 'business as usual' under Alexander.

[806] Callieri 2007, 85.

The coins of Persis were found in different hoards from the province of Fārs (in particular Persepolis, Staxr and Naqš-e Rostam) and on markets in Iran and abroad.[807] They were most probably struck at or in the vicinity of Persepolis: Staxr, a city located just a little further into the gorge to the East of Naqš-e Rostam, is known to have been an important mint in the Sasanian period.[808] However, some scholars like Callieri, have suggested the coins could have been minted in Susa[809], which as we saw in the previous chapter was an active mint in the Hellenistic period and used by sub-Seleucid kings of Elymais. The Persid coins were issued by a series of local (likely vassal) kings and probably only intended for local circulation: no examples of the coins have been found outside Fārs, not even in near-by Pasargadae or Susa.[810] The coinage mainly consists of overstrikes – 'reused' denominations from the time of Alexander – and Michael Alram, whose exhaustive publication of the series is the main reference for this material, has described it as a "Prestigeprägung", or 'prestige' coinage:[811] the minting of the coins did not reflect an 'economic necessity' and these were used in parallel to the imperial currency issued by the Parthian overlords of Persis.[812]

One of the main problems with the coinage as a source for history concerns its dating; another difficulty, as with other 'provincial' issues minted by sub-Seleucid and sub-Parthian kings, is deciding to what extent the coinage is an indication of the political autonomy of its local rulers. In so far as the dating of the coins has some incidence on the study of the evolution of the script recorded in the legends, it seems relevant to briefly sum up the latest conclusions – even though there is no absolute consensus – concerning the chronology of the issues. Similarly, it will be helpful to touch upon the main debates concerning the interpretation both of legends and the iconography on the Persis issues and draw out what these may tell us about the way in which the kings of Persis presented and viewed themselves, in what capacity they ruled the province and how this may have affected their choice of writing system.

[807] See Wiesehöfer 1994, 91-96 for an overview of the finds and the contents of the different hoards.

[808] Bivar and Boyce 1998.

[809] Or rather Seleucia of the Eulaios as it then became known, Callieri 2007, 128.

[810] Wiesehöfer 1994, 18-19, see also Frye 1984, 159.

[811] Alram 1986, 162.

[812] See similarly Engels 2013, 37.

Dating the coins series of Persis.

The coins of Persis are classified into four separate series based on the legends as well as iconographic and typological details. Where scholars disagree is on the beginning date of the minting and whether there was a (significant) hiatus or not between the different series. Traditionally, the local coinage of Persis was regarded as beginning immediately after Seleukos I, because the hoard from the Persepolis Terrace unearthed by Herzfeld in the early twentieth century contained a tetradrachm of Seleukos I in relatively good condition along with the earliest issues of Persis coinage.[813] According to this theory, the Persis kings started minting their coins in 280 BCE (Newell)[814] – a date which corresponds to just after the death of Seleukos I, when unrest in the kingdom would have provided the local lords of Persis an opportunity to vie for their independence – or even earlier, in 300 BCE (Herzfeld). Because of the close typological links between the later Persis issues and Parthian coinage, this early dating also implied an important hiatus between the first and second series, in which no coins would have been minted by the local kings.

However, Wiesehöfer has rightly argued that the fact that a coin of Seleukos I was found in the same hoard as Persis issues does not prove that the coins were contemporaneous with each other, nor that they followed each other in a seamless succession – the Seleukos coin could well have been kept over time and it is more generally delicate to draw chronological conclusions based on the presence or absence of coins in a hoard.[815] Furthermore, Alram demonstrated that even though there are some iconographic and stylistic differences between the first and second series, there is no typological break, suggesting a relatively continuous series of issues.[816] Instead, Alram proposed to consider the typological proximity between the later Persis series and Parthian coinage as the most important dating criterion. In other words, based on the assumption that the Persis coins constituted a continuous series, he preferred to 'work back' in time from the point when Persis coins begin to show a marked affinity with Parthian coinage, rather than 'forwards' from Seleukos I on.[817] Evidence of Parthian influence occurs as early as the coins of Dārēw I and those of his unnamed predecessor (respectively, the sixth and fifth kings of Persis according to numismatists), when the tetradrachm, which was the

[813] Wiesehöfer 1994, 91-93 and 115-116.

[814] This 'high dating' has been recently supported by Engels 2013, esp. 42-49 and 74-79.

[815] Wiesehöfer 1994, 120.

[816] Alram 1986, 163.

[817] Alram 1986, 162-163.

main denomination in Persis based on the Seleucid model, is dropped in favour of the Attic drachm after Parthian numismatic practice.[818] Alram thus placed the reign of the first king of Persis (Baydād)[819] and the beginning of local minting activity in the early second century BCE; Wiesehöfer favoured a slightly earlier date, around 220 BCE, corresponding to the revolt of the Seleucid general and satrap Molon, after which there was a reorganization in the governing of the provinces.[820] It is their dating that will be retained in this study.

Elements for the political history of Hellenistic Persis.

Closely related to the problem of dating the Persis coins is that of determining the degree of autonomy suggested by local kings' minting activity and how this may relate to events from the broader and much better documented history of the Seleucid empire. Wiesehöfer, Alram and Engels have argued that the first Persis coins were minted by the local dynasts with the approval of their Seleucid overlords: it is not necessarily suggestive of the province's full independence in the second century BCE.[821] For Alram, the fact that the early coinage mainly consists in overstrikes suggests limited minting autonomy/initiative.[822] Some comments in classical historiography concerning the administrative organisation of Persis can also help flesh out the 'dark ages' of the province. Wiesehöfer has observed that in the reign of Antiochus III (222-187 BCE), Persis was under full Seleucid control, governed by a satrap called Alexandros, with bowmen from both Persis and Elymais serving in the Seleucid army.[823] Furthermore, there is a consensus among scholars to identify the Persid king named Wahbarz in his coin legends with

[818] Alram 1986, 163, 171-172.

[819] Note that the exact order of succession of the *fratarka* kings is debated and that David Engels has recently argued against beginning this dynasty with Baydād, see Engels 2013, esp. 37-42.

[820] Wiesehöfer 1994, 120-121 and 128-129.

[821] Engels argues for a "pacifist" and "loyalist" interpretation of the iconography on *frataraka* coinage, Engels 2013, esp. 49-74. Frye and Callieri, who agree in the main with Alram and Wiesehöfer's chronology are on the other hand more convinced about the independence of the early kings of Persis, Frye 1984, 160 and Callieri 2007, 117. On the difficulty in applying the modern concepts of 'independence' and 'autonomy' to the ancient World in general and the ancient Iranian world in particular, see de Jong 2013, esp. 148-152: in classical Greece, the notion of *autonomia* was an instrument of empire, rather than a sign of independence, and described the (limited) rights of cities to pass their own laws, while in the Hellenistic period it was a dignity actually dispensed by the king.

[822] Alram 1986, 162.

[823] Wiesehöfer 1994, 120-121.

a personage called Oborzos, mentioned by the second century CE Greek historian Polyaenus.[824] The latter records in his *Stratagems* (VII, 40) that Oborzos was at the head of a contingent of 3000 'colonists' or *katoikoi* which he then conspired to massacre – by getting them drunk – with the help of fellow Persians. As Wiesehöfer has pointed out, any local king who commanded a contingent of Macedonian forces must have done so under the aegis of the Seleucids. On the other hand, the organised murder of the colonists may indeed have been an attempt to gain complete autonomy.[825] The Greek historian Strabo (XV, 3, 24) provides a further hint of the vassal status of the Persis dynasts when he reports that in the time of Augustus (63 BCE – 14 CE), the kings of the Persians were subordinate to the Parthians, as they had been earlier to the Macedonians:[826] in other words, the Parthians reinstated the Seleucid status quo when they took Persis from the Seleucids and appointed local vassal kings. Finally, the earliest kings of Persis are depicted on their coins wearing a headgear closely resembling that of Achaemenid satraps: this iconographic detail may be an indication of their perceived status.[827]

In this way, all indicators point to the early Persid rulers being loyal sub-Seleucid kings; kings of Persis and Elymais even supported the Seleucid king in the face of the Parthian onslaught on their province.[828] Hints at a full independence of Persis in the hiatus between Seleucid and Parthian rule of this province is provided again by a combination of allusions in classical historiography and iconographic details from the coins. Pliny the Elder (VI, 152) records that following the battle of Numenios (named after the Seleucid governor of Characene of that name) under Antiochus IV in 186 BCE a successful uprising undertaken by the Persians against Seleucid rule won them the freedom of Persis.[829] Alram, followed by Wiesehöfer, has proposed to see a reflection of this victory in the coins of Wādfradād I, the fourth Persis king: using Hellenistic imagery, this ruler depicts himself on his reverses being crowned with a ribboned wreath by a winged figure of Nike.[830] The political autonomy of Persis may have

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[824] Wiesehöfer 1994, 126: "Der in dieser Quelle genannte Oborzos, ohne Zweifel identisch mit dem dritten Frataraka Vahbars", Callieri 2007, 117.

[825] Wiesehöfer 1994, 127.

[826] Wiesehöfer 1994, 102, 126-127.

[827] Wiesehöfer 1994, 128.

[828] Wiesehöfer 2001, 109-110.

[829] Wiesehöfer 1994, 128-129. For a full discussion of the Classical sources concerning Persis, see Engels 2013, 33-36 and esp. 34 for the passage in Pliny on the battle of Numenios. On the battle of Numenios, see further Schuol 2000; Shayegan 2011, 155-161.

[830] Alram 1986, 163 and Wiesehöfer 1994, 128.

lasted for his reign, and possibly that also of his successor Wādfradād II. From then on however, the influence of Parthian numismatics – such as the switch to the Attic drachm as the main denomination – becomes too tangible to support full independence (from the Parthians). This switch is dated by Alram to the defeat of the Seleucid king Demetrios Nikator – supported by Elymaean and Persian contingents – in 140 BCE by Mithridates I.[831] The ruler portraits on Persis coins take on an increasingly Parthian style, culminating in the coins of Wādfradād III, which do away with the traditional depiction of the king's head and represent him instead in full bust, wearing a torc and accompanied by a ceremonial guard on the Parthian model. The close affinity of later Persis issues with Parthian coin typology and style has led scholars to conclude that there was no attempt on the part of the local Persis kings to distance themselves from their overlords – or at least no blatant rejection – pointing once again to the peaceful vassal relationship described by Strabo.

The dates put forward in the above summary are the main historical markers that allow us to organise the coins of Persis, their iconography and their legends, in a relative chronology. Before turning to the alphabet used on the Persis coin series,[832] a few words must be said about the different legends they bear. Their interpretation is clouded by several problems relating to the palaeography and language of the inscriptions, as well as to the meaning of the titles they record. As such, the legends have joined the scholarly debates concerning the political and administrative role held by the kings of Persis in the framework of their vassal rule.

Fratarakā of the Gods.

The title that appears on the earliest two series of Persis coins is systematically recorded under the fixed formula [King's name] *prtrk' zy 'lhy'*: [King's name] *prtrk'* of the gods. Because of the palaeographic ambiguity of several Aramaic letters, the title *prtrk'* has been variously deciphered *prtkr'*, *prtdr'*, and *prtrk'* and thereby respectively translated as 'fire-maker', 'first among the people/army', 'fire-holder/keeper', 'governor'.[833] The readings which interpret the first element as deriving from Armenian *hrat* 'fire' and which translate the term *prtkr'*/*prtdr'* as 'fire-maker/holder/keeper' imply that the function was heavily laden with religious connotations. This is somewhat supported by the Aramaic term which makes up the second part of the syntagm, *'lhy'*, 'god', in the plural. According to this interpretation, the local kings of

[831] Alram 1986, 163.

[832] On the subject of which see Rezakhani 2016; his study will be discussed at length below.

[833] See Naster 1968 for a sum up of the different readings and interpretations by scholars.

Persis would have filled a mainly religious role, with some scholars even proposing to see in the vassal kings representatives of a 'religious-nationalistic party' or a 'priestly-dynasty'.[834] This hypothesis is now generally rejected for both linguistic and historical reasons: the first element is very unlikely to derive from the unusual Armenian word *hrat* and there is no evidence for a line of 'priestly-princes' in Persis; the function of the sub-Seleucid and sub-Parthian rulers of this province was evidently a mainly political, administrative and military one.

On his earliest coins the first king of Persis depicted himself wearing the royal tiara; he later switches to the 'satrapal tiara', which as mentioned above was the headdress chosen by all his successors: by contrast, the priestly headdress never appears in the portraits of Persis rulers. Wiesehöfer has noted that the coins also portray the Persis kings with specific attributes, such as the scepter, as well as certain weapons like the bow, sword and spear that are more at home in the royal, political and military sphere than the religious one.[835] Another important consideration in this respect is the fact that in the later numismatic legends of Persis, the entire phrase *prtrk'zy 'lhy'* is replaced by the term *mlk'*, the Aramaic for 'king' – [King's name] *mlk'* instead of [King's name] *prtrk'zy 'lhy'* – a title which is an unambiguously political designation. For these reasons, and probably above all because it echoes the well-known and ubiquitous title *frataraka* of Achaemenid administrative documents, the last reading, *prtrk'*, is the one generally retained by scholars. Wiesehöfer has observed that only about 100 years separate the use of this term in Achaemenid archives and its appearance on the coins of Persis.[836] As we saw in the preceding chapter, under the Achaemenids it designated an office just below that of the satrap and involved important administrative, judicial and military responsibilities and authority; this would fit nicely with the picture of a vassal rule of the Persis kings under the Seleucids and later under the Parthians suggested by the historical and numismatic data.

Nevertheless, some doubts have been raised concerning the somewhat surprising juxtaposition of the apparently political-administrative title *prtrk*' with the outright religious *'lhy'* and scholars are still divided on what exactly the function of a "*frataraka* of the gods" would have implied. The second element of the phrase has therefore equally received much attention. Several scholars have envisaged a more secular role of the *prtrk'zy 'lhy'* than the title might suggest at first sight by observing that the *'lhy'* or 'gods' may be a reference to the

[834] Herzfeld 1932, 69, n. 1; Wikander 1946, 15-16 as well as Chaumont 1958 and Naster 1968.

[835] Wiesehöfer 1994, 134. Although as we will see below, Albert de Jong has pointed out that all arms were not necessarily at odds in a religious context and that priests bore their own weapons, de Jong 2003.

[836] Wiesehöfer 1994, 2009.

Seleucid cult of deified kings: the syntagm would be following Hellenistic pattern in describing the kings of Persis as governors of the (deified) Seleucid overlords.[837] Antonio Panaino has highlighted several problems with this interpretation: the administrative and political function of 'governor' is not attested in connection with a divine royal cult; the use of the plural to refer to the overlord in a title describing a vassal relationship ('*frataraka* of the gods/lords/kings'), although there have been attempts to explain it as a *pluralis maiestatis*, is also somewhat surprising.[838] Finally, the complete subordination to Hellenistic royal ideology that this reading would imply does not tally with the coins' evident display of local semi-independence.

Other scholars, such as Callieri, prefer to understand *'lhy'* as referring to the 'Achaemenid ancestors' of the kings of Persis:[839] as we shall see, the Achaemenid past of Persis is clearly celebrated on the reverses of the Persis coins, with the display of old Persian imagery and possibly monuments also. He also draws attention to the strange patronym *dārāyānagān* inscribed with the more usual *dārāyān* on a silver cup dated to the pre-Sasanian period by Prods Oktor Skjærvø (see below on this object). Because both terms occur in the same inscription, Skjærvø concludes they must mean something different: the name *dārāyānagān* appears to be a patronym based on *dārāyān*, which is itself a patronym, 'son of Darius'; *dārāyānagān* could refer in a wider sense to the "descendants of earlier *dārāyān*'s".[840] For Callieri, the existence of the patronym *dārāyānagān* on the silver cup is an important element in understanding how the kings of Persis viewed their relationship to their Achaemenid predecessors and expressed "la pleine conscience de leur héritage politique".[841] However, this possibility still does not explain the description of the Achaemenid kings as 'gods'. Panaino observes that in the Old Persian inscriptions the Achaemenids monarchs were never called *baga-* 'god', and although they reigned under the aegis of Ahura Mazda, were never endowed with divine prerogatives.[842] Most tellingly perhaps, in the Babylonian versions of the trilingual cuneiform inscriptions, the names of the Achaemenid kings are not marked with the divine determinative, which helps distinguish between divine and human/other homonyms. Finally, there is no indication whatsoever that the Achaemenid kings were deified after their death.

[837] Wiesehöfer 1994.

[838] Panaino 2003, 266.

[839] Callieri 2007, 129.

[840] Skjaevø 1997, 94.

[841] Callieri 2007, 131.

[842] Panaino 2003, 267-269.

Alternately, another 'non-religious' interpretation of *'lhy'* may be possible based on the later Sasanian inscriptions.[843] In the Middle Persian versions of these, the Sasanian royal titulature gives the name of the king according to the set formula *mazdēsn bay* [king's name] *šāhān šāh ērān ud anērān kē čihr az yazdān*, generally translated as "the mazdean Lord [king's name] king of kings of Ērān and non-Ērān whose seed is from the gods". Although the Middle Persian term *bay* is rendered in the Parthian versions of the same inscriptions (and sometimes in the Middle Persian ones too) by the aramaeogram ALHYA/ORHYA – here we have the Aramaic *'lhy'* 'god' – and by *ΘΕΟΣ* in the Greek translations, scholars have demonstrated that when it is in anteposition to the king's name, *bay* is better understood as 'lord' than by 'god'.[844] This epithet was certainly the exclusive prerogative of the Sasanian monarchs but did not describe them as divine beings as such.[845] In this respect, Panaino has highlighted the careful distinction in Middle Persian between the terms *bay*/*bayān* and *yazad*/*yazadān* even though this subtlety is not translated – perhaps intentionally, perhaps not – in the Greek: the Sasanian king is never described as a *yazad* and by the third century the term *bay* had evidently come to be used in a general sense as 'Lord'.

Returning to the coins of Persis, it remains possible that *'lhy'* is being used heterographically in the sense of *bay*. Nevertheless, in the phrase *prtrk'zy 'lhy',* the term stands alone and occurs in the plural which is inconsistent as we have seen with the Sasanian use of the term as an epithet to signify 'Lord'. Panaino therefore prefers to overlook the unusual juxtaposition between the administrative Achaemenid function of *frataraka* and the religious *'lhy'*, and understand *prtrk'zy 'lhy'* literally as meaning 'governor of the gods': the gods in this case would neither be the deified overlords or the deified Achaemenid ancestors, but more simply the ancient gods of Persis. The vassal kings derived their authority "from the divine powers of their land".[846] This reading is supported as we shall see below by Albert de Jong who highlights the religious connotations of certain iconographic elements of the Persis coin reverses.[847]

[843] Panaino 2003, 274-280.

[844] Boyce 1981, 64-65.

[845] Panaino 2003, 274-278.

[846] Panaino 2003, 283.

[847] De Jong 2003.

The title "krny" of the coins of the Persid kings Wahbarz.

Recently, the historian David Engels highlighted the occurrence of the title *krny* on the issues of the Persid *frataraka* king Wahbarz; he appears to have been the first to link it to the dual Greek-Iranian titulature of the eponymous founder of the Parthian empire Arsakes I, who is described as autokator-*krny* on his coins.[848] As mentioned in the previous chapter, the title *krny* probably derives from an Achaemenid military function (Old Persian *kāra-* 'army') and would designate a high-ranking military commander. The occurrence of the designation *krny* in both Persis and early Parthian numismatics suggests the widespread use of this Achaemenid military function as a title by sub-Seleucid, local kings across the empire; perhaps it should be taken as a hint of a similar political situation at both ends of the empire. Indeed, although the date and succession of the *frataraka* kings of Persis remains much debated, it is probably safe to assume that the *frataraka* Wahbarz and Arsakes I were roughly contemporaries of one another.

Achaemenid symbols, insignia and monuments on the coins of Persis.

At this point, a few comments concerning the iconography of Persis numismatics may be helpful. The reverses of the early coins issued by the first *frataraka* king Baydād depict the ruler facing left, sitting on a high throne and holding a scepter in his right hand; his left hand holds a flower (?) and rests on his lap **[Fig. 6.1]**.[849] Directly in front of him at (his) eye level is a (roughly) square banner or standard mounted on a pole or spear; tassels, which terminate in small round ornaments or 'pompons', hang from the bottom side of the banner; the banner itself sports an X-shaped cross or saltire, with a small dot or circle in each of the four sections created by the cross. In the later coins of the same ruler, the typology of the reverses changes. The king is now presented facing right and standing with his hands raised in a gesture of worship; directly facing him, right in the middle of the field, is a tall square structure/building with what appears to be a stepped base and three crenelations on its parapet; the centre of the structure is divided length-wise into two rectangles that could be the two panels of a door, each panel is decorated with three rectangular recesses; to the right of the structure we find the banner that was depicted on the earlier coins **[Fig. 6.2]**. This second reverse type is the one that will be maintained by the next seven successors of Baydād, albeit with some 'augmentations'. From the reign of Wādfradād I on for instance, the representation of a winged disk is added hovering directly above the square structure; from the disk emerges the bust of a bearded man – facing left,

[848] See Engels 2013, 55-60 and Engels 2018, 178-183

[849] Alram 1986, Table 17.

towards, but above, the ruler – wearing a crenelated crown, with his right hand raised and clasped together in a gesture of prayer (or blessing?). A double curved bow now also rests on the right foot of the standing king; he holds it with his left hand. As we have seen, a later coin of this king further includes the figure of Tyche placing a wreath on the ruler's head, although this addition does not continue beyond a special issue. His successor, Wādfradād II, further complexifies the scene by introducing the representation of a bird – probably an eagle or falcon – perched on top of the banner to the right **[Fig. 6.3]**. The tall square structure undergoes some changes and simplifications – the three crenellations of the parapet are reduced to a single, three-stepped and V-shaped merlon or battlement – but remains immediately recognizable.

Only much later, under Dārēw II, is the ruler-structure-banner triad modified to represent the king standing in front of an open fire altar with the flames schematically represented as three or some vertical, more or less wavy, lines; he holds a bundle of barsom in the direction of the fire in the manner of one officiating a ritual **[Fig. 6.4]**. The tall structure, banner, winged disk and bird have all disappeared in this new typology. Then on, the iconography of the Persis coins gradually becomes more and more simplified: the standing figure of the king is increasingly replaced by his portrait (identical to the one on the coins' obverse), and the fire altar with simpler elements such as a crescent moon and star or even non-figural motifs like the *triskelion* **[Fig. 6.5]**.[850] A much more elaborate and grander version of the open fire altar reappears on the reverses of the coins of the first Sasanian kings.[851]

Key elements of the iconography of Persis numismatics have been recognised as directly stemming from Achaemenid imagery. The figure of the ruler seated in profile on the high-backed throne with his scepter, or standing with hand(s) raised in a gesture of worship; the flower he holds in some scenes; the bow balanced on the standing king's foot (even though in the Achaemenid period it is a straight longbow and in the Persis coins a shorter double curved bow); the winged-disk from which emerges the bearded, crowned man, generally thought to be a representation of the Iranian concept of *xwarrah* (divine glory) or the supreme god of Mazdeism, Ahura Mazda; the square banner mounted on a high pole (although see more on this below)[852] – all these unmistakably Achaemenid insignia and symbols of royal power would

[850] Alram 1986, Tables 20 and 21.

[851] Alram 1986, Table 22.

[852] In the context of the coins of Persis however, de Jong has observed that the bird appears around the same time as the winged disk is added; this would encourage the interpretation of it as symbolising the standard's meaning by incarnating a "visible sign of the divine glory", de Jong 2003, 192-193.

have been readily available to the local kings of Persis as motifs engraved on the sumptuous ruins of their homeland, on the monuments and rock-cut tombs of Persepolis and Naqš-e Rostam.

More difficult to identify is the ubiquitous tall structure of the early coins. Based on the scene repeatedly depicted on the Achaemenid tombs, which represents the king in a gesture of worship facing a three-stepped altar with the winged-disk hovering above, the structure has sometimes been interpreted as a fire-temple or fire-altar – some scholars have even suggested that the three elements crowning the structure's parapet could be schematisations of flames.[853] The later unambiguous representations of the open fire altar surmounted by wavy flames make this hypothesis unlikely, however. Most scholars agree that the structure was probably at least inspired by – if not a direct representation of – the great box-like tower colloquially known as the Ka'ba of Zoroaster (the 'cube' of Zoroaster) at Naqš-e Rostam **[Fig. 6.6]**, and its sister-structure, the Zendān-e Soleymān (the Prison of Solomon) at Pasargadae.[854] In addition to the tower-like shape of the monument, the rectangular recesses which adorn its facades find an exact parallel in the structure depicted on the Persis coin reverses. Unfortunately, the nature of these two monumental towers – be it their original function in the Achaemenid period or the (probably) new purpose they filled when they were reinvested with several important inscriptions in the Sasanian period – is still not clear. It is therefore difficult to grasp the

[853] For a thorough examination of the different interpretations of this structure that have been put forth, see Potts 2007.

[854] For an exhaustive study of the possible links between the stepped towers in Achaemenid iconography, the actual monumental towers of Pasargadae and Naqš-e Rostam and the iconography of the Persid coins, see Garrison 2017, esp. 319-321. Mark Garrison concludes that: "Formally, the structure on the reverses of the *frataraka* coinage thus include the stepped structure (on the late coins) and both versions of the tower structure as documented in Persepolitan glyptic. The appearance of the three types of Persepolitan structures on *frataraka* coinage seems rather more than fortuitous. […] Structurally and iconographically, the scenes on the frataraka coinage and Persepolitan glyptic are linked. One striking difference between the visual corpora is the incorporation of the bow into some of the scenes on the coins […], a phenomenon that must certainly be a direct quotation of the tomb façades at Naqš-e Rostam and Persepolis. This mash of syntax and iconography suggests that the scenes on *frataraka* coinage may be appropriating and reformulating various syntactical and iconographic elements of Achaemenid imperial art without any sense of the significance of the original context of the imagery and, perhaps, without the intent to depict any true lived experience of the *frataraka* period. The importance of the evidence from the *frataraka* coinage would appear to be its testimonial to the strength of the Achaemenid visual tradition, not its documentation of the continuation of actual ritual behavior or the presence of specific types of buildings in Fārs in the early Hellenistic period", Garrison 2017, 321.

significance that this structure had for the Persis kings and the reason for its representation on their coins. The Pasargadae and Naqš-e Rostam monuments, which harbour a small blind *cella* in the top part of the tower – accessible by a flight of stairs on the north façade – have variously been interpreted as tombs, coronation towers, fire-temples, fire-repositories (*ātašgāh*), royal treasuries and repositories of royal regalia and state archives/annals. Some more "all inclusive"[855] studies have argued that the towers fulfilled a combination of these functions[856] and as Daniel Potts has demonstrated there is generally a lack of clear distinction between the (probably different) function of the buildings in the Achaemenid and Sasanian periods.[857]

It is also true however, as Potts has pointed out, that it was not necessary for the kings of Persis to have any knowledge of the buildings' original function to recognise them as architectural masterpieces; whatever their use was, they no doubt had acquired a "mythical if not mystical" quality.[858] The two monumental towers – and particularly the Ka'ba of Naqš-e Rostam, located only a couple of kilometers from Staxr, and planted at the foot of the Achaemenid royal tombs – were iconic ruins and more generally immediately recognisable landmarks of the local kings' homeland. It should be mentioned that Callieri categorically refuses to identify the box-like monument with the towers of Pasargadae and Naqš-e Rostam because the archaeologists who examined the parapets of the buildings concluded that these did not have crenellated battlements.[859] The merlons crowning the structure in the coins is certainly a constant and immediately recognizable feature of the iconographic motif. For Potts, the divergences between the structure on Persis numismatics and the actual monumental towers should not be an argument to dismiss their evident relationship: in the same way that the Achaemenid kings on the tomb reliefs sport a straight long bow balanced on their foot while the rulers depicted on the Persis coins balance a double-curved one on their, the iconographic choices made by the Persis kings are a display of the reappropriation of an ancient royal ethos. Furthermore, Callieri does agree that the structure on the coins of Persis likely represents an Achaemenid monument – either the Persepolis terrace itself, which does present a crenellated parapet, or another, low lost building. For the purposes of this study therefore, and whatever the tower-structure on the coins meant to the kings of Persis, it is enough to conclude that with this

[855] As Daniel Potts called Sancisi-Weerdenburg's article, Potts 2007, 283.

[856] Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1983.

[857] Potts 2007, 290-291.

[858] Potts 2007, 296.

[859] Callieri 2007, 119-123.

motif they were making an ostentatious allusion to the Achaemenid ruins which were a distinctive and iconic landmark of their homeland.

The prestige of the kings of Persis.

Based on the brief overview of the iconography of the Persis coins, we may safely maintain with Wiesehöfer and Callieri that echoing Achaemenid imagery and symbols evidently helped the vassal kings to assert their political power and cast themselves as successors of the Achaemenids – although without the claim to a world-empire, for as Wiesehöfer has argued, this would not have met with the approval of their Seleucid and later Parthian overlords[860]– and probably even more importantly as legitimate *local* rulers of Persis, as opposed to powerful but alien overlords. Although this was no doubt one of the pillars their legitimacy rested on, Albert de Jong has observed that attention ought to be given to some of the more religious aspects of the coins' imagery for a clue to the foundations of the vassal kings' 'prestige'.[861] He points out that because the iconography on the Persis coins has been identified as deriving from Achaemenid imagery it has been traditionally classified as royal insignia. Yet, several 'kingly' objects found on the coin reverses like the scepter, and more specifically the banner, are kept in the main centers of religious activity among modern Zoroastrians, and may be viewed as religious symbols also: Parsi fire-temples for instance host 'cultic banners'.[862] In other religious traditions that show a marked influence of Zoroastrianism, such as the Mandaeans and certain community religions from the mountains of Georgia, the cultic banner – respectively *drabša* and *droša*, compare Middle Persian *drafš*, 'flag, banner' – is planted beside the cultic hut; it is adorned, blessed, touched and praised, and plays an important role in rituals and ceremonies such as the swearing of oaths.[863]

Drawing out the religious aspects of their numismatic imagery does not mean casting the kings of Persis as a priestly dynasty; rather, it suggests that cultic activity and authority was one of the keys to the local political legitimacy of these vassal rulers.[864] The cultic banner which

[860] Wiesehöfer 1994 and 2009. Furthermore, whether this entailed a clear, historical memory of these glorious predecessors as Callieri claims is less evident to me, but this debate will not be picked up here, see Callieri 2007, 129, 132.

[861] Taking up Alram's description of the Persis coin series as *Prestigeprägung*, de Jong 2003, 192.

[862] De Jong 2003, 193

[863] De Jong 2003, 196-200.

[864] In fact, insisting at all on the separation between political rule and religious authority – just like the separation between religion and legal practice – is not relevant to either ancient Persis or ancient Iran.

appears on the reverses of the first eight kings furthermore implies that they were the guardians of an important shrine, "'governors of the gods' in a very literal sense."[865] As de Jong observes, their guardianship is probably what provided them with the means to strike coins in the first place[866]. This joins Panaino's interpretation of the term *bayān*, and his conclusion that the legitimacy for the vassal kings' rule was paradoxically not of royal derivation, even though it staged a direction connection with the Achaemenid vestiges, but stemmed from religious authority.[867] It is worth highlighting that in the reign of Dārēw II, when the banner disappears from the Persis coin reverses – along with the square structure and the winged disk – it is replaced by the motif of an open fire altar being officiated by the king himself (he holds a bundle of barsom in the direction of the flames). As de Jong notes, the dynasty that would follow the Persis kings, the Sasanians, were themselves known to have been the guardians of the Fire of Anahīd before rising to power and seizing the crown from the Parthians.[868]

Khodadad Rezakhani and the eastern origins of the Middle Persian inscriptional alphabet.

As we move on to the analysis of the Persis coin legends and their relationship with the Sasanian Middle Persian alphabet(s), we should note that the possible palaeographical link between inscriptional Middle Persian and the script on late Persis numismatics has recently been questioned. In a recent article, Khodadad Rezakhani has studied the evolution of the Aramaic(-derived) script in the legends engraved on the coins of Persis.[869] His brief overview spans the very first coins of Baydād to the very first coins of Ardašīr V who was to be the founder of the Sasanian dynasty – the Sasanian king Ardašīr I – as well as those of his elder brother Šābuhr. Rezakhani's aim is to identify the roots of the Middle Persian *inscriptional* alphabet as it is recorded in the very first royal inscriptions of the Sasanian kings and decide whether it can be regarded as descending from the script used on Persis coins. Based on his diachronic study, he concludes that the alphabet used in the legends of Šābuhr and Ardašīr V/I make too drastic a departure from the letter shapes on the later Persis coins: inscriptional Middle Persian cannot be regarded as a natural outcome of the Persis script. It is therefore necessary to

[865] De Jong 2003, 201-202.

[866] De Jong 2003, 202.

[867] Panaino 2003, 283-284.

[868] De Jong 2003, 201-202; see also Chaumont for the list of Arabic chroniclers who record the link between the cult of Anahita at Staxr and the family of the (future) Sasanian dynasts, Chaumont 1958, 155-156.

[869] Rezakhani 2016.

"look for an alternate path" to explain the emergence of "Pahlavi".[870] He therefore turns to the coins and inscriptions of Elymais and Characene, and although his comparison reveals some crossover and parallel innovations, he concludes that the script on the terminal coins of Persis is too dissimilar to that recorded in Elymais and Characene: these local alphabets cannot be regarded as a source for the innovations specific to the Sasanian inscriptional script; the evolution of these three Aramaic-derived scripts must have been independent from one another. Rezakhani then considers the coins of the eastern Indo-Sāka dynasty. He notes the very similar shapes of the letters *alef* and *taw* on the coins of Ardašīr and Šābuhr and that of the Indo-Sāka kings from the two first centuries CE; the later Sasanian coins also display a similar *samekh* to that in Indo-Sāka numismatics.[871] Rezakhani also observes that the reverses of Indo-Sāka coins depict a fire altar, offering a further point of similarity with the late-Persis coins/early-Sasanian issues.[872] Rezakhani puts forward other, historical arguments to further justify the possible influence of the Indo-Sākan dynasty on the early Sasanian kings. Several rulers of the Indo-Sāka line bear names which include the compound Sāsān – the last of the Indo-Sākan kings, in fact defeated by Ardashir during the latter's eastern campaigns, was called Farn-Sāsān, and his father, Adur-Sāsān.[873] Sāsān is of course also the name of the eponymous hero and ancestor of the Sasanian dynasty, whose origins remain a mystery.[874] For Rezakhani, the presence of the element Sāsān in Indo-Sāka royal nomenclature and the parallels between certain letter-shapes in Indo-Sāka and late-Persis/early-Sasanian issues should encourage scholars' investigations into the eastern origins of the Sasanian dynasty.[875] In other terms, Persis would not be the ancestral cradle of the Sasanian dynasty as it is portrayed to be by the kings of this dynasty in their inscriptions: their family line would have originated much further east.[876] Alram had argued that Ardašīr V/I's campaigns in Indo-Sāka territory were carried out after his western conquests and after the issuing of his first coins; the numismatist thus considered the presence of the fire-altar on Indo-Sāka coinage as a sign of Ardašīr V/I's influence on eastern numismatic tradition.[877] Rezakhani by contrast, based on his comparison of Indo-Sāka and (pre-)Sasanian

[870] Rezakhani 2016, 72.

[871] Rezakhani 2016, 73.

[872] Rezakhani 2016, 73-74.

[873] For the Parthian origins of the name Sāsān, see Olbrycht 2016, 25-26.

[874] See however Olbrycht 2016, 25: Sāsān is likely to be a regional Zoroastrian deity worshipped in eastern Parthia.

[875] Rezakhani 2016, 73-74.

[876] On the Eastern Parthian ancestry of the Sasanians, see Olbrycht 2016.

[877] Alram 2007 and Rezakhani 2016, 73.

legends as well as royal onomastics, proposes the influence took place in the opposite direction: he suggests that Ardašīr's eastern campaigns were in fact carried out before his western conquests and that the Middle Persian inscriptional script exhibits the imprint of an eastern, local, Aramaic-derived alphabet.[878]

The problem with comparing two bodies of evidence and drawing out (possible) parallels between them is indeed deciding which corpus exercised an influence on which. Furthermore, apparent correlations, particularly when there are very few of them, may not be connected at all, or at least not in a direct manner: as we saw when studying the Elymaean, Characenean and Parthian scripts, innovations such as the introduction of similar diacritics to differentiate letters that had become indistinguishable, occurred around the same time but were not necessarily applied to the same letter. We will be returning to Rezakhani's arguments and his comparison of the Indo-Sāka and pre-Sasanian scripts in more detail after carrying out our own overview of the legends on Persid coinage. Meanwhile, it is worth making a short remark concerning the appearance of the fire altar on the Persis coin reverses. Rezakhani states himself at the end of his article that a study of the evolution of this religious symbol could help throw some light on the relationship between Indo-Sāka and pre-Sasanian coins.[879] The open fire altar with officiating king holding a bundle of barsom – which replaced the earlier triad consisting of the praying-king, box-like monument with winged-disk hovering above and (cultic) banner – appears with the ninth Persis king, Dārēw II.[880] Important palaeographic modifications accompany the iconographic change on his issues – these will be addressed later in detail. Suffice it to say for the moment that Dārēw II's coins present the marked influence of Parthian numismatics, both in terms of palaeography and coin typology **[Fig. 6.4]**. The legend for instance is organised in a distinctively square manner around the motif of the fire altar, creating a box around it, rather than running along the edge of the reverse as in previous series as well as in later issues. The square-shaped legend immediately calls to mind Parthian numismatics which systematically arranged their (Greek) inscriptions in this angular manner on their reverses (see chapter 5). The reign of Dārēw II is dated by Alram and Wiesehöfer to the middle of the first century BCE, which is when Parthian influence would have become more and more tangible in Persis.

[878] Rezakhani 2016, 74.

[879] Rezakhani 2016, 74.

[880] Alram 1986, Table 19.

The motif is taken up by Dārēw II's two sons and successors Ardašīr II and Wahšīr[881] (spelled *wḫwḫštr*): the fire altar with officiating king was thus struck on the reverses of the local Persis coinage up until the end of the first century CE. The representation of the fire-altar is then abandoned for a while, before appearing again under Ardašīr V/I. However, it is also interesting to note that although the fire altar disappears after Wahšīr, the representation of the officiating king holding a barsom is maintained on several coin series between Wahšīr and Ardašīr V/I; the space where one would have expected the fire altar to be, opposite the king whether he is looking left or right, is often filled by the representations of a crescent moon and star, with the star nestling in the concave curve offered by the crescent.[882] Now, in one of the more schematically engraved reverses of Dārēw II, the king is all but a stick-man and the fire altar is etched with only a few lines: a simple vertical line, the stand, rests on two short horizontal lines with the bottom one slightly longer, representing the stepped base; on top of the vertical stand is another horizontal line, the flat top of the altar, upon which rests a crescent moon-shaped bowl probably standing in for the fire-bowl; in the bowl is a star-shaped motif which evidently represents the fire itself with sparkling flames **[Fig. 6.4]**.[883] In this way, although the crescent moon and star have their own obvious (astronomical, astrological and by extension religious) significance, it seems to me that when both motifs are combined, especially opposite an officiating king with barsom, they may also have been standing in for a schematised, open fire altar – the crescent as the fire bowl and the star, nestled inside it as the blazing fire. The religious responsibility, authority and practice of the Persis kings may have been one of the (no doubt many) latent meanings behind the crescent moon and star pair; it could help explain its ubiquitous presence on Persis royal as well as later Sasanian imperial iconography.

Be that as it may, the motif certainly appears early on in the Persis coins series. Furthermore, the fire altar with officiating king was a constant of Achaemenid imagery and was engraved on the royal tombs cut into the rock face at Naqš-e Rostam. Both these elements would encourage the view that the motif was 'indigenous' to Persis; it would also have been a 'natural' choice for the local kings since, as we have seen, religious authority was an important pillar of their prestige and role as vassal rulers. In terms of style, it is true the altar struck on the early Sasanian coin reverses is very close to the one – much simplified – etched on the coins of the Indo-Sāka kings: both sets of altars present a thick main stand flanked with two more

[881] Alram 1986, 174-175.

[882] Alram 1986, Table 20.

[883] Alram 1986, Table 19, n° 565.

ornamental side-plinths (or decorative cordons hanging down to the floor?); the roaring fire is represented by several wavy lines, with the middle one soaring up above on either side.[884] It may well be that the comparable design indicates an iconographic affinity and therefore contact and exchange. The Sasanians however, whose prestige and local authority (and probably revenue), like the kings of Persis before them, rested on their role as guardians of an important local shrine, did not need the Indo-Sāka kings for the inspiration to represent a fire altar on their coin reverses.

II. Towards a palaeography of the Persis coin legends.

The legends of the Persis coins and their script.

The following description of the Persis coin legends will work chronologically through the numismatic series as it has been organised by Alram;[885] it proposes to highlight palaeographic changes and attempts, when these are striking or very sudden, to relate them (when relevant) to broader historical events. The corpus of Parthian, Elymaean and Characenean coins constitute an essential point of comparison: as the last chapter demonstrated, the Middle Persian script emerged among a mosaic of different local Aramaic-derived scripts heavily influenced by Parthian scribal tradition. Of course, our study of the Persis script is limited to the letters recorded by the coin legends, as well as two short pre-Sasanian inscriptions on silver vessels, which we will examine in conclusion. Until more written sources are rediscovered, we are left with a partial image of the script's different chronological strata. Nevertheless, the analysis below should help us decide whether Rezakhani's argument that eastern influences were fundamental to the emergence of the Sasanian Middle Persian ductus is realistic.

Probably one of the most striking characteristics of the Persid numismatic corpus is that the Greek alphabet apparently never made its way into the coin legends. This sets it starkly apart from the Parthian, Elymaean, and Characenean series. The coin hoards unearthed in Fārs indicate that Greek-engraved coins, be they Seleucid or Parthian, widely circulated in the province; as Alram has suggested, these were probably even used concurrently with local Persid issues.[886] Historical evidence suggests as we have seen that Persis was not spared Seleucid and Parthian domination: under both empires Greek was the main or a very important administrative

[884] See the reproductions in Rezakhani 2016, 73.

[885] Alram 1986.

[886] Alram 1986, 162.

language, as well as a script of prestige. Indeed, the previous chapter showed that later, local Parthian mints, where the use of Greek had long fallen into disuse, crudely mimicked Greek letter shapes to maintain this alphabet on their issues. In this way, whereas in the Parthian, Elymaean and Characenean contexts Greek legends preceded a later shift to a local Aramaic-derived script, on the basis of our information, this initial 'Greek phase' does not apply to Persid numismatics. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, it is delicate to conclude that the use of a local language or script necessarily expressed an act of resistance to 'foreign' overlords or a rejection of 'Hellenism'; typologically and stylistically – the figure of Nike placing a wreath on the king in the earlier series and the various heavily Parthianising representations of the Persid rulers in the later ones – the coins of Persis unmistakably bear the imprint of Hellenistic influences. Furthermore, Alram and Callieri both conclude that based on the high artistic quality of Baydād's issues, this very first semi-independent ruler of Persis turned to a Hellenistic workshop – and an excellent Hellenistic workshop, with engravers boasting a long experience in preparing dies – for the design of his prestige coinage. Incidentally, this indicates that commissioning the composition of a Greek legend would have been relatively straightforward. If the Persid kings had their legends engraved in Aramaic neither out of rejection of Greek nor out of lack of access to it, then it is probably simply because Aramaic was a natural choice for them: Persis, which had been the heart of the Achaemenid empire with a special administrative status at least up until Seleukos I and an old imperial administrative hub, likely hosted an important local chancery which had maintained a strong Aramaic scribal tradition.

The first series: a neat, lapidary Imperial Aramaic script.

On the first Persis coin series, the title 'governor of the gods' appears almost invariably underneath the box-like monument. The name of the king is engraved either to the left, behind the king who raises his arms, or to the right, typically between the monument and the cultic banner **[Fig. 6.2]**. On the opposite side (be it left or right) additional information is given: in the case of the first king, it is his patronymic *br bgwrt* 'son of Bagward', while on the coins of his successors a new phrase appears, *br prs* 'son of Pārs' or 'son of a Persian'. Because this expression is used by several generations of Persid kings it is unlikely to refer to an ancestor – it is not a patronymic as such – and probably yet another way for the vassal ruler to assert his local roots: these gave him his legitimacy as king of Persis and set him apart from the Seleucid overlords. The upper part of the coin has no inscription.

The first series displays a neat, imperial Aramaic script, somewhat more angular than the cursive ductus known from late Achaemenid manuscript archives, no doubt due to the numismatic medium **[Fig. 6.2]**.[887] As is the case with most lapidary-style scripts, this gives the ductus an overall archaising flavour and limits cursive features, such as ligatures. The downward strokes form straight, vertical lines which do not slant to the left in medial position as they do in manuscripts; the wavy *zain* is thus simplified to a simple downward stroke. The lower curves in letters such as the *bet* and the *lamed* are rendered by a right angle, creating an inverted L-shape; the normally rounded legs of the *samekh* are equally angular, making the grapheme look like a square with an open bottom and a shorter left leg. Similarly, the concave heads of certain letters like the *dalet*, *resh* and *kaf* are either simplified and flattened out into a horizontal bar, or present an exaggerated, box-like concave shape. The *resh* and *dalet* were already almost impossible to tell apart in the late Imperial Aramaic cursive ductus, but this lapidary feature makes all three graphemes as well as the *waw* virtually indistinguishable. In some of the coin issues, some efforts are made to differentiate them nonetheless, indicating a particular care in the engraving of the legend: the vertical leg of the *kaf* is longer than those of the *resh* and *dalet*, while the head of the *waw* is smaller, often slightly slanted, and never takes the concave box-shape (like a number one without the bottom horizontal bar). Similarly, the *yod* and *gimel*, which both take the shape of an open-bottomed triangle, can be told apart by their size, with the *gimel* being much larger.

It is worth noting that the title 'governor of the gods' is systematically written *prtrk' zy 'lhy'*: there are no 'mistakes' or variations in the spelling of the terms. In the same way that the spelling is consistent, so the letter shapes within this title remain perfectly steady throughout the coin legends of the kings who bear it, to the point of being almost frozen and 'oblivious' to palaeographical changes taking place in other words of the same coin legend. Thus, while in this phrase the *alef* typically takes the form of cross-shaped star – the lower right leg is sometimes very short making the grapheme look more like a trident – in the name of Ardašīr, the third '*frataraka*' ruler (spelled *'rtḫštry*), the initial *alef* has a completely different shape and resembles a Latin N, or a Hebrew *alef* **[Fig. 6.7]**. Similarly, the final *yod* in this same king's name is rounded and crescent-shape – like in Parthian and Middle Persian – whereas the *yod* of the particle *zy* in the formula (including on the same coin) is completely angular, like a bottom-less triangle, reminiscent of the Aramaic grapheme.

[887] Alram 1986, 165-170 and Tables 17-18.

A number of conjectures can be made based on this preliminary overview. The workshop which the first semi-independent kings of Persis turned to for the engraving of their prestige coinage was evidently highly skilled and experienced and the prototypes for the legends were drafted by highly trained scribes. The consistency in the spelling both of the kings' names and in the title formula, the efforts made to differentiate similar graphemes, as well as the clear, archaising Aramaic ductus all strongly support the view that it was a well-established mint working with official scribes trained in the Achaemenid scribal tradition. Nevertheless, there is also a hint of the existence of (the beginning of) a local cursive ductus: this is suggested by the variations in the shape of the *alef* and *yod*, which are archaising in the title formula but innovative in the names of later kings. Thus, although the scribes employed by the Persid rulers to compose the legends were evidently trained in the monolithic Achaemenid scribal tradition and kept a good knowledge of the 'classic' Imperial Aramaic alphabet and style, they were also evolving within a local scribal school from which a new ductus was gradually emerging.

Enter the Parthians.

After the fourth *frataraka* ruler Wādfradād I follow two Persid rulers whose coins are anepigraphic (Alram reads a rather defective rendering of the name 'Wādfradād' on the first set, which is what led him to call the first of the two kings Wādfradād II); it is their reverse type and portraits which place them firmly in the early period. The reigns of these two kings are placed in the second half of the second century BCE and thus fall into the short and only period of independence enjoyed by Persis, probably already started under Wādfradād I.

It is clear from the coins of their successor Dārēw I – dated to the turn of the first century BCE – that both the province and the local scribal tradition had undergone serious change in the intermediate period **[Fig. 6.8]**. Several features immediately recall Parthian numismatics, which tallies well with Wiesehöfer and Alram's suggestion – based on iconography and numismatic typology – that Dārēw I was the first sub-Parthian king.[888] The title 'governor of the gods' has disappeared from the legends and the local ruler is now described as a 'king', rendered by the Aramaic *mlk*/*mlk'* (see below). Scholars have also drawn attention to the fact that this period saw a 'revival' of the old Achaemenid name Darius.[889] How meaningful this revival is, however, is unclear, since Artaxerxes, the name of several early kings of Persis, was

[888] Alram 1986, 163.

[889] Callieri 2007, 124.

also an important Achaemenid name.[890] More directly relevant to our study is that the coin legends betray some hesitation in the spelling of 'Dārēw'. In the earliest coins the name ends in a letter which takes the shape of an open-topped square; Alram suggests it could be an *'ain*.[891] In later spellings the final grapheme is a wavy line, which was thought by Alram to represent a *waw* but is in all likelihood actually a *nun*.[892] This last spelling is the one maintained in later issues as well as under later kings of the same name. It is worth noting that the inter-consonantal *alef* (D**ā**rēw) is written, whereas in the names of previous Persis kings presenting a long *ā* it was not (such as Wādfradād).[893]

In terms of palaeography, the coin engravers adopted the Parthian convention of transcribing the *mem* by a cross **[Fig. 6.8]**. As we saw, this was a script-convention also followed by the local kings of Elymais under Parthian rule. Whereas in Parthian coins the *alef* has moved on from the older Aramaic cross-like grapheme and is going towards the squarer, cursive Parthian and Middle Persian shape, on the Persis coins this letter remains close to its Imperial Aramaic prototype. This makes the *alef* and the *mem* virtually indistinguishable in this series of Persid coins, even though the legs of the *mem* are often admittedly a little wavier.[894] The ductus in the coins of Dārēw I is also overall much sloppier – the letters do not have regular proportions and are engraved at strange angles giving them a 'jumbled' appearance – and is characterised by several highly simplified graphemes: the *dalet*, *resh* and *waw* have been reduced to a simple vertical line, and so has the *yod*, albeit a slightly shorter one, and even the *lamed*, even though a little wavier. It is probably to remedy the ensuing confusion that new grapheme shapes are introduced under Dārēw I's successor, Wādfradād III **[Fig. 6.9]**: the *waw* is decidedly wavier and takes the shape of an inverted 'S'; the *dalet* now resembles a '3'.[895] The previous chapter showed that the 3-like shape of the *dalet* probably resulted from the welding of the main grapheme – originally a reversed S-shape, like the *waw* and *resh* – with a dot or diacritic which was added underneath it to differentiate it from other very similar letters; this evolution has an

[890] The name 'Darius' also took the form of a patronymic in this period, *dārāyān*.

[891] Alram 1986, 171.

[892] The correct spelling of the name Darayan will be clarified by a *pointillé* inscription on a silver vessel published by Skjærvø in 1997.

[893] Häberl highlights the use of (Aramaic-derived) *matres lectionis* as vowels as a specificity of the Parthian script: in Aramaic dialects from the Arsacid and Sasanian periods, *matres lectionis* are used only as such (apart from Mandaic, probably because of Iranian influence), see Häbel 2006, 60-61.

[894] Alram 1986, 171-174 and Table 19.

[895] Alram 1986, 172 and Table 19.

exact counterpart in Elymaean.[896] Most significantly, these two changes in the coins of Wādfradād III herald the Middle Persian inscriptional graphemes, where the *dalet* maintains this new 3-like while the *waw* and *resh* both take a more angular version of the reversed S-shape, resembling a number 2.

Indications of 'frozen' or heterographic spellings in the early first century BCE.

Also significant is the fact that the spelling MLK' for 'king' – rather than MLK – becomes the norm after Wādfradād III: the word appears to have become 'frozen' in the determinate or emphatic state – normally used to indicate the identifiability of the subject in a given context – rather than in its abstract or unmarked form.[897] Now, MLK' is the 'frozen' spelling of the aramaeogram for 'king' in Middle Persian: read *šāh* but written MLK'. Similarly, a new change is documented in the coin legends of Dārēw II, Wādfradād III's successor and son, where the word for 'son' is spelled BRE – until then it had consistently appeared on legends in its unmarked form BR.[898] BRE is, like MLK', the determinative state in Aramaic; it is the form in which this word will become fixed into an aramaeogram in Middle Persian. It is worth noting that the Parthian versions of Sasanian inscriptions spell the aramaeogram for son BRY, which is originally the possessive form in Aramaic.[899] Wādfradād III's coins thus indicate that in the early first century BCE already, a local scribal tradition was emerging in Persis, with its own palaeographic characteristics as well as distinctive morphological features. The word BRE is also remarkable for its peculiar palaeography: the *bet* has resolutely moved away from its Aramaic prototype and acquired the Middle Persian form, with a small vertical line and a long, extended lower horizontal line. The bend is curved rather than angular and the words present features of ligatures: the *resh*, reduced to a 'tick', and the *he*, much more elongated than its Imperial Aramaic prototype, are written 'within' the *bet*, resting on its lower horizontal stroke, with the lower leg of the *he* curling back to the right and merging with the long lower leg of the *bet*. We are far away with this word from the earlier angular, detached, and archaising lapidary ductus.

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[896] See Häberl 2006, 59 and the table on page 57.

[897] Gzella 2012, 578.

[898] Alram 1986, 173 and Table 19.

[899] See chapter 5 for and overview of the possible mechanisms which 'froze' nouns into the possessive and determinative forms.

Indications of an emerging local scribal tradition.

The striking changes in both title and palaeography which appear with the coins of Dārēw I call for some comment. The short period of independence – in which the anepigraphic coins of two vassal kings were struck – evidently witnessed important administrative upheaval as well as the disintegration of what had been the tail end of the monolithic, Achaemenid administrative and scribal – for both, as we argued previously, went hand in hand – tradition under the Seleucid rule of Persis. Spelling of names are inconsistent or at least 'experimented' with; certain words like 'king' and 'son' have become fixed in grammatically awkward forms; the engraving of the legend has nothing of the neatness of earlier inscriptions; the archaising, angular style of the earlier Aramaic ductus is completely abandoned. Parthian numismatics and palaeography have exercised a marked influence: Dārēw I is the Persid king who switched to the Attic drachm as the main denomination of his issues after the Parthian model; the cross-shaped *mem* on his coins stems directly from Parthian numismatics. We could even posit that the change in title from '*frataraka* of the gods' to 'king' was in step with Parthian numismatics/tradition: on their coins, the Parthian kings call themselves ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ and ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ, and then later (only from the middle of the second century on) MLK' and MLKyn MLK'. The coins of Dārēw I and his successors also betray the imprint of a more cursive local ductus which must have been used in the regional administration in parallel to the numismatic, semi-lapidary, alphabet. The simplified vertical lines of the *resh*, *waw* and *dalet*, which become very difficult to tell apart, are typical features of cursive Aramaic-derived scripts (including much later manuscript Middle Persian). The much more rounded hook of the *pe*, the vertical leg of which is decidedly slanting, curling towards the left – in the direction of writing – is also a typical manuscript feature. The introduction of diacritics on the coins of Wādfradād III and Dārēw II to distinguish graphemes which had become virtually identical suggests a conscious attempt to make the legends less ambiguous. Whether this was a special effort made for the king's titulature on their issues or whether it was a transposition on coins of an already existing palaeographic characteristic stemming from local manuscript tradition is difficult to tell. The former is perhaps more likely – numismatics may thus have been one ground of palaeographic 'experimentation' – since Dārēw I's do not present the use of diacritics and clearly reflect the simplified ductus of manuscript writing. The ligatures in the word BRE are another feature of cursive. It is of course delicate to decide whether the words MLK' and BRE had become aramaeograms by then and were being read for their Persian equivalents. The block-like, fixed spelling of this latter term certainly encourages it, and so does the grammatically awkward forms of these two nouns, apparently already firmly 'frozen' in the emphatic state. Finally, it should be noted that several

graphemes are heralding their 'ultimate' inscriptional Middle Persian forms: as mentioned above the 3-shaped *dalet* is the inscriptional Sasanian grapheme; so is the elongated bet (similar in both inscriptional and manuscript Middle Persian) and even the *he*, still slightly angular but definitely on its way to its Sasanian shape.

The palaeographic trend of this new phase of Persid numismatics can be described as combining Parthian numismatic and manuscript tradition with local manuscript characteristics; it continues with the coins of Dārēw II's successors and sons. The reigns of Ardašīr II and Wahšīr span the second half of the first century BCE; like Dārēw II they have abandoned the depiction of the praying king, tall square structure and banner on their reverses and replaced it with the motif of the king officiating before an open fire altar and holding a bundle of barsom.[900] With Ardašīr II, the cross-shaped Aramaic *alef* disappears and the Parthian manuscript grapheme – an opened-topped square with a 'tail' to the left – is adopted: this is the final shape of the *alef* in both inscriptional and cursive Middle Persian. The *ḥet* in the name of Ardašīr is also directly borrowed from Parthian, and takes the shape of an elongated Latin N. The legends on the coins of this king are much better engraved and legible, perhaps suggestive of a newfound administrative stability, already underway with Dārēw II. They also present some elegant, archaising features which further help distinguish the graphemes: the *lamed*, earlier reduced to a single vertical line, is given a little lower hook, which is the shape it will keep all the way into, and throughout, the Sasanian period, even making its way into Middle Persian manuscripts from the Islamic period via heterograms. Such 'archaising' shapes do not so much illustrate a 'return' to more classical Aramaic prototypes than derive directly from Parthian: like the *lamed*, the *shin* is closer to the Imperial Aramaic grapheme than in earlier Persid coins, but also much more upright, *à la Parthe*.

New cursive forms: the first century CE.

With Ardašīr II's successor Wahšīr, the above palaeographic evolutions are maintained and we are introduced to further innovations. The *mem* has shifted from the cross-shaped grapheme of Parthian numismatic to the Parthian manuscript letter – it is therefore paradoxically closer to its original Imperial Aramaic prototype. The most striking palaeographic change is the *shin*, which has abandoned the conservative Aramaeo-Parthian form to assume an entirely different shape, heralding the inscriptional Middle Persian grapheme: it is now a horizontal bar with two ticks

[900] Alram 1986, 173-175 and Table 19.

or comma-like strokes resting on it, in the middle **[Fig. 6.10]**. This sudden departure from Parthian ductus is probably best explained by the transposition of a local cursive style into the numismatic medium. We will come back to the evolution of this letter with the discussion of pre-Sasanian Middle Persian inscriptions on silver vessels, which may illustrate intermediary forms of this grapheme.

The rule of the next four kings, identified by their coins as Pakor I, Pakor II, Nāmbed and Napād spans the first century CE. The motif of the fire altar is abandoned on their coin reverses and replaced by the king's portrait, non-figurative motifs such as the triskeles, or again the figure of the officiating king facing a crescent moon and star (see above).[901] Their legends confirm the palaeographic evolutions described above for the *dalet*, *alef*, *ḥet*, *bet*, *he*, *lamed*, *yod*, *shin*, *waw* and *resh* – these have all either assumed their Middle Persian forms or firmly herald them. Other graphemes indicate that further change is underway. The *pe*, which had already become more hooked and left slanting in Dārēw II's issues, is now steadily curling in, almost becoming a semi-circle. The *nun*, which is here engraved for the first time since the 'Parthian' period began, displays a markedly Parthian shape (resembling a Latin L) – this is the form which will be carried into Sasanian Middle Persian inscriptions. An important palaeographic change is illustrated by the *kaf*, which is decidedly wavier and moving towards the Sasanian Middle Persian 3-shaped grapheme. It is worth noting that the name 'Pakor', spelled '*pkwr*', presents the juxtaposition of three graphemes that had become increasingly difficult to tell apart:[902] the *kaf*, *waw*, and *resh* all take the shape of a long, reversed Latin S (or an elongated number 2). It is possible that the palaeographic change introduced in Pakor I's coins results from a conscious effort to differentiate the *kaf* from the *waw* and *resh*. In this respect, the *kaf*'s evolution is comparable to that of the *dalet*, which had similarly been modified with a diacritic to look like a '3' to distinguish it from the *resh* and *waw*.

Napād is followed by an 'unknown' king – whose coins are anepigraphic – and with the latter's successor, Wādfradād IV, we enter the second century CE. A remarkable palaeographic evolution in this king's coin legends is the shape of the *taw*, which until then had remained relatively conservative (a straight vertical line with an upper right hook): the upper hook is now more rounded and the bottom of the main vertical stem curves towards the right.[903] Again, this development is independent from Parthian: in this script it is the upper hook which gradually

[901] Alram 1986, Tables 20-22.

[902] Alram 1986, 175-176 and Table 20.

[903] Alram 1986, 180 and Table 21.

becomes bigger, more rounded and curves back towards the main stem. The *taw* represented in Wādfradād IV's coins is therefore in all probability a local variant and heralds the inscriptional Middle Persian grapheme. With Wādfradād IV's successor, Mančihr I, the letter 'ch' makes its first appearance on Persis coinage.[904] It would appear, as Rezakhani has argued, that this letter is based on the Imperial Aramaic *ṣade*.[905] It is worth noting however that the shape of this letter in Mančihr's coins is very similar to the Parthian *shin*: as we have seen, the *shin* in Persid numismatics was by this time quite distinct from its Parthian counterpart and on its way to the inscriptional Middle Persian form. Follows Ardašīr III, whose legends confirm the decidedly Middle Persian shape of the *taw* with a short, rounded upper hook and right-curving main stem. It is with his successor however, Mančihr II, that an important palaeographic change occurs.[906] The *mem*, which had until then followed Parthian manuscript ductus, adopts a completely different shape. The curving right leg of the letter now curls right back towards its main stem, intersecting it to resemble a loop, crossed to the left **[Fig. 6.11]**. In the defective coins of Mančihr II's unnamed successor, the loop even rotates upwards, resembling a cursive Greek gamma. The new, much rounder shape of this grapheme, as well as the way the two strands of the loop intersect each other, is suggestive of a cursive ductus: we may once again posit the influence of a local manuscript tradition for this sudden palaeographic change. The intersection of graphemes, typical of cursive styles, is further illustrated in the legends of Mančihr III: in the word BRE 'son', the letter *resh* does not 'rest' on the long lower line of the *bet* as it had done in earlier coins, but crosses it vertically, turning back to the right beneath the *bet*. In this kings' coins, the *ch* is also becoming curvier, moving towards its monumental Middle Persian shape. With Mančihr III's successor Ardašīr IV, we enter the third century CE. No new palaeographic changes are introduced, but his legends contain eleven different letters, making it easier to appreciate the long evolution undergone by the Aramaic-derived graphemes.[907] Only the *kaf* is still conservative, displaying the reversed-S shape. Otherwise, in my opinion the script can firmly be described as proto-Middle Persian. The main difference is perhaps the overall ductus, which is more angular than Sasanian Middle Persian – the graphemes' individual shapes however (apart from the *kaf*) resolutely belong to this alphabet.

[904] Alram 1986, 180-181 and Table 21.

[905] Rezakhani 2016, 72.

[906] Alram 1986, 182 and Table 21.

[907] Alram 1986, 184-185 and Table 22.

The pre-Sasanian kings and the 'curly style'.

Now, the overall style of the script undergoes a serious change with Ardašīr IV's successor Šābuhr **[Fig. 6.12]**.[908] A modification of legend-type accompanies this change, with the appearance of the epithet *bgy* in anteposition to the king's name (see above for the significance of this term in the context of royal titulature).[909] These two elements, which herald both Sasanian titulature and script style, suggests that there was a conscious effort to break with an older aesthetic tradition and embark into a new royal era.

In terms of palaeography, the *kaf* is back to the 3-shape earlier introduced by Pakor, with an additional tick at the bottom (like a cedilla), which it will keep in Sasanian inscriptions. As we saw, the 3-shaped *dalet* was probably the result of the welding between the original grapheme – a reversed S – and a diacritic, added below it to differentiate it from the *resh* and *waw*. The 'new' *kaf* was apparently the consequence of a two-step transformation: to the original reversed-S shape was added a lower tick to differentiate it from the *resh* and *waw* as we can see in Pakor I's coins, making it look like a 3; it was then given an extra tick under Šābuhr, probably to differentiate it from the *dalet* which kept the 3-shape. The epithet *bgy* 'Lord' now precedes the name of the king. It allows us to appreciate the shift in the shape of the gimel, which is still a triangle, but which has rotated 90° clockwise, and now looks a little like a very small *bet*. The *pe* has also completed its transformation, underway since Pakor, and become a full loop with a small tail to the right. Above all, it is the ductus – rather than the palaeography – that is remarkable in Šābuhr's coins. The letter shapes are – apart from the *kaf*, although again, the change it underwent is perfectly in line with the evolution of other graphemes in both Persis and other regional scripts like Elymaean – identical to those of his recent predecessors.

More strikingly, the writing style acquires a much more curved – even curly – ornate quality with this king's coins **[Fig. 6.12]**. To give an image, it was as if the letters were now traced with a soft paint brush rather than carved on metal with hard tools. All angles are softened, and straight vertical lines are wavier, often beginning and/or ending with a curl. Thus, the *ḥet*, which previously looked like an elongated Latin N has essentially become a wave; the *yod*, which was a little hook, is a crescent; the loops of the *pe* and *mem* are almost perfectly circular. This new trend in the ductus style carries on in the coin legends of his brother Ardašīr

[908] Alram 1986, 185 and Table 22.

[909] It is worth noting that this king describes himself as the 'son of Lord Pabag, King' in his legends, although no coinage of Pabag has survived.

V, the future Sasanian king Ardašīr I.[910] The upper hook of the *resh*, which had the reversed-S shape, is now accentuated, giving this grapheme its final inscriptional Middle Persian form (like a '2'). Similarly, the upper hook of the *taw* is more rounded and its main stem more arched than vertical, which is the shape it will keep in Sasanian inscriptions.

The shift in late Persis coinage towards the 'curly' ductus was not as sudden as might appear: legends on the reverses of the Sasanian king Ardašīr's coins distinctly belong to the older, more angular style.[911] Indeed, the obverses of the new monarch's coins present beautifully engraved and long legends in the new ornate style: these introduce the ubiquitous formula of Sasanian royal titulature 'mazdean Lord X king of kings of Ērān whose seed if of the gods',[912] carved all along the edge of the coin. The script on the obverses is Sasanian inscriptional Middle Persian; any divergence can be put down to the difference in medium: the numismatic style may present some more cursive or simplified strokes which are fully developed in full-scale rock inscriptions. However, on the reverses of the first Sasanian king's early coinage, a trace of the 'pre-curly ductus' survives. The legend on that side of the coins read NWR' ZY 'rtḫštr, or "fire of Ardašīr", thus identifying the flames blazing on the altar as this king's dynastic fire. The *waw* and *resh* are indistinguishable and take the reversed-S shape; the *taw* is angular and archaising; the *alef* much more box-like; the *ḥet* back to its elongated N-shape as opposed to the curvy wave of the same coin's obverse. This important detail shows that different ductus-styles were co-existing in Persis and could even make their way onto the same object. It also strongly suggests that the 'curly style' that was to become the mark of inscriptional Middle Persian was a *recherché* ornate style, evidently elaborated – along with a new titulature-type – to celebrate a new dynastic era in Persis.

Further thoughts on the relationship between the Persis and Sasanian scripts.

With this last observation we may return to Rezakhani's study of the Persis script. Indeed, one of the problems it presents is a lack of distinction between palaeography – the actual shape of the letters – and script style. The more rounded and curlier style is not a tendency that is exclusive to the pre-Sasanian Persis coin legends. As we saw in the previous chapter, the coins and inscriptions of Elymais and Characene display a similar tendency: in Elymais, the *alef* was

[910] Alram 1986, 186 and Table 22. For a palaeographic study of the early Sasanian coin legends, see Skjærvø 2003.

[911] Alram 1986, 187-188 and Table 22.

[912] Augmented under Šābuhr to king of kings of Ērān and non-Ērān.

ligatured making it look like an infinity symbol while the *samekh* was rounded into a full circle; in the coins of Characene it is the *shin* which resembles an infinity symbol. Similarly, these scripts display certain analogous or parallel innovations, such as the use of diacritics which take the form of ticks/cedillas to tell similar graphemes apart; all three bear the imprint of Parthian numismatics and manuscript tradition. The scripts of Elymais, Characene and Persis remain firmly distinct however, because their respective graphemes underwent separate evolutions. Furthermore, an important omission is made in Rezakhani's study: surprisingly, he does not take into consideration the palaeographic influence of Parthian. While he compares the pre-Sasanian Persis script to Elymaean, Characenean and even Manichaean, as well as Indo-Sāka numismatics, he entirely neglects Parthian, a major scribal tradition which had gradually replaced Greek in regional administration, coinage and monumental inscriptions. The rule of Parthian overlords spans the reign of eighteen local Persis kings – this omission can only be misleading.

The analysis of the Persid and early Sasanian numismatic corpus shows a gradual and smooth palaeographic evolution from Imperial Aramaic to inscriptional Middle Persian. New letter shapes usually are introduced progressively, appearing only every two or three reigns only; different styles may even co-exist, with some words maintaining older versions of the same grapheme. More sudden changes occur also, typically after a period of one or two anepigraphic series: these often correspond to a period of political turmoil and administrative reorganisation, such as the short period of independence which Persis experienced in the first half of the second century BCE, the conquest of the region by the Parthians, as well as the rise to power of what would be the Sasanian dynasty.

The overview offered above helps us draw out several overarching trends which shaped the Middle Persian script. The first is the gradual simplification of angular, lapidary and archaic Aramaic graphemes – a common scribal trend. The second is the evident influence of Parthian numismatics, and later, Parthian manuscript tradition, with direct borrowings into the Persid coin legends. In some cases, this meant a 'return' to more conservative letter shapes: Parthian, a powerful imperial administrative script, had kept close to Imperial Aramaic prototypes. The third is a conscious effort to distinguish graphemes that have become too similar to avoid (excessive) confusion: such modifications have pointedly occurred on the coins of a king whose name presented the chance juxtaposition of a series of graphemes which had become difficult to tell apart. The fourth is the occasional introduction of what can reasonably be explained as local cursive forms, as well as local cursive tendencies: these have no counterpart in Parthian or took a different direction in the latter script. Examples of these include the horizontal *shin*,

which first appeared in the legends of Wahšīr at the turn of the first century CE, and the loop-like *mem,* introduced in the reign of Mančihr II in the second half of the second century CE: the predecessors of both these kings had kept with older forms of the graphemes. Such innovations are introduced sporadically and over time and are therefore more likely to stem from local scribal tradition than be the result of external influence: sudden palaeographic changes have the tendency to bring on bigger, 'wholesale' modifications, linked to wider typological and iconographic alterations. Finally, it appears that the wavy, curly ductus of pre-Sasanian and Sasanian script was an ornate style, elaborated for the purpose of a new royal era (perhaps inspired by a decorative script applied through another medium, like paint?): it effected the overall aesthetic of the inscriptions but did not fundamentally change the letters' shape.

Thus, the overview of Persid coinage helps confirm that the palaeographic evolution that led to the emergence of the Middle Persian script was organic: local engravers composed with different scribal styles taking into account such factors as new numismatic models (Parthian), legibility and aesthetics, and reflected a general tendency to move away from angular lapidary forms to a more cursive ductus. The Sasanian dynasty may well have had its roots in the east. From the point of view of palaeography and (iconography, for that matter), the Sasanian kings were firmly anchored in a tradition that was local to Persis, which may be described as the product of a local manuscript tradition (or traditions!) evolving within a Parthian administrative and scribal framework.

III. Further examples of pre-Sasanian Middle Persian inscriptions.

Pre-Sasanian Middle Persian inscriptions on silver vessels.

Another category of inscribed objects – also omitted in Rezakhani's study – contributes to illustrate the variety of scribal traditions in Persis and may help understanding some palaeographic innovations: silver vessels. A first pre-Sasanian Middle Persian inscription on a silver bowl with gold inlay was published by Prods Oktor Skjærvø in 1997.[913] It is engraved all around the outer rim of the object in *pointillé* – this scribal convention, which stems from Parthian practice, is common to all silver vessels, including Sasanian ones. Inscriptions on Parthian and Sasanian silverware typically indicate the weight of the object, with different variants of the formulas MN S [Number] (the S stands for 'stater') or MN ZWZYN [Number]

[913] Skjærvø 1997.

(ZWZYN being the aramaeogram for ‘drachm’). It also often identifies the owner of the piece with the phrase [Name] NPŠE (*xwēš*; ‘his, property of’).[914]

This bowl is no exception to this basic rule although it also provides additional information. The first few words of the inscription transcribe the name and patronym of a king, read by Skjærvø as follows: “King Ardašīr, our brother, descendant of Dārāyān, son of king Dārēw” (’rtḫštr MLK’ AH’yn dry’nkn BRE dry’n MLK’). Sims-Williams has more recently proposed the reading “Of the brothers of King Ardašīr, descendant(s) of Dārāyān, son(s) of Dārāyān.”[915] We will return to this difficult patronymic presently. Next comes the identification of the object according to the standard formula [Object] ZNE ‘this’. Sims-Williams corrected Skjærvø’s original reading and demonstrated that the object identified was a *štxw*: a type of vessel or bowl.[916] This term is engraved on other Parthian, pre-Sasanian and Sasanian inscribed silver vessels. The bowl is further described in the inscription as being made of YNGDWN *zl* KSP and weighing 50 staters (S 20 20 10). Skjærvø has shown that the Middle Persian verbal heterogram YNGDWN, formed on the Aramaic root *ngd*, is used in several Aramaic attributes applied to metal and likely expresses the quality of being ‘chased, laminated, stretched or hammered into a sheet’.[917] As Skjærvø argued, in the context of the inscription, it probably describes ‘hammered’ metal: in this case the vessel is of hammered gold (*zl*, *zarr*) and silver (KSP, *asēm*).[918] The last words are engraved in a very different ductus: the dots of the *pointillé* are wider and so close to one another that they almost merge into full lines. This last passage records the familiar ownership formula wḫwḫštr BRBYT’ NPŠE, property of prince Wahšīr. The noticeable difference in ductus between the first section of the inscription and the final ‘property’ formula suggests that the latter was added to the vessel at a later stage: the bowl was probably first presented to king Ardašīr and then came into the ownership of the prince (and later king) Wahšīr.[919]

[914] For different variants of these stock formulae, see Gignoux 1975.

[915] Skjærvø 1997, 93-94; Sims-Williams 2021, 615-616.

[916] Sims-Williams 2021, 611-613.

[917] Skjærvø 1993, 186-188.

[918] Skjærvø 1997, 94.

[919] Skjærvø 1997, 95.

Comparing the coin legends with the silver vessel inscription.

The coins of Persis provide us with a remarkable royal sequence to compare this inscription with. The Persid king Ardašīr II describes himself on his coin legends as 'son of king Dārēw'; the latter is Dārēw II, son of Wādfradād III, himself preceded by Dārēw I. The coins also attest the existence of Ardašīr II's brother Wahšīr, also identified in his legends as being the 'son of Dārēw' (II).[920] This serendipitous sequence firmly places the engraving of the silver vessel in the middle of the first century BCE. The strange patronymic Dārāyānagān is translated by Skjærvø and Sims-Williams as 'descendants of Dārāyān': both scholars see it as a reference to the Persid King Dārēw/Dārāyān I (see below).[921] This fits nicely with the numismatic evidence and seems more plausible than Callieri's interpretation of the patronymic as the expression of the Persid kings' "full conscience" of their Achaemenid political heritage. Skjærvø even suggests that Sasanian national history may have conflated the Achaemenid and highly legendary Dārāy ī Dārāyān with his Parthian namesake from Persis.[922]

The inscription on the silver vessel confirms the 'fixed' spellings of the terms 'king' and 'son' as MLK' and BRE, which, based on numismatic evidence seem to have become generalised around the time of Dārēw I. The inscription introduces us to another example of 'fixed' spellings, further suggesting the increasingly systematic use of heterography by the mid-first century BCE: BRBYT' 'prince', appears in the emphatic state like BRE and MLK'; it is found with the exact same spelling in Sasanian inscriptions (both Middle Persian and Parthian versions) as well as manuscripts. On the other hand, the awkward spelling AH'yn for 'brothers' ('our brothers' in Skjærvø's reading) is an indication that not all Aramaic (proto-)heterograms had acquired their 'final' forms. In Sasanian Middle Persian one would have expected AHY'n: AHY, the possessive form in which this word was 'frozen' into an aramaeogram, with the phonetic complement 'n to express the plural.[923]

As Skjærvø has observed, the vessel helps us correct the name of the Persid king which was read 'Dārēw' by Alram.[924] In the *pointillé* inscription, the name is unambiguously written *d'ryn*: it clearly ends in a *nun*, which is drawn as a long vertical line with a foot going towards

[920] Alram 1986, 173-175 and Table 19.

[921] Skjærvø 1997, 93-94 and Sims-Williams 2021, 615.

[922] Skjærvø 1997, 103.

[923] See Sims-Williams 2021, 616 for further comments on this term, its reading and spelling.

[924] Skjærvø 1997, 94.

the right, somewhat like a Latin L.[925] As we have seen, this is the more 'evolved' – and future Sasanian – version of this grapheme, which in the numismatic corpus only emerges with king Napād. In the coins of king Ardašīr II himself, as well as that of his brother Wahšīr and father (Dārāyān II), the name ends with the reversed-S grapheme, which usually renders either a *waw* or a *resh*.[926] The letter *nun* is not represented elsewhere in the Persid coin legends until king Nambed – who directly precedes Napād – so it is difficult to trace the local evolution of this grapheme. Nevertheless, the letter which begins this king's name presents a wavier version of the L-shaped *nun*, with a slightly curved head: the resulting shape comes close to a reversed-S.[927] In this way, the *nun* must have evolved from a simple cursive wavy line (see the coins of Dārāyān I), to the ubiquitous reversed-S shape and then been distinguished from the *waw* and *resh* with a sharper lower right foot. Here again, the corresponding Parthian grapheme took an alternate route, closer the Aramaic prototype, and acquired a left foot. Although *dārāyān* takes the shape of a patronymic, there is no doubt based on both the numismatic corpus and the vessel inscription that it is used as a first name.

From the point of view of palaeography, the inscription on the silver bowl is consistent in many respects with that of the legends on these kings' silver coins but also presents curious individual letter shapes **[Fig. 6.13]**. The word BRE is written with exactly the same ligatured style as on the coins, with the very long lower leg of the *bet* supporting the *resh* and *he*; the *lamed* has acquired its lower hook and the *nun* its lower right foot; the *resh* and *waw* resemble a '2' which is their 'final' form; the *dalet* presents the familiar 3-shape and even the *kaf* displays its 'final' form with lower cedilla: in the numismatic corpus this change only appears with king Pakor but from the vessel inscription it had clearly already been underway; the *mem* has moved on from the cross-shape of Parthian numismatics and acquired the corresponding Parthian manuscript shape, a shift which happens just around this time in the coins too, with the legends of Wahšīr; the *taw* is even more curled than on the numismatic legends and has a little lower foot, anticipating the coins in acquiring its final Middle Persian shape; the *yod* is similarly more rounded than in Persid numismatics, already resembling a little crescent opened to the left; the *pe* is much more rounded, but, similarly to the coins of from this period, has not quite formed a loop yet. We are introduced with the silver vessel to letters which do not appear in the numismatic corpus. One such letter is the *zain*, which has already acquired its final Sasanian

[925] Skjærvø 1997, 96-97.

[926] Alram 1986, 173-175 and Table 19.

[927] Alram 1986, 177-178 and Table 20.

shape: a small vertical line with a more or less sharp double bend like a reversed Latin 'z'. The Aramaic prototype was a simple straight line while in Parthian this grapheme only has a single sharp bend in the middle. Another 'new' letter is the *samekh*, which again presents its rounded, inscriptional Middle Persian shape. This is an important detail as the *samekh* was one of the arguments put forward by Rezakhani to support a possible influence of Indo-Sāka numismatics on the Sasanian Middle Persian alphabet:[928] the silver bowl shows that the shape of this grapheme was part of Persis scribal tradition well before then.[929] In this way, the *pointillé* inscription, which can be compared with such precision to the Persid numismatic legends thanks to the name and patronym of the king it records, helps us confirm that many of the palaeographic changes which can be observed on later Persid coins were already on their way or had already taken place a few decades earlier.

Further indications of a local scribal tradition in Persis.

Some more surprising shapes like that of the *alef* and *shin* also suggest that there were several contemporaneous scribal styles co-existing in this region. Thus, the *alef* on the coins of the Persid kings Ardašīr II and Wahšīr takes the Parthian (numismatic and manuscript) shape of an open-topped square with a 'tail' to the left. This is the style retained by the kings' successors and maintained in both inscriptional and manuscript Sasanian Middle Persian. By contrast, Ardašīr II and Wahšīr's father, king Dārāyān, had used the cross-shaped alef, itself a derived and simplified form of the star-shaped Aramaic grapheme.[930] In the silver vessel inscription, dated to the reign of Ardašīr II, the *alef* is different again. It appears to be a variant of the cross-shape, but with a ligature at the bottom which links the two lower extremities of the cross. Although Elymaean and Characenean also present ligatures for this grapheme, the resulting shapes are entirely different, suggesting a purely local innovation.

Another curious palaeographic innovation recorded in the *pointillé* inscription is the *shin*. In the first part of the text, this grapheme takes the strange shape of two long horizontal wavy lines drawn one on top of the other, with the upper one shorter than the lower; both join a single short vertical line to the left.[931] In the 'property formula', engraved slightly later than the first section of the text but still within the reign of Ardašīr II (his brother and successor

[928] Rezakhani 2016, 73.

[929] See the pictures at Skjærvø 1997, 98.

[930] Compare with Naveh 1970, 26 and 46.

[931] Skjærvø 1997, 97 and Sims-Williams 2021, 615.

Wahšīr is described as a 'prince') the *shin* is an elongated version of the proto-Middle Persian shape (see below). Indeed, the period spanning the reigns of Ardašīr II and Wahšīr appear to have been a creative one for this grapheme. In the coins of Ardašīr II the *shin* is decidedly Parthian, like a Latin L with an extra short horizontal bar at the top – an upright version of the Aramaic prototype. In Wahšīr's legends, it has shifted to a proto-Middle Persian shape: a base horizontal line with two 'ticks' or comma-shaped strokes resting on it.[932] For Skjærvø, the *shin*(s) in the silver vessel inscription is an illustration of an intermediate form, mid-way between the Aramaeo-Parthian and Middle Persian graphemes: it suggests that the final Middle Persian form was obtained not by rotating the entire letter 90° counterclockwise but by the upper horizontal line detaching itself and coming to rest on the lower horizontal stroke;[933] the left 'tick' in the Middle Persian grapheme would thus be the original vertical main stem. This may well be, although whether the grapheme's evolution was as linear as this description suggests is more difficult to ascertain. As we shall see presently, the *shin* takes yet another (fifth) shape in an inscribed silver vessel recently published by Nicolas Sims-Williams. What these different innovations do certainly illustrate is the emergence of a local ductus that was moving away from Aramaeo-Parthian prototypes, and by extension suggest a lively local scribal activity. Other graphemes in the *pointillé* inscription show a range of shapes: thus the *kaf* has acquired the 'advanced' Sasanian inscriptional shape – a '3' with lower cedilla – in the first occurrence of the word MLK' as well as in the aramaeogram for silver KSP('); in the second occurrence of MLK' it has an elongated reversed-S shape, common on Persid coins from this period; while in the patronym *d'ryn**k**n*, if Skjærvø's reading is correct, it resembles much earlier versions of this grapheme on Persid coinage, closer to the Aramaic prototype.

A second pre-Sasanian Middle Persian inscription on a silver vessel.

A second silver vessel engraved with a pre-Sasanian Middle Persian inscription in *pointillé* was recently published by Nicholas Sims-Williams.[934] The inscription begins ZNE š'tẖw nwydyt "this bowl was presented" and then lists the names and military titles of those who presented the bowl; the name of the recipient of the gift is apparently omitted. The last sentence appears to be a blessing formula, read by Sims-Williams as "May it grant blessing!".[935]

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[932] Alram 1986, 173-175 and Plate 19.

[933] Skjærvø 1997, 95.

[934] Sims-Williams 2021.

[935] Sims-Williams 2021, 611, 614.

The ductus is overall much neater with proportionate, round, and ornate letters which display a more characteristically (inscriptional) Middle Persian ductus **[Fig. 6.14]**. Thus, the curves in the 3-shape of graphemes like the *dalet* and *kaf* are accentuated, with a deeper central dip in the main stem; similarly, the lower hook of the elegantly elongated *lamed* is rounded and pronounced; the *pe* has been stylised as a swirl; the angles of the *ḥet* are softened, heralding the Sasanian wave-like grapheme. The *taw* has a pronounced upper hook and has acquired its lower 'foot'; the main stem of this letter is even elegantly arched (rather than forming a straight vertical line), which is characteristic of the more ornate and official Sasanian inscriptions. Even the *mem*, which is still decidedly Aramaeo-Parthian, presents an elegant upward curl to the left of its upper horizontal bar. As Sims-Williams has observed, efforts were even made to distinguish the *waw* and *resh* – which is neither the case in Persid coinage nor in Sasanian inscriptions/manuscripts:[936] while the *waw* maintains its familiar reversed-S shape, the *resh* has a flatter top, more like an American number one (without the lower horizontal bar).

The inscription introduces us to new stylised, ligatured words – on the coins, the only fully ligatured word was BRE – such as BYN 'andar' ('in, at') **[Fig. 6.15]**. The *bet* is in this case also exaggeratedly elongated; the *yod*, drawn like a comma, rests upon it; the *nun*, placed right next to the *yod*, cuts through the *bet* in a long wavy line. The lower strokes of the *bet* and *nun* (respectively horizontal and vertical) intersect in their respective middle, forming a cross. This heterogram later became so corrupt in Sasanian manuscripts that the individual graphemes which make up the word are impossible to identify: the word almost became a letter in its own right.

Even in this ornate and carefully engraved inscription single graphemes display distinct shapes – incidentally this may indicate that in pre-Sasanian Persis at least, the co-existence, within an inscription, of varying shapes for the same grapheme was not regarded as a stylistic flaw, perhaps even contributing to the overall aesthetic effect? Thus, the *alef* sometimes takes the unusual shape found in the earlier silver vessels – a cross with a ligature at the bottom – which is unknown from the numismatic corpus and has no counterpart in either monumental inscriptions or manuscripts; but it also presents the (Aramaeo-)Parthian box-shape. Similarly, the *shin* takes the strange, elongated shape illustrated in the other silver vessel, but also presents a new form: in the word *š'ṭḥw* which designates this type of silver vessel, the upper, shorter bar of the shin comes to rest as a semi-circle on the longer, wavy horizontal stroke, while the vertical bar to the left crosses the lower stroke. It is probably best to view this 'new' *shin* as one of the

[936] Sims-Williams 2021, 610-611.

many variants of the grapheme use in Persis in this period, rather than qualify it as yet another 'intermediary' form to 'fit' it neatly in the evolution of the grapheme.

A last letter that is worth highlighting in the second *pointillé* inscription in the *'ayin* which opens the (proto-)heterogram 'L ('to'). It resembles a Latin 'z' and presents a little upward curl or 'flourish' in the upper left extremity, an embellishment which is typical of this particular inscription. As Sims-Williams has observed, it is carefully distinguished from the *resh* and *waw*.[937] Without the lower right bar it would have been analogous to the corresponding Parthian grapheme but almost indistinguishable from the Persis *resh* and *waw*: we could therefore posit that the lower bar is once again the result of the welding between the main stem and a diacritic added underneath it. As we shall see in the following chapter, the *'ayin* is one of the first Aramaic-derived graphemes to disappear from Middle Persian: like the *qof* it did not represent an Iranian phoneme and was confined to aramaeograms, before increasingly becoming replaced by the *waw* and gradually falling into disuse. The etymologising spelling of the aramaeogram 'L is suggestive of a rigorous – if innovative, palaeographically – scribal tradition.

Preliminary conclusions concerning the local pre-Sasanian scribal tradition of Persis.

The exact relationship between the early Sasanian dynasts and the local rulers of Persis is difficult to establish. Whether there were direct family links between the brothers Šābuhr and Ardašīr and Mančihr III and/or Ardašīr IV is impossible to prove. The same however, can be said of the Persid kings themselves: unless their coins specifically state their kinship through patronyms, their exact family ties remain unknown. In terms of palaeography, typology and iconography, the numismatic corpus certainly suggests a direct continuity. Beyond stressing the continuity between the Sasanians and their Persid predecessors however, what this detailed overview of the Persid coin legends serves to highlight is the evident presence of a strong local scribal tradition which was firmly anchored in this region throughout the Seleucid and Parthian periods. Consistency in orthography, etymologising spellings and numerous recognisably Aramaic-derived graphemes suggests that the thread which linked the scribes of Persis to the monolithic Achaemenid administrative and scribal tradition was never completely broken – no doubt thanks, in large part, to the Seleucid and Parthian empires who maintained a certain administrative tradition and stability in the region. The same cannot be said of Elymais and Characene. However, through the letters engraved on the coins of Persis, also transpire

[937] Sims-Williams 2021, 611.

simplifications and cursive forms, innovations and diacritics, ligatures and stylistic flourishes, frozen or heterographic spellings, that were all specific to Persis – with no counterpart in Parthian or other regional scripts – through which we can discern a rich and lively local and cursive scribal tradition which has left no vestiges because of the perishable media it was inscribed on.[938]

Other vestiges attributed to the Persid kings similarly herald Sasanian imagery and artistic themes as well as give a hint of the skilled artisanship which was probably flourishing in Persis under the Parthians – a word must be said about these to conclude this chapter. Incised in the limestone blocks of the ruins of Persepolis is a series of graffiti which depict princes mounted on richly caparisoned horses being led by dignitaries, bedecked in sumptuous garb. Their wide pants and fitted tunics are textured with different patterns and their headdress embellished with a row of pearls all along the outer rim and decorated in the center with motifs such as the crescent moon and star. The similarity of these headdresses with that of the Persid kings on their coins has encouraged scholars to attribute these engravings to them. Two of the mounted princes hold out a ribboned wreath. Three of the figures, depicted in full body, stand with their left hand resting on the hilt of their sword while their right holds what appears to be an incense-burner. In a corner the figure of a lion, sitting on his haunches, snarls. These 'graffiti' were by no means scribbled on the stone by passers-by: the high technical skill of some of the figures have been recognised by scholars like Callieri.[939] Characteristic details of the horses' harness such as the large balls of wool (?) which trail on the ground on either side of the saddle as well as the big bows around their hind legs, the depiction of the bearded princes and dignitaries – heads in profile to the left but with frontal busts – the pattern of their clothing and their high tiaras, the ribboned wreath held outstretched by the mounted princes: these would all be constants of Sasanian monumental rock sculpture.

[938] Commenting on the ligatures in the word BRE in the early Persis coins, Herzfeld commented in 1924 that it "cautions us against considering the script of the early Sasanian inscriptions as the normal cursive script of the time. From this and from other facts, it is proved that beside the script of the inscriptions there was always a more cursive writing in existence, and sometimes the forms of the latter were allowed to enter into the inscriptions", Herzfeld 1924, 71.

[939] The latter has also argued that the incised figures were meant to be a support for painting, see Callieri 2006b.