Historiography and palaeography of Sasanian Middle Persian inscriptions

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Chapter 7

Early Sasanian manuscript vestiges: the rise of ligatures

I. Early Sasanian manuscript material: the parchment fragments from Dura Europos.

Inscriptional vs manuscript: the corpus of Sasanian written vestiges.

Most of the Middle Persian written documents which can be securely dated to the Sasanian period are epigraphic vestiges. These include coins as well as dated monumental inscriptions commissioned by the Sasanian kings or by important Sasanian officials.[940] By contrast, Middle Persian manuscript remains nearly all postdate the Sasanian period. The important archive of economic and administrative documents, written in a highly cursive quasi-stenographic script style and known as the "Pahlavi archive", belongs to the late seventh and eight centuries;[941] while the important religious literature of Zoroastrian texts, which constitutes the bulk of Middle Persian manuscript material as we know it today, is recorded in manuscript copies which date to the Islamic period. As the following study will serve to highlight, the lack of manuscript material from the Sasanian period has contributed to a distortion of scholars' understanding of writing practices and has often led to the assumption that Middle Persian palaeography gradually evolved from the highly ornate, monumental inscriptional style recorded in Sasanian royal inscriptions, to the cursive and characteristically ligatured hand known from the Zoroastrian manuscripts. Yet, there is ample evidence from the monumental inscriptions themselves that most of the written output in the Sasanian period was manuscript

[940] As well as an extensive corpus of inscribed seals. The main disadvantages which seals present in terms of studying the evolution of the Middle Persian script is that they bear no date and rarely enjoy a clear provenance: most were brought to light through unofficial digs and their archaeological context is not known. They do record important palaeographic information – some examples suggest a 'play' on different graphic registers with the conscious juxtaposition of different script styles within a single legend – and also display erudite scribal 'word-games', namely in elaborate compositions based on stylised alphabetical motifs known as 'monograms'. Because of the difficulty they present with regards to dating and context of use, seals will not be examined in detail at this stage of our enquiry into Sasanian scribal practice.

[941] It is kept in Berkeley at the Bancroft Library and in Berlin, see Weber 2008 as well as Gignoux 2012, Gignoux 2014 and Gignoux 2016.

on perishable materials – no doubt redacted in a cursive hand that had little to do with the highly ornate style of the rock cut texts. Indeed, official inscriptions systematically refer to a wealth of specialised, and now lost, manuscript documents that constituted the legal, administrative and literary backdrop for the epigraphic texts. We will explore the specialised vocabulary which describes these manuscript documents and other elements of scribal practice in this chapter, when we turn to Sasanian Middle Persian inscriptions. Now, if we want to gain a glimpse of what was being written besides monumental inscriptions in the Sasanian period, we must turn to Syria.

The Middle Persian manuscript vestiges of Dura Europos.

Paradoxically, the earliest, securely datable vestiges of Middle Persian writing consist of a handful of manuscript documents – parchments, an ostracon, and a series of dipinti – which pre-date the first Sasanian royal inscriptions. They were found in the ruins of Dura-Europos, a city on the southwestern bank of the Euphrates in modern day Syria close to the border with Iraq, which was initially founded in 303 BCE by Nicanor a general of Seleukos I.[942] Before its destruction by the Sasanians and its subsequent abandonment, the city changed hands several times. After two centuries of Hellenistic domination, it was conquered in 113 BCE by the Parthians, under whose rule it gradually lost its military function and flourished into an important administrative and cultural regional capital. The Romans occupied it briefly between 115 and 117 CE and then conquered it half a century later in 165 CE.[943] It was utterly destroyed by the second Sasanian king Šābuhr I in 256 – this date is debated by scholars however (see below) – after a bitter siege and soon after abandoned: the Sasanian king himself in his inscription at Naqš-e Rostam tells us that he deported (*ānīd*) the inhabitants of the Roman-held lands which he conquered and resettled them (*nišāst*) throughout the different provinces of his empire (ŠKZ§30); Dura Europos (*Dūrā*) is specifically mentioned at ŠKZ§15 as one of the cities of Syria which Šābuhr 'ravaged, burned and plundered'.[944] There are no settlements recorded after this period; the city was swallowed by the desert before being rediscovered in 1920 by British soldiers. The written, artistic and to a lesser extent architectural vestiges of

[942] On the history and chronology of the Dura settlement see Rostovtzeff *et al.* 1929-1952, Matheson 1982, MacDonald 1986, Leriche and A'sad 1994, Leriche and MacKenzie 1996 as well as James 2019.

[943] As the archaeologist Pierre Leriche observed, ironically the only Iranian cult known at Dura-Europos is that of Mithra and was introduced by the Romans, Leriche and MacKenzie 1996.

[944] Huyse 1999a, I, 31-32 and 43-44.

Dura reflect a culturally, religiously and linguistically diverse urban society. Jennifer Baird has highlighted the sheer density and extent of the 'writing culture' at Dura which displays, along with the parchments and ostraca mentioned above, a wealth of graffiti painted or scratched into the walls of the city in Greek, Latin, Palmyrene, Safaitic, Aramaic, Hebrew – as well as Parthian and Middle Persian.[945] It is to the Dura vestiges in these Iranian languages that we now turn.

Dating the Sasanian occupation of Dura.

The exact date of the Sasanian manuscript documents, as well as the precise context in which they were redacted, is the object of a lively scholarly debate. While some scholars prefer to place them in the few years which preceded the destruction of the city, in 253-256, when the Sasanian army is thought to have occupied the city, others reject the hypothesis of a Sasanian interval at Dura and firmly consider that the Middle Persian manuscript vestiges belong to the time of the city's destruction or just after. From the point of view of the evolution of Middle Persian palaeography and writing practices, this small difference in dating has little significance. On the other hand, it does have a bearing on the circumstances in which the texts were written, affecting the decipherment of the dipinti in particular.

Scholars date the destruction of Dura by Šābuhr I to 256 on the base of a series of coins found during the excavations: the latest issues found among the ruins – on the body of a victim buried in the debris from the siege – belong to the next-to-last series of coins minted in Antioch for Valerian, thereby providing a *terminus post quem* for the fall of the city.[946] Michael MacDonald has even suggested a slightly later date, 257, arguing that the siege of the city would have stopped any new coins from entering Dura: the latest numismatic issues recovered in the excavations were probably not the latest in circulation at the time.[947] This date for the final destruction of Dura by the Sasanians does not need to be put in question. More problematic is MacDonald's argument, followed by scholars such as Touraj Daryaee and Pierre Leriche, that the Sasanian written documents all post-date the siege of the city.[948] As Franz Grenet has observed, the building in which the Middle Persian dipinti were painted, the synagogue, was closed off by the rubble which was actively piled up by the inhabitants in their preparations to withstand the Sasanian siege: the synagogue, its frescoes and dipinti were

[945] Baird 2018.

[946] Matheson 1982, 36

[947] MacDonald 1986, 63.

[948] MacDonald 1986, 61-63 and 68; Leriche and MacKenzie 1996; Daryaee 2010.

sealed from the world until the excavations revealed them. The Middle Persian texts can thus hardly post-date the destruction of the city.[949] Similarly, the Middle Persian parchment fragments were found within the debris of the actual siege: the *terminus post quem* of these vestiges must necessarily be the same one as the siege itself. As we will see, the administrative nature of the parchments and ostraca lend further weight to the hypothesis of a brief Sasanian occupation of Dura before its final fall.

The Middle Persian dipinti and inscribed administrative documents are not the only testimonies of a (prolonged) Sasanian presence at Dura. The excavations revealed pictorial graffiti as well as a wall painting presenting several key features which recall contemporary Sasanian stone sculpture. In the building known as the House of the Roman Scribes, the horsemen depicted in two graffiti appear to wear the balloon-shaped headdress that is typical of Sasanian royal gear.[950] In a large fresco which covers the wall in a private home and depicts a battle, the cavalrymen wear a hair style that is characteristically Sasanian, with long locks parted into two voluminous bunches on either side of the head **[Fig. 7.1]**.[951] Similarly, their dress, which consists of textured and richly decorated tunics over long trousers, have exact counterparts as we have seen in pre-Sasanian and Sasanian stone vestiges. The horses are represented in the emblematic 'flying' gallop and their harness presents immediately recognisable Sasanian features, such as the big 'pompoms' which trail behind almost touching the ground. Determined to place any Sasanian presence after the city's siege however, MacDonald has preferred to view this 'battle mural' as the representation of a "skirmish between the local rural police patrol, the "archers", and the bandits endemic to the region", and attribute all other Sasanian-style pieces of art to pro-Sasanian factions among the inhabitants of Dura living in the city before its fall.[952] The dipinti painted onto the frescoes of synagogue would for their part be the graffiti of Sasanian – possibly Jewish – visitors, expressing their 'admiration' and 'satisfaction' for the scenes depicted; we will see presently how this assumption influenced the decipherment of several terms in the dipinti.

Beyond the stratigraphic evidence – which indicates that the Middle Persian dipinti were applied to the frescoes of the Synagogue before the siege of 256 *and* that a Middle Persian parchment was composed before this date in the city – and the Sasanian-style wall-paintings

[949] Grenet 1988, 138.

[950] Rostovtzeff *et al.* 1929-1952, VI (1936), 306-307, Fig. 22 and 23.

[951] Goldman and Little 1980, 285.

[952] MacDonald 1986, 59; see also Grenet's discussion of MacDonald's article, Grenet 1988, 156-157.

and pictorial graffiti, an important argument in support of a Sasanian interlude at Dura preceding its final destruction concerns the resolutely administrative nature of the Middle Persian and Parthian ostraca and parchments.

The bilingual nature of the Sasanian administration at Dura.

Of the two extant Middle Persian parchments from Dura, one has enough written material preserved to allow some sense of its contents. It appears to be a letter sent by an army general (*gund*[sālār] or *gund*[bed]) to someone of lesser rank.[953] It records the transportation of a 'load' (*abarwār*) to the Tigris and the management of property belonging to the sender. Most interestingly, it mentions a 'rescript' (*dib*, *dpy*) authored by an individual named Šābuhr. In his edition of the text, Henning understood the missive to be referring to written orders issued by the Sasanian king himself to resolve a point of contention or confusion around a military load. The purpose of the Middle Persian ostracon is somewhat less clear but is again evidently administrative in nature. It consists in a long list of professions such as 'saddler' (Henning; 'armourer', Harmatta and Pékáry); cobbler; kennel master; baker; chief scribe; accountant and so on.[954] According to information received by Altheim and Stiehl the Middle Persian ostracon was found along with other, Parthian-inscribed, ostraca in the Palace of the Dux Ripae.[955] Because the Parthian documents concern grain distribution, it has been suggested that the list of professions could be an official record of the workmen in the service of the Persian governor of Dura during the period of Sasanian control. The other possibility evoked by Harmatta and Pékáry is that it was a scribal exercise.[956] As they observe, whatever its exact purpose was, the list certainly reflects the administrative organs of the city which Sasanian scribes were concerned with. They also note that it does not include Zoroastrian clergy or juridical officials: perhaps their management was independent or dealt with separately from the military organisation.[957] Another parchment, this time inscribed in Parthian, was also found among the rubble of the great wall ramp.[958] The date and names of the sender and receiver are missing and so is the main body of the letter. Nevertheless, Henning was able to read the introductory few

[953] Welles, Fink and Gilliam 1959, 415-417.

[954] Henning 1954b; Harmatta and Pékáry 1971.

[955] Altheim and Stiehl 1952, 40; Harmatta and Pékáry, 1971, 473.

[956] Harmatta and Pékáry 1971, 474.

[957] Harmatta and Pékáry 1971, 475.

[958] Welles, Fink and Gilliam 1959, 414-415.

lines, which mainly consist in the standard greetings formulae which headed official correspondence; he has highlighted just how close the wording and syntax of this fragment is to the fixed introductory formulae known from Achaemenid official correspondence in Aramaic: Achaemenid chancery models were still the blueprint for epistolary conventions in the early third century CE. As was mentioned in the fifth chapter, such fixed, even 'frozen' formulae were no doubt one of the main vectors for the aramaeographic components of the Middle Persian heterographic writing system.

The Parthian ostraca mentioned above as being found with the Middle Persian parchment also record several officials, such as a scribe, a treasurer and most importantly a satrap (*ẖštrp*), named Rašn.[959] Two of the ostraca contain a list of proper names which as Frantz Grenet has observed, are almost all Persian;[960] each of these names is linked to a specific number of *grīvs*. This unit of measurement is used for grain or flower and probably by extension bread;[961] both lists are headed by a large MN, *až*, 'from'. This led Harmatta to interpret the ostraca as fiscal receipts received by the satrap on behalf of Sasanian settlers established in the surroundings of Dura after the siege of 256.[962] He thus prefers to place Sasanian presence at Dura after the destruction of the city. Harmatta's interpretation has been put in question by Grenet.[963] The latter points out that the preposition MN which heads the lists may announce the *break-down* of the total grain quantity (also given in each ostracon) rather than indicate the *provenance* of the goods: the ostraca may not be fiscal receipts at all. Instead, they may reflect the record-keeping of grain distribution (military rations?). Be that as it may, both the context of the finds as well as onomastics – Grenet notes the recurrence of the name or onomastic component Ardašīr – would suggest that these Parthian-inscribed ostraca date to the Sasanian period and were written in the context of the Sasanian political and military management of Dura (as opposed to during the period of Arsacid control of the city). For our purposes, the most important aspect concerning this find of Parthian and Middle Persian manuscript documents, is perhaps that they testify to the bilingual nature of the early Sasanian administration: in the early Sasanian period, both Parthian and Middle Persian were used in

[959] Harmatta 1958.

[960] Grenet 1988, 137.

[961] For a discussion of this unit of measure, see Huyse 1999a, II, 114-155.

[962] Harmatta 1958.

[963] Grenet 1988, 137.

day-to-day scribal practice in the royal chancery – although whether some or all scribes could write both languages is a question that must remain unanswered for the moment.

The Persian scribes of the Dura synagogue.

The other set of texts written in an Iranian language at Dura consists in a series of dipinti painted on the frescoes of the Synagogue. In terms of both dating and outlining the nature of the Sasanian presence at Dura these inscriptions contain crucial evidence, but this evidence has been interpreted differently. The dipinti are almost all signed: the authors give their name and, very often, their official function also – when this is recorded, it is that of *dibīr*, 'scribe'; at least eleven Persian scribes are responsible for the dipinti. Grenet has stressed the importance of the function of *dibīr* in the context of Sasanian political and administrative organisation: scribes were not ordinary 'literate' people; they were professionals and officials, either directly in the service of the state or employed by a higher official with administrative or military responsibilities.[964] The suggestion that these inscriptions were the scribblings of curious Sasanian visitors to the synagogue in the aftermath of the siege is very difficult to support. Yet, to explain the pointed interest of Sasanian 'tourists' for the Dura synagogue, scholars have brought forward various hypotheses concerning the identity of these enigmatic *dibīr*. MacDonald proposed that they were Iranian Jews or "Persians deeply interested in the Jewish religion", who visited the Synagogue (as a sort of pilgrimage?) following the city's destruction – an idea taken up most recently by Touraj Daryaee.[965] Bernhard Geiger suggested that the Sasanian scribes travelled to Dura in the context of an official embassy sent by Šābuhr I to the Romans; as Grenet has observed however, this seems unlikely in view of the conflict opposing both powers at Dura between 252 and 256.[966] Altheim and Stiehl, who remind their reader that "persische Herkunft und jüdischer Glaube schliessen sich nicht aus" posited that the *dibīr* were Jews who had been brought from Persia specifically to decorate this place of worship.[967] In this respect, they were echoing Pagliaro's initial assumption that the 'scribes' of the synagogue were the painters of the frescoes[968] – we will come back to Pagliaro's study and the reasons for this assumption below.

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[964] Grenet 1988, 138.

[965] MacDonald 1968, 62; Daryaee 2010, 34-35.

[966] Geiger 1956, 299; Grenet 1988, 138.

[967] Altheim and Stiehl 1952, 27.

[968] Pagliaro 1942.

Whatever their exact purpose was in writing their name in the synagogue, the Persian scribes of Dura, like the other Middle Persian and Parthian material from the site, testify to an administrative and political Sasanian presence at Dura before the final destruction of the city. The fact that these officials were at least temporarily established in Dura rather than just 'passing through' or visiting is further suggested by the range in the dates which accompany the dipinti. Indeed, the painted inscriptions are almost all dated and indicate that the scribes were settled in the city for about a year. The dates recorded in the dipinti are comprised between the months of March and October; one date indicates the month of February (without a year) which Grenet has convincingly taken to be that of the following year.[969] The months predictably follow the Zoroastrian calendar. The years recorded, '14' and '15', are counted according to the reign of an unnamed king and are more problematic. The king can only be Šābuhr I – the Synagogue was built in 243/244, making this Sasanian monarch the only candidate for this period – but the exact start date of his 'era' is debated. Šābuhr I succeeded his father upon his death in 241/ 242. If the beginning of Šābuhr I's era is regarded as starting at this time, then the dipinti could have been written as late as 256/257. However, the Arabic chronicles unanimously record a period of coregency, which lasted at least a year: Šābuhr I was crowned during his father's life – by Ardašīr himself according to certain accounts – and his 'regnal fire' lit in 239/240, officially marking the beginning of his era.[970] The earlier date for the start of Šābuhr I's regnal era is also suggested by the chronology of Mani's life, which, as Henning put it, was "inextricably bound up with the dates of the early rulers of the Sasanian state" as well as the monumental inscription of Bīšāpūr.[971] Calculated according to this start date, the dipinti may have been applied as early as 253/254.

The stratigraphical evidence, the administrative nature of the extant Sasanian written material and the dating formulae of the dipinti all point to a period of Sasanian rule in Dura Europos before the destruction of the city in 256. For the purposes of our study, this information serves to confirm that the Middle Persian and Parthian texts were written by professional scribes of the royal Sasanian chancery, rather than chance visitors to the site. The scribal style recorded by the parchments and ostraca can safely be seen as reflecting the 'standard' cursive hand used by professionals in the early Sasanian period in the context of the royal

[969] Grenet 1988, 143.

[970] For an overview of the relevant passages in the Arabic chronicles see Chaumont 1974.

[971] For an exhaustive discussion of these sources see Henning and Taqizadeh 1957, 116-119 as well as Ghirshman 1975.

administration; similarly, the bilingual nature of the royal chancery at Dura can be regarded as official Sasanian practice, at least in the first decades of the dynasty (most of the administrative documents are in fact in Parthian). As we will see shortly, the dipinti illustrate a more 'ornamental' script when compared to that in the ostraca or parchments: their medium and context – paint applied to frescoes in a holy building – was after all slightly different. They were no doubt produced by professional Sasanian scribes who also wrote letters and lists on parchment and ostraca in a highly cursive hand but were inspired by the more solemn circumstances offered by the synagogue and the frescoes to display their scribal skills.

Palaeographic features of the Dura Middle Persian parchments: the rise of ligatures.

The Middle Persian inscribed parchment fragments from Dura consist in one very small strip in which hardly a whole word which can be deciphered **[Fig. 7.2]** – although individual letters can still serve our analysis of the script – as well as a larger piece written on recto and verso and which as we saw above concerns the transport of a (military?) load **[Fig. 7.3]**. On the smaller strip, Henning discerned in the upper, partly damaged line a *pe*:[972] it is fully rounded and ligatured to the right, almost like a Modern Persian *waw*; this is the letter's 'final' cursive Middle Persian form. In the second line, one can distinguish the neatly written letters *'mly*-. The left tail of the *alef* joins with the round *mem*, which is neatly crossed to the left; similarly, the *lamed* and *yod* are ligatured. The shape of the *lamed* is particularly striking: it has acquired the slanting shape of much later Middle Persian cursive and completely moved away from the straight vertical line with lower hook which is typical of Persis/Middle Persian coinage and inscriptions. The same *lamed* occurs again in the fifth line, linked to a *yod* which has also distinctly acquired its later comma-like shape – a slightly elongated version of the left-opening crescent shape that can be observed on the late-Persis and early Sasanian coins. On the other hand, the *dalet* which immediately follows the -ly- pair retains the 3-like shape which is typical of numismatic and inscriptional scripts from this period. The fourth line offers a clear example of a *shin*, which resembles that described in the previous chapter on late Persis coinage: a lower horizontal line with two hooks resting on it; this letter is linked to the right with the preceding letter, which Henning reconstructs to be a *pe*. In the same line we have an elegant *ḥet*, ligatured to the left with a *waw* which takes the simplified – and late Pahlavi form – of a single vertical line. The *ḥet* is the wavy line familiar from late Persis numismatics although in that corpus the

[972] For a transcription and commentary, see (Henning in) Welles, Fink and Gilliam 1959, 417; for an illustration, Altheim and Stiehl 1952, 84, Fig. 31 as well as Frye 1968, pl. XXXIV, Fig. 40.

letter never appeared with a ligature. Finally, it is worth noting that although the *mem* takes in this manuscript fragment the older form of a loop neatly crossed to the left, it heralds the late Middle Persian *mem*, with the lower left stem of the cross pointing a downward and lengthening.

This tiny strip of parchment holds precious information concerning mid-third century Middle Persian cursive. The marked tendency towards ligatures is probably one of its most striking aspects. Although these are not as rounded or deep below the line of writing as the manuscripts from the Islamic period, almost all the letters featured present a link to either the preceding or following letter, depending on scribal convention. Also telling are the shapes of several letters which display they 'final' Middle Persian manuscript forms, such as the *alef*, *yod*, *lamed*, *waw* and *pe*. As we shall see, these same graphemes were being written in a very different style in contemporary rock inscriptions and even other parchments: this small parchment fragment is strong evidence for the coexistence of different scribal styles – better, registers – in a given period.

Palaeographic features of the Dura Middle Persian parchments: a multiplicity of script styles.

Indeed, the larger fragment of parchment with Middle Persian writing displays marked differences in script style **[Fig. 7.3]**.[973] The *lamed* takes the more formal shape of a straight vertical line with lower hook, familiar from Parthian, late Persis numismatics as well as early Sasanian inscriptions; the *waw*, simplified to a single line in the smaller fragment, maintains the ornamental 2-like shape of coins and inscriptions; the *yod*, especially in word-final position, presents a formal 9-like shape which contrasts with the 'elongated comma' of the small strip of parchment and later cursive; the *pe* is almost completely round, without the long tail of high cursive. Henning identified the official nature of this piece of administrative correspondence as well as the high rank of the protagonists involved. The letter certainly displays a neat, regular and evidently more 'formal' hand than the smaller extant fragment, better suited to the circumstances. The style is nonetheless cursive, with simplified graphemes – such as the *taw* and *ṣade*, which display simplified main vertical stems rather than the dented ones of numismatics and inscriptions – ligatures and the stylisation of letters in word-final positions. The ligatures are not as systematic as in the smaller, more cursive fragment. The graphemes tend to be squeezed together tightly rather than actually linked or connected: it would thus

[973] (Henning in) Welles, Fink and Gilliam 1959, 415-417; Altheim and Stiehl 1952, 74, Fig. 3 and 4.

appear that in more formal styles the scribe lifted his pen more than when writing less official documents. Still, there are multiple cases, particularly on the verso, when the scribe allowed his hand to become a little 'sloppier' than in the first formal introductory lines, where the left tails of the *shin*, *alef*, *yod*, and *lamed* link with the following letter. Similarly, the lower 'foot' of the 2-shaped *waw* and *kaf* present a marked tendency on the verso to 'link back' to the letter preceding immediately them. This larger parchment also includes several examples of stylised letters in word-final positions. The lower foot of a final *nun* is almost systematically left to trail all the way back below the line of writing, 'underlining' the two – sometimes three or four – preceding letters; this flourish is particularly exaggerated in the recto and was evidently considered an 'elegant' touch. The recto presents a striking example of a word-final *alef* with a final 'tail' that has been extended all the way to the lower line, merging with the word beneath it.

The difference in palaeography between these two parchment fragments confirms the existence of a multiplicity of script styles used synchronically, no doubt by the same scribes, depending on what the situation called for. Comparing these two manuscripts is particularly edifying: the medium, date and archaeological contexts are the same; it is the circumstances/purpose of the documents which affected the script. The larger parchment even presents a divergence in style between the carefully written recto and the more cursive verso. This short overview allows us to put forward a few observations. In this early period, 'detached' letters were evidently considered more elegant: in informal documents or highly cursive passages, ligatures were increasingly the norm, or at least more 'natural' for the hand of the scribe *when writing on parchment*. This feature is particular to Middle Persian: as we will see, cursive Parthian does not display a tendency towards ligatures in cursive. Numismatic-/ inscriptional-style graphemes co-existed with much more simplified versions of the same letters, many of which had already reached their 'final' manuscript forms; the former were evidently considered 'elegant' and 'formal', better suited to official correspondence between important protagonists. In this way, cursive, formal cursive, numismatic and inscriptional Middle Persian are better regarded as different but synchronically used graphic registers rather than a diachronic evolution from the latter to the former. The rest of the Dura Europos written vestiges confirm these preliminary conclusions.

Palaeographic features of the Middle Persian ostracon from Dura.

The extant Middle Persian ostracon, which contains the list of workmen or professions and which has been deemed by some to be a simple writing exercise, displays a surprisingly regular and legible hand for a draft fragment **[Fig. 7.4]**.[974] The writing instrument used was thinner than that in either of the two parchment fragments and the harder, clay writing surface stopped the letters 'bleeding' into each other as much; the graphemes are thus neatly formed and easily distinguishable. Writing on a potsherd may have encouraged the scribe to lift his writing instrument systematically, restricting the use of ligatures and links. Indeed, stylistic features mainly consist in the exaggerated *vertical* elongation of graphemes – whether above or below the line of writing – but there are barely any examples of horizontal elongations; the rougher, drier writing surface evidently discouraged this. In this way, all the *lamed*s have very long stems, which often meet the upper line; the stems remain very straight – they are never slanting like in the smaller parchment fragment – with the lower hook simplified to a small left-curving foot; this may just about join the following letter but often does not. Similarly, the *nun* – which takes the shape of a Latin L – the 2-shaped *waw* and the 3-shaped *kaf* with its lower 'cedilla' are very elongated below the writing line but their bottom right stroke/foot/cedilla is by contrast very short, barely reaching beneath the preceding letter: in the two parchment fragments by contrast, this lower horizontal stroke could underline the entire preceding word. Similarly, the left 'tail' of the *alef* which almost systematically links with the following letter in the parchments is here practically inexistent and the grapheme is rather abruptly interrupted (one exception occurs in the middle of the second line, where the *alef* reaches into the following *mem*). The only case of a longer horizontal line is a *bet* in the first word of the second line, a standard feature of this grapheme even on the earliest Middle Persian coins. This word – read *ḥnbrk* by Harmatta and identified by him as the Middle Persian 'prototype' of the Armenian *hambarak* 'storekeeper'[975] – offers the most interesting examples of ligature of the ostracon. The last two letters of the word, the *resh* and the *kaf*, rest on the long lower horizontal stroke of the *bet*; the *kaf* even crosses it, with its lower half written beneath the line. The first two letters of this word also present an important example of the *ḥet* with a following letter – in this case a *nun* – which is exactly analogous to the ligature between a *ḥet* and *waw* in the smaller parchment fragment. In both cases, the wavy *ḥet* is written at an angle, acquiring a lower 'tail'

[974] Frye 1968, Pl. XXVII, Fig. 24; Harmatta and Pékáry 1971.

[975] Harmatta and Pékáry 1971, 470.

or small stem which joins the lower horizontal 'foot' of the *nun/waw*. These two examples may well help explain why the *ḥet* became indistinguishable from the *alef* in much later cursive: when it is ligatured, even this older form of the grapheme can be confused with a ligatured *alef*; the wavy head of the *ḥet* becomes simplified to a rounded, open-topped square, and the ligature to the left resembles the 'tail' which finishes the cursive *alef*. Other than this striking example of the influence of cursive, the shapes of the graphemes themselves are rather formal in the ostracon, with few simplifications. The *mem* is neatly crossed to the left and the *pe* is almost a perfect circle; the *yod* is shaped like a comma, open towards the left when it is in the middle of a word but towards the bottom in word-final position; the *dalet* has a clear 3-shape and even the main stem of the *kaf* retains in most cases its 3-like shape with cedilla, even though it is less exaggerated than in the *dalet*. If this list of professions was a writing exercise, then it was a very carefully executed one, with well-formed legible graphemes, good spacing between words and some elegant stylisations. The script on the ostracon belongs mid-way between the tiny parchment fragment – the most cursive and ligatured so far and presenting the most simplified graphemes – and the formal missive on the larger manuscript piece. It would also appear that the rougher surface of the clay potsherd was less conducing to horizontal ligatures, so that the main stylisations occupy the vertical line of writing. The comparison of the ostracon and parchment, written in the same period and in the same archaeological contexts are an illustration of how the writing medium also, as well as the purpose of the document can influence script style, the tendency towards ligatures and even the choice of stylisations. These three document fragments also indicate that many of the features which are characteristic of much later, Islamic period manuscript Middle Persian, be it the shape of the graphemes, their cursive simplifications/elongations as well as ligature conventions already existed in the manuscript documents of the early Sasanian period or were well on their way.

The Parthian written vestiges of Dura.

Before turning to the much-discussed Middle Persian graffiti painted on the frescoes of the synagogue, a brief word ought to be said of the palaeography of the Parthian parchment and ostraca found at Dura. Although the focus of this study is Middle Persian, the Sasanian imperial chancery was, as we saw above, resolutely bilingual.

In his review of Richard Frye's photographic edition of the parchments and ostraca from Dura, Christopher Brunner considered that the scripts in the Parthian documents broadly agree with one another and more importantly attest to the "continuation" of the script style

illustrated in the texts from Avrōmān.[976] He concedes however that the Dura manuscripts present more cursive forms, with several simplified and lengthened graphemes, heralding "modification towards their Sasanian forms".[977] It certainly is easy to appreciate when comparing the Avrōmān parchments with that from Dura that the Parthian script had undergone some changes in the two centuries preceding the rise of the Sasanian dynasty.[978] Many of the Parthian graphemes in the Avrōmān corpus were closely related to their Aramaic prototypes. The *alef* is an archaizing three-pronged star; the *shin* takes the shape of an upward-facing trident; the *bet* is a wide angle opened to the left; the heads of the *kaf* and *resh* are still markedly concave (like a Latin 'y'); the *qof* is completely rounded, like a Latin P, true to Aramaic practice. These letters have all acquired their Sasanian forms in the Dura texts **[Fig. 7.5]**: the *shin* is now fully upright; the head of the *resh* and *kaf* are flattened out; the *bet* has lost much of its angular quality and acquired the characteristic elongated, reversed C-shape of the Sasanian period; the *qof* is angular and open towards the bottom. The Parthian parchment of Dura does not present any ligatures, but, like at Avrōmān, the letters lean and merge into each other, touching and linking along the line of writing. The script of the sale contract at Avrōmān is overall much neater and the words are much more clearly and regularly spaced. In both sets of documents the main stylisations take the form of exaggerated elongations of graphemes in word-final positions. Still, at Avrōmān, the elongations are typically towards the bottom, with the vertical stems of the *nun*, *qof* and *lamed* extended all the way to the lower line in the case of the two first; to the upper line in the latter. In the Dura parchment, the elongations are along the horizontal line: the lower tails of the *dalet* and *nun* curve sharply left and can underline the entire following word.

As Brunner observed, the script on the Parthian ostraca of Dura is very close to that on the parchment found on the same site **[Fig. 7.6]**. The description of the letter shapes made above for the parchment is valid for the potsherds. Both also share characteristic features, such as the tendency for the *waw* to become almost fully circular or again the minimal gap between words; like in the parchment, the stylisation of word-final letters in the ostraca mainly consist

[976] Brunner 1972, 494-495. Note that of the three parchments at Avrōmān: one parchment is written entirely in Parthian; the other two parchments are written in Greek, one of which has an endorsement in Parthian on the verso.

[977] Brunner 1972, 495.

[978] For a reproduction of the better-preserved Parthian parchment of Avrōmān, see Minns 1915, Pl. III. For the Parthian parchment from Dura, see Altheim and Stiehl 1952, 73, Fig. 1 and (Henning in) Welles, Fink and Gilliam 1959, 414-415; for the Parthian ostraca from Dura, see Harmatta 1958.

in extending along the horizontal line the lower tails of the *nun* and *kaf* so that it underlines or comes to touch the first letter of the following word. The number 1 which often ends the lines – this indicates, as mentioned above, the amount of flour allocated to the names listed in the ostracon – is made to dip way below the line, either at an angle or straight down. As Brunner noted however, the script in the ostraca is overall more cursive, with many simplified graphemes: at times, it becomes difficult to tell the *dalet*, *resh*, *kaf*, *nun* and even *bet* (particularly if it is in the middle of a word) apart. Nevertheless, the difference in script between the Parthian parchment and ostraca of Dura is not as marked as that between the Middle Persian parchments and ostracon from the same site. This brief overview of the Parthian script style attested at Dura and its comparison with the parchments from Avrōmān (dated to 33 CE), shows that Parthian graphemes had resolutely moved away from Aramaic prototypes and reached their 'final' Sasanian forms by the middle of the third century BCE. While the documents from Dura attest to the bilingual nature of the Sasanian chancery, they also indicate that both scripts remained firmly distinct: in the study of Persis coinage, we had been able to observe the direct influence of Parthian numismatic script, which included 'wholesale' borrowings from the Parthian alphabet into the legends of the Persian vassal kings. By the early Sasanian period, both scripts had much evolved but each firmly in its own way, developing different characteristic features. In particular, the tendency towards ligatures illustrated by the Middle Persian manuscripts from this period has no counterpart in contemporary Parthian documents: although these do present some stylisations, elongations of word-final letters and examples of graphemes leaning into each other, the scribes writing in Parthian almost always lifted their writing instrument to draw the next letter.

II. The Middle Persian dipinti and graffiti from Dura Europos.

The dipinti of the Dura synagogue.

In the most recent and comprehensive publication of the Dura graffiti and inscriptions, David Noy and Hanswulf Bloedhorn document sixteen Middle Persian dipinti painted on the frescoes – technically tempera brushed into dried plaster – of the synagogue.[979] All four walls of the synagogue were covered with narrative compositions divided into three registers, top (register A), middle (B) and bottom (C).[980] The Middle Persian dipinti are all written on the frescoes of

[979] Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, 177-209.

[980] Mesnil du Buisson 1934a and 1934b; Hachlili 2010.

the lower register C, at about eye-level. They concentrate on two of the painted scenes: the Triumph of Mordecai, and one panel of the Elijah cycle – where Elijah revives the widow's son (1 Kings 17:21-22). Both these scenes are adjacent to one another and located to the left of the niche, directly opposite the synagogue's main door.[981] It should be noted from the outset that in many historical contexts, writing on a work of art or monument was not necessarily considered subversive or destructive, in the same way that graffiti often is today – in fact, it was quite often an expression of admiration or devotion.[982] Scholars have also noticed that the authors of the dipinti took particular care not to damage or 'deface' the paintings with their inscriptions,[983] some even considered them as "participating in the structures they occupy, reasserting rather than contradicting the integrity of the painted form".[984] The dipinti are neatly painted in spaces of lighter colour offered by the representation (a foot, a calf, the shoulder of Mordecai's horse and its flank, a piece of fabric) and are naturally delimited by the outer lines of the figures, adapting to the shape of the space. Depending on the space available and the author's artistic whim, the dipinti are either written horizontally (on Haman's thigh, in a long, rectangular, neatly 'justified' text; on a bystander's *himation*) or vertically (along Mordecai's horse's hindquarters; below his saddle).[985]

The Middle Persian dipinti are not the only inscriptions in the synagogue, nor even the only inscriptions on those painted scenes. Other written vestiges of the synagogue include: visitors' graffiti in Aramaic, with the author's characteristic plea to the reader to remember them; 'official' inscriptions commemorating the benefactors who funded renovations; painted 'captions' in Aramaic, which name specific figures in the pictorial scenes – such as 'Moses', 'Esther' – and label the subject matter depicted in the scene, 'Moses, when he parted the sea'. It should be noted concerning the 'donor inscriptions' – in Greek and/or Aramaic – that the formula, "X made this painting/scene", makes it sometimes difficult to decide whether the person named 'made' the painting in a literal sense or was the benefactor who funded it. Noy and Bloedhorn agree to view the latter as more probable.[986]

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[981] See the diagram in Mesnil du Buisson 1934b, 560.

[982] For a recent study of graffiti in the ancient word, see Harmaşah, Ragazzoli *et al*. 2017; Guichard 2014.

[983] Grenet 1988, 134.

[984] Wharton 1995, 49, cited in Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, 180.

[985] Frye 1968, Pl. I – XII.

[986] Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, 153-154.

Of scribes and painters: the authors of the dipinti.

As mentioned above, the identity of the authors of the dipinti as well as their motivations for writing on the synagogue's frescoes has been the subject of a lively scholarly debate. This is in part because their damaged state makes the reading of key words difficult. In the first major study dedicated to the Middle Persian dipinti, Antonino Pagliaro assumed that the Persian scribes – *dibīr*, spelled either *dpyr* or, more often, *dpywr* – named in the inscriptions were the painters of the synagogue's frescoes, proudly signing their work of art.[987] This was an idea put forward in the very first publication dedicated to the synagogue paintings by the Comte du Mesnil du Buisson. He considered that while the conception of the narrative compositions was no doubt the responsibility of the religious head of the Dura Jewish community, the frescoes were executed by 'foreign mercenaries'.[988] He attributed the scene figuring the Triumph of Mordecai to the hand of a "Maître Iranien", based both on more or less convincing stylistic and iconographic details such as Mordecai's Iranian dress and the treatment of his horse ("Quand il [le maître iranien] peint des chevaux son intérêt s'éveille – et c'est encore là le caractère iranien"[989]), and on the presence of the Middle Iranian dipinti, which he took to be the Iranian master's signature.[990] In his study of the dipinti, Pagliaro argued that there was no clear distinction between scribe and painter in the Sasanian period. He drew a comparison with the seeming lack of distinction made between scribe and painter – or more exactly 'illuminator' – in Manichaean texts: illustrated books were probably the most renowned religious artistic medium used by Manichaean followers to record and circulate their ideas.[991] The books juxtaposed pictorial scenes with texts and enlarged, coloured letters, creating a three-dimensional effect.

Encouraged by his assumption that the Persian *dibīr* of Dura were painters, Pagliaro interpreted several key words in the dipinti as technical terms relating to the art of painting: *nidipist*, *nidipit*, *nikartan*[992] were all verbs expressing the notion of "dipingere" ('to paint'); *dipān* as "figure" (figures); *dip*, which in this context would mean 'painting' rather than the usual 'written document'. In their study of the synagogue inscriptions, Altheim and Stiehl followed Pagliaro in assuming that the Persian *dibīr* were painters, and so did Jean de Menasce

[987] Pagliaro 1941, 583.

[988] Mesnil du Buisson 1934a, 119.

[989] Mesnil du Buisson 1934b, 563.

[990] Mesnil du Buisson 1934a, 115.

[991] Pagliaro 1941, 584; see also Gulacsi 2008.

[992] I reproduce here Pagliaro's transcriptions, his readings have since been rejected.

in his critical review of their *Asien und Rom*.[993] While Pagliaro regarded the Persian painters as 'complete strangers' to the Jewish religion and 'cultural environment' of the synagogue – he suggested that the artists were called in from Persia proper for the project, but went home during the hot summer – Altheim and Stiehl argued they were Jewish Persians. Although he does not explain it clearly, Pagliaro's feeling that the dipinti are extraneous to the frescoes is probably due to the fact the short texts do not 'label' or 'name' the figures they are written on; nor do they offer any indication that the authors understood what they were looking at: the dipinti refer to 'this painting/picture' – *nk'l* or *nk'ly*, easily legible in a number of inscriptions – in a vague manner. Only two of the inscriptions are tentatively thought to 'comment' on the scene of the revival of the child by Elijah, but without naming the latter.[994] The synagogue is also imprecisely referred to as ZNE BYTA 'this house'.[995] In several dipinti, the scribes state that they came (YATWN) and saw(?) the "*by'm'y/bym'y*". Scholars generally agree that this may render the Greek *βῆμα*, 'platform, tribunal', although this was categorically rejected by Geiger, who prefers to view it as a synonym for *nikār* 'picture'.[996] The latter also deciphered the word *ptlstky*, *padrastag*[997] in several dipinti, which he takes to mean the 'edifice', a synonym for *BYTA*.[998] In the current state of conservation of the inscriptions it is impossible to either challenge or support his decipherments of this word; nevertheless, as Noy and Bloedhorn noted, Geiger had to resort to heavy emendations to come to this reading.[999] Finally, Noy and Bloedhorn observed that the scribes present characteristically Zoroastrian names: this, admittedly, would not necessarily exclude the possibility that they were Jewish; nevertheless, the other donors named in inscriptions or captions in the synagogue are either Greek or Aramaic.[1000] Geiger found the proposition that the Persian scribes were Iranian Jews ludicrous.[1001]

Pagliaro's idea that (some of) the frescoes of the synagogue were the work of Iranian artists was dismissed by Geiger who published a new edition of the Middle Persian dipinti. He

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[993] de Menasce 1952.

[994] Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, 197-198, 200-202; Geiger 1956, 284, 309-311.

[995] Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, 185-187.

[996] Geiger 1956, 307; Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, 192-193. This term would nowadays be transcribed *nigār*.

[997] After MacKenzie 1986, this term would now be transcribed *payrastag*.

[998] Geiger 1956, 299; Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, 190-194.

[999] Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, 189.

[1000] Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, 179.

[1001] Geiger 1956, 299.

refuted the argument concerning the lack of distinction between painter and scribe in the Manichaean context: the former was referred to as *niγārgar*, 'picture-maker'.[1002] Geiger judged Pagliaro's and Altheim and Stiehl's studies "complete failures" and believed that the scribes were "Iranian visitors sent to Dura by the Sasanian king before the fall of the city as members of his retinues of ambassadors".[1003] He also identified a *zandak ī yahūdān* or 'official' of the Jews in one inscription, which prompted him to conclude that the scribes were accompanied during their diplomatic visit to the synagogue by the religious head of the Jewish community who was in charge of explaining the meanings of the paintings to them.[1004] The words read by Pagliaro as specialized terms relating to the art of painting Geiger re-deciphered as a series of verbs expressing the notion of 'seeing/beholding': the scribes would be commemorating their visit to the synagogue, indicating that they had viewed/seen/beheld the frescoes. Where Pagliaro had deciphered *nidipist* and *nidipīt* Geiger read *nkylyt* (*nigerīd*) *ndyšyt* (*niyīšīt*) and *psčyt* (supposedly deriving from the Old Iranian root *ci-* 'to see', emended and transcribed as *patčīt*).[1005] In order to support his readings, however, Geiger has to explain previously unknown Middle Persian terms, assume a number of scribal 'errors' and tax the scribes of being 'utterly confused'.[1006] Geiger's reading of *zandak ī yahūdān* has also been emended to *bandak ī yahūdān*, 'servant of the Jews', discrediting the idea that the Persian scribes were given a presentation by the head of the Jewish community during an official visit.[1007]

Key words in the Middle Persian dipinti.

Nevertheless, Geiger's readings were overall a marked improvement on Pagliaro's (and Altheim and Stiehl's) and are generally accepted; isolated corrections and improvements have been put forward by scholars, and have been taken into account by Noy and Bloedhorn in their latest edition of the texts.[1008] In the current state of conservation of the Middle Persian dipinti, and based solely on Frye's plates, it is practically impossible to agree or disagree with either Geiger's readings or the recent emendations to them. Some brief remarks may be made none

[1002] Geiger 1956, 287.

[1003] Geiger 1956, 300.

[1004] Geiger 1956, 285, 299-300.

[1005] Geiger 1956, 284, 292-297.

[1006] Geiger 1956, 298, 303.

[1007] Grenet 1988, 144; Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, 187-190.

[1008] Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, 177-209, prepared with the assistance of Philip Huyse who provided, as well as emendations, the transcriptions for the readings of the dipinti.

the less. Keywords such as the dating formulae, *dpywr*/*dypr*, *nk'l*/*nk'ly*, *BYTA* and *by'm'y* can be clearly read in several dipinti and present no difficulty of decipherment. The synagogue dipinti are authored by a group of Persian functionaries who call themselves 'scribes' and mention the 'images' next to which (ZNE, *ēn*) they wrote their message; they describe the synagogue as a 'house' and mention what appears to be a *bēma*. The main verb (often the last word) which describes what the scribes actually did with regards to the frescoes is much more difficult to ascertain because of breaks in the plaster and the rubbing of the ink.

In Plate I of Frye's edition, the final word – the main verb – was read by Pagliaro *prgst*, *pargast* ("fu compiuto", 'was completed') and by Geiger *ptčyt*, *patčīt* 'was observed, viewed' and later emended to *psndyt*, *passandīd* by Huyse and Grenet.[1009] The difficulty is that the second letter is a little damaged and the scribe has written the third and fourth letters very close together. In my opinion, based on the picture, it is very difficult to decipher anything else than the letters *psynyt* **[Fig. 7.7]**. This reading was in fact proposed by Jean de Menasce in his review of Altheim and Stiehl's edition of the inscriptions; he took it to be the verb *pēsīdan*, 'to paint, colour', translating it as 'had painted, copied'.[1010] Grenet also declared that de Menasce's reading was "la seule qui peut être maintenue après contrôle sur l'original"[1011] – but later retracted this statement preferring *passandīd*. This word does not have a counterpart in the other dipinti. For this one inscription therefore, perhaps de Menasce's (and Grenet's) original reading and his suggestion that the scribe had the fresco painted or copied is the one that ought to be maintained. In Plate II, the inscription is thought to end with the words *'pryny krty* (*āfrīn kard*): the letter *lyny krty* are clearly legible but unfortunately the first two letters are destroyed. If the reconstruction is correct, the scribes record that they 'paid homage to/praised' the pictures.[1012] The other two main verbs read by Geiger, based on which he argued that the scribes 'viewed' or 'beheld' the pictures, are *nigerīd* and the otherwise unknown *ndyšyt* (which he considers synonymous with the former).[1013] The first, *nigerīd*, he deciphered in Plates II, III, VII, VIII and X. The relevant passages in Plates II, III and VIII are unfortunately too damaged to offer any trace of the word any longer. In Plate VII however, at the end of line 3, the letters *AP-šn by'm'[y] [??]kylyt* are clearly legible: this phrase can plausibly be transcribed as *u-šān*

[1009] Frye 1968, Pl. I; Pagliaro 1941, 612-613; Geiger 1956, 293-295; Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, 181-185.

[1010] de Menasce 1952, 516.

[1011] Grenet 1988, 155, n. 85.

[1012] Frye 1968, Pl. II; Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, 185-187.

[1013] Geiger 1956, 284, 292-297.

[the scribes] *bēma nigerīd*. Still, it is important to note that the verb *nigerīd* in this case refers to the *bēma* rather than to the pictures. In Plate X, line 3, the following letters can be securely deciphered: *nk'l [?]kldyt*. Geiger reconstructs the letters *ny* in the gap preceding the second word and argues that the verb *nykldyt* is a pseudo-historical spelling of *nigerīd*. The occurrences of the second verb, *nydyšyt*, in Plates III, V and VI are no less problematic. Once again, plate III is now too damaged to allow any reading of the word. In both plates V and VI, the main verb *nydyšyt* follows the word *by'm'y* – just as in plate VII therefore, the main verb is directly linked to the *bēma* rather than to that of *nk'l*: in plate V the fourth letter is unfortunately lost because of a slip in the plaster but the letters *ndy[?]yt* are clearly legible; in plate VI the ink has rubbed a lot but the following letters of the last word can be read, *ndy[š][y]t*. This brief overview of the key words deciphered in the dipinti does not mean to put in question the fact that the Persian scribes 'beheld' the pictures. Still, it aims to show that what exactly they did at the synagogue remains difficult to ascertain without new and better readings. Furthermore, whereas the verbs 'to see/look at/behold' can be read with reasonable confidence in several cases, in almost all of them it is the *by'm'y* which is the direct object of the (seeing) action: in this way, perhaps the focus of any further analysis of the dipinti should move away from the scribes' role with respect to the *nigār* and instead shift towards what the enigmatic *bēma* may have represented.

Palaeography of the Middle Persian dipinti from the Dura synagogue.

In his review of Frye's photographic edition, Brunner grouped all the Middle Persian written vestiges together when he regarded them as precious illustrations of the cursive script of the third century CE.[1014] Yet, as demonstrated above, the Middle Persian inscribed parchments and ostracon show different versions of the 'standard' cursive hand of the early Sasanian period. By comparison, the synagogue dipinti present a much more formal, 'lapidary' style script. These present a number of cursive features also illustrated in the parchment and ostracon, but the letter shapes themselves are generally more ornate and better distinguished – the authors of the dipinti, who were careful to mention that they were professional Sasanian scribes, were evidently eager to show off their scribal skills. The dipinti had a different purpose to the parchments and ostracon: they were made to last, to commemorate the passage or work – whatever the exact reason was – of their authors, while the other Middle Persian written vestiges record administrative notes, transactions or communications. The dipinti were all

[1014] Brunner 1972, 493.

executed by different hands; each displays a personal style and its own idiosyncrasies, as well as varying degrees of care in the execution of the letters. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this study, the dipinti can be taken as a whole: the following observations will highlight characteristic features and broad tendencies that this small corpus of texts displays, and only point out some of the more striking or specific scribal details or peculiarities.

Almost all the dipinti of the synagogue present the combined used of cursive and more ornamental/monumental letter styles within the same inscription, the same line or even the same word. There is no 'rule' dictating the choice of one style or the other for a particular grapheme although certain trends can be identified. The first line – sometimes the first two – is typically the 'neatest', presenting the use of more monumental letters: the scribe's hand has a marked tendency to become more cursive towards the end of the dipinti. This was also a feature of the larger parchment fragment, the missive between two Sasanian military officials. We can similarly posit for the dipinti that the monumental style of lettering was considered more 'elegant' but also co-existed with a more rapid, cursive, 'natural' hand. Then, the use of monumental-style lettering is apparently favoured when writing heterograms. This is particularly striking in the case of the *lamed*: in oft-occurring, short heterograms such as OL ('to') and AL ('not') and whatever line the word appears in, the grapheme is always an archaising, Aramaic *lamed*, with a long vertical line ended by a – sometimes very exaggerated – hook **[Fig. 7.8]**. In such cases, the *lamed* is also often oversized – about ten times as big as the preceding *waw* or *alef* – and if the word finishes a line, it can take up almost three-lines-worth of space.[1015] In other, phonetically-written words that contain a *lamed*, the difference in treatment of this letter is notable: the grapheme is reduced to a single vertical line, sometimes even drawn at a slight angle – characteristic of later Middle Persian cursive script – and almost always links to the left with the following letter. It is often exaggeratedly elongated, easily reaching the upper line, sometimes touching or even crossing it – a typical stylisation as seen above – but in phonetically written words the *lamed* never presents the Aramaic lower 'hook'. The Aramaic-style graphemes of certain heterograms do concern only the *lamed*. In Plate I the scribe appears to have made a distinction between the letters *qof* and *mem* in the aramaeogram QDM, *abar* ('on/in'): the *qof* did not represent a phonetic reality in Middle Persian and was only used to spell heterograms, with a grapheme that became identical to that of the *mem*. It is not clear when the two letters stopped being differentiated in Middle Persian; the distinction was kept in Parthian into the Sasanian period. In the last word of the first line (Plate I), the first

[1015] Frye 1968, Plate I.

letter is a distinctively monumental *mem*, with a small 'dip' in the loop just below the left cross; the last letter of the same word is a much more simplified, cursive *mem* **[Fig. 7.8]**. Because of the dipinti's bad state of preservation, it is difficult to tell in the other instances of the word *QDM* whether this differentiation was systematic. It certainly seems to be the case again in line 3 of Plate XII, where the cross of the *mem* is left to 'trail' in a typically cursive way, whereas the Q is neat and monumental. It is also possible however that the distinction between Q and M in these cases stems from the fact that the beginning of words, like the beginning of lines and texts, tends to be more carefully written and ornamental. Still, the 'survival' of Aramaic-style graphemes in armaeograms is a feature of Islamic period Middle Persian manuscripts – as if the heterograms were not only a vehicle for 'frozen' Aramaic words but for graphemes also. This convention can certainly be seen as formalised, in the case of the *lamed* at least, by the mid-third century CE in the dipinti. Finally, the position of the letter in the word also seems to influence its style: thus the *resh*, *waw* and *nun* in the middle of a word, especially in oft-occurring words like 'month' or 'this', tend to be simplified down to a single short vertical line; this makes them difficult to tell apart from the *zain* (see line 1 of Plate X with the phrase *YWM [Hor]mezd*) **[Fig. 7.9]**. Otherwise, the *resh* and the *waw*, virtually indistinguishable, take the form of a curvy '2', while the *nun* is like a Latin 'L'. The *mem* in word final position often takes a cursive shape that resembles the much later manuscript grapheme: the lower strand of the cross is elongated and left to 'trail', sometimes all the way down to the lower line, making it look almost like a Latin 'p' (see the *mem* in the middle of line 1 in Plate VI). Similarly, in Plate V, we have a striking example of a cursive *ṣade* in word final position, at the end of the first component of the compound name 'Burz-Ādur' **[Fig. 7.10]**: the *ṣade* adopts an *alef*-type head with a long curling tail which curves back to the right and links with the *lamed* directly preceding it. It certainly appears that the scribe wrote the *l+č* pair of his name in a single stroke; the pair is also 'underlined', by the long lower bar of the *bet*, significantly contributing to the overall stylisation of his name. As such, the ligatured, cursive *ṣade* has little to do with its monumental counterpart, although it has not yet acquired the distinctive 'reversed-question mark' form of later Middle Persian cursive either; rather, it is reminiscent of this grapheme's shape in the parchment known as the 'Pahlavi Psalter' (discussed below).

Stylisations and ligatures in the Middle Persian dipinti.

As for the Middle Persian parchments and ostracon, the main stylisations in the dipinti consist in the exaggerated elongations of graphemes, either vertically or horizontally: as mentioned,

the stem of the *lamed* can be elongated one to two lines up; the bottom curve of the 3-shaped *dalet* can sometimes reach the line below; the bottom stem of the cross of the *mem* can be stretched down; the bottom horizontal stroke of the *bet*, particularly if it begins a word, is typically elongated so that it underlines the entire following or two-following words; the lower horizontal foot of the *nun*, if this letter is in word final position, will similarly be stretched all the way back to underline the word it finishes; the lower 'cedilla' of the *kaf* can also reach quite far backwards. In several cases, the *shin* is made into a long horizontal line with its two little hooks perched all the way towards the left end, effecting an exaggerated elongation of this grapheme.

Although there are multiple examples of ligatures in the dipinti, they are certainly not as accentuated as in the smallest parchment fragment; they mainly consist in the leftward lengthening of a grapheme so that it joins the following one, but in most cases the scribe clearly lifted his writing instrument between the letters. A few exceptions include oft-occurring letter pairs: in the conjunction *AP* which begins many sentences in Middle Persian, both graphemes are systematically written in one stroke; this also seems to be the case for the letter combinations š+n and perhaps also l+a/y. Such 'true' (mini-)ligatures do not have counterparts in the Parthian material from Dura, where letters lean into each other but are written separately: this seems to be a specific feature of cursive Middle Persian, as early as the 3rd century CE. Then, the *bet* beginning a word is typically lengthened and the letters that immediately follow it are made to rest upon its lower horizontal bar, sometimes even crossing it (the *waw*, *resh*, or even wavy *ḥet* can cross it; see the first word in Plate I). This was a type of ligature/stylisation that already featured in later Persis coins (see chapter 6, with the aramaeogram BYN). Again, it is characteristic of Middle Persian and does not exist in Parthian. Other graphemes that are lengthened to support following letters or may even 'cross' through them include (but are not limited to) the *alef* and the *lamed*. On Plate XI, line 1 the left 'tail' of the *alef* supports the letter *yod* and crosses through the middle of the *kaf* in the aramaeogram AYK (*ku*, 'that') **[Fig. 7.12]**. The *lamed* typically reaches and can cross the upper line of writing. In Plate XII, in the aramaeogram LK (*tō*, 'you') in the first line, the *kaf* is written through the lower hook of the *lamed* **[Fig. 7.11]**. The Middle Persian dipinti also offer several examples of the changing shape of the cursive *ḥet*, already highlighted above for the smaller parchment fragment. Especially when this letter is in word-initial position, it takes the shape of an *alef* with a trailing left tail which links with the following grapheme. In such cases, the only real difference between this letter and an *alef* is that its 'head' is written above the main line of writing, whereas an *alef* rests upon it. Here again, we can posit that the effort to 'link' this letter to the following

grapheme heralded its much later cursive shape, when it became indistinguishable from the *alef*.

Prototypes of later 'corrupted' forms in the Dura dipinti.

The increased tendency towards ligatures, including in script-styles using more formal lettering like the synagogue dipinti, was responsible for certain 'corrupted' forms: in late Middle Persian manuscript certain oft-occurring words almost became graphemes in themselves and the original letters that composed them are difficult to single out. It is likely that later scribes were unable to distinguish the graphemes of such compositions and learned the forms almost as they would a 'logograms'. The Middle Persian dipinti from Dura retain the prototypes of such corrupted forms, which help trace how these terms became single, distinctive blocks. An example of this process is the aramaeogram AYK, *kū*, which typically introduces indirect speech. In late cursive it takes the shape of three little hooks all linked together and terminated by a sign which at first sight resembles a large number 2 – a loop with the main stem stretching down and back below the word. An early form of this heterogram can be found in Plate XI, where the letters *alef*, *yod* and *kaf*, although linked, are still perfectly distinguishable **[Fig. 7.12]**. The *kaf* takes its ornamental shape – a number three with a cedilla, which as we saw in the previous chapter was probably introduced by scribes to distinguish it from the *dalet*; the cedilla reaches right back, underlining the word, a stylisation which is characteristic for this grapheme in word-final position. The 'corrupted form' of later manuscripts can easily be explained: the scribes came to write this word exactly as it appears in Plate XI but without lifting their writing instrument; the result was three ligatured hooks terminating in a loop – the head of the *kaf* linked to the preceding *yod* – with a simplified, straight stem reaching down and back below the word. A very similar explanation can be given for the 'corrupted' form of the aramaeogram LK, *tō*. In later manuscripts it presents the shape of a long vertical stem linked to a 2-shaped grapheme: this is here again a case of the ornamental *kaf* being ligatured to the preceding *lamed* and reaching back below the word in a characteristic early Sasanian stylisation. One of the more striking 'corrupted' late Middle Persian cursive forms concerns the heterogram BYN, *andar* ('in').[1016] It is written as a deep hook – reaching below the line of writing – linked to a smaller hook and terminated by a vertical line which curves back to the

[1016] It should be noted that although the examples mentioned here are all aramaeograms, corrupted forms concern words in *plene* also, such as Hormazd: the main criterion appears to be their frequent occurrence.

right. The composition is then crossed at an angle by an oblique line: it is very difficult to guess the graphemes that constitute it.

As Brunner recognised, the dipinti record a prototype of this very 'corrupted' form (in which the letters have merged to the point of being unidentifiable as individual graphemes), in line 4 of Plate V **[Fig. 7.12]**.[1017] Now, the preceding chapter showed that the Persis coins already presented ligatured forms for this word. It was one of the first examples of Middle Persian graphemes linking and crossing. On the coins, the lower horizontal line of the *bet* is lengthened and the *yod*, drawn like a comma, is made to rest on this lower bar; the *nun*, placed close to the *yod*, crosses the lower stroke of the *bet* vertically. In the dipinti, the BYN corresponds exactly to this description, with one added feature: the *nun* is not simplified to a straight line like in the Persis coin but takes its ornamental shape, with a lower right 'foot'; this foot is stretched back below the word, 'underlining' it. Here again, we may posit that the later, corrupted form resulted from the scribal tendency to mark ligatures: scribes increasingly drew the same letters, with their stylisations, but without lifting their writing instrument. In this way, the first deep hook is the head of the *bet*, directly ligatured the *yod*, which forms the second hook; the pair is terminated by a straight downward line which reaches back to the right – the *nun*. The reason the *bet* lost its elongated horizontal stroke is simply because this allowed the scribe to draw the entire word in one go, without lifting his writing instrument and 'going back' to the head of the *bet* to add the *yod* and *nun* on its lower bar. Was the oblique line that crosses the later composition a way of representing the truncated 'tail' of the *bet*?

Investigating the formation of later cursive 'corrupted' forms.

The above overview of the earliest examples of ligatures, stylisations and the influence of cursive script allows us to contribute to a scholarly debate concerning the development of 'corrupted' forms such as BYN. Barr argued that to understand the formation of such compositions, one must "start from cursive forms of the elements forming the ligatures and not from the forms of the letters such as they appear on the stone monuments or in the Psalter MSS. written in archaic script":[1018] corrupted BYN cannot have originated from monumental B + Y

[1017] Brunner 1972, 495-496.

[1018] Barr 1936, 399, n. 2. Barr was here arguing against Nyberg and Henning's explanations of the peculiar grapheme or 'flourish' (Schnörkel) which can end verbal heterograms and which is identical in shape to the 'corrupted' cursive BYN. Nyberg considered that this verbal ending was the ligature of monumental Parthian *yod + he* (Nyberg 1928, 13). In his review of Nyberg's *Hilfsbuch,* Henning rejected Nyberg's hypothesis that

+ N, where the letters are kept separate. Any ligatures that occur on monuments are directly influenced by the cursive script which "in Persia as everywhere has developed independently and apart from the monumental script".[1019] Barr held that corrupted BYN stemmed from a cursive ligature of *bet+yod* with an added *nun*; he regarded the oblique stroke which crosses BYN as an ornamental element, binding the elements of the word together. Brunner by contrast argued that the dipinti of Dura were the "true source of Pahlavi BYN" and gave a (rather obscure) critique of Barr's explanation for the formation of the later corrupted form.[1020] He agreed with Barr that Sasanian inscriptional B+Y+N could not be the prototype of cursive BYN, but rejects his explanation of a *bet+yod* ligature with an added final *nun*: in the dipinti, while the *bet* can be ligatured with following graphemes, it always keeps its long lower horizontal stroke; it is never truncated. Rather for Brunner, the shape as we have it in the Dura dipinti "gradually became rounded and condensed" until it was unanalysable to scribes. Although he does not say so explicitly, Brunner seems to regard Barr's 'ornamental' oblique stroke as the remainder of the truncated tail of the bet.

There are a number of problems with the explanations given above which appear to me to be due to a problematic understanding of the articulation between monumental and cursive scripts in early Sasanian Iran. When Barr argues that late corrupted BYN cannot have derived from the monumental Middle Persian script and must necessarily stem from cursive practice, he is rejecting the idea of a diachronic evolution from monumental to cursive. This is certainly supported by the evidence presented in both the preceding chapter and this one: different graphic registers, with intermediary forms – depending on the context or the scribe's whim – coexisted in pre-Sasanian and Sasanian Iran. On the other hand, his view that they evolved separately is inaccurate: monumental and cursive were not kept hermetically apart, and as the overview of the Dura material shows, the same scribes not only wrote both scripts, but also wrote them in the same text or the same word, drawing on both registers to achieve elegant stylisations. For this reason, the monumental or inscriptional Middle Persian script is probably best viewed as 'ornamental' rather than archaic or even archaising; the preceding chapter demonstrated that it was probably created in the wake of the rise of the Sasanian dynasty, to celebrate a new era, and drew both on older, formal letter-shapes as well as innovations

elements of monumental Arsacid script could have made their way into Sasanian Middle Persian but did agree that this ornamental ending could be traced back to monumental Middle Persian letters (Henning 1935, 6).

[1019] Barr 1936, 399, n. 2.

[1020] Brunner 1972, 495-496.

introduced by a lively local cursive scribal tradition. Of course, there is some overlap between 'older forms' and a 'formal' script: un-simplified graphemes were evidently considered elegant, including in the context of cursive or semi-cursive documents. Appreciating the dynamic relationship between monumental and cursive forms is essential to study the development of 'corrupted' cursive forms. Barr regarded cursive letters as the base elements for such compositions, but as we have seen, late, corrupted forms contain the blueprint of several ornamental/monumental letters – such as the *kaf* and *nun*, typically in word-final position, or the *bet* in word-initial position – that were deformed by their ligature to other letters which were themselves increasingly more cursive in shape. In this regard, Brunner's explanation of 'corrupted' BYN as being the result of the form seen in the Dura dipinti becoming gradually more 'rounded' and 'condensed' is rather vague: not only is it necessary to factor in the combined used of monumental and cursive forms in single ligatures, but what really seems to have set cursive Middle Persian apart was the Sasanian scribes' increasing practice of writing entire words without lifting their writing instrument. One only has to try to write the semi-monumental BYN as it appears at Dura **[Fig. 7.12]** in one long single stroke to end up with the corrupted form of late manuscripts. The addition of the oblique stroke was either an ornamental feature – such long lines are indeed typical of manuscript stylisations – or the representation of the characteristic, long tail of the *bet* which had been truncated in the scribe's effort to write the entire word without lifting his writing instrument. As to Brunner's argument of the Dura graffiti as the 'true source' of the corrupted form – no single document or corpus can probably be regarded as the ultimate source of a scribal form: as we have seen, BYN was one of the first words to present innovative ligatures in the coins of Persis. The different written Middle Persian vestiges that are extant were only a fragment of the manuscript material that was produced by Persian scribes: what drove the transformation of scribal forms was no doubt the innumerable repetition, along with innovations and stylisations, of words – the fact that 'corrupted' forms typically concern much often repeated terms is probably the best illustration of this process.

The Middle Persian and Parthian graffiti of Dura.

The Dura vestiges offer a last example of early Sasanian writing, with a graffito engraved on the door jamb of the synagogue's main entrance.[1021] Only the first two words have been tentatively deciphered by Geiger (*zwt'n* YATWN, which he translated as 'come sooner').

[1021] Geiger 1956, 283-284; Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, 209.

Brunner commented that the author of the graffito appeared to "copy the ligatures of the cursive dipinti".[1022] Apart from the two words tentatively read by Geiger, it is possible to clearly distinguish several individual graphemes and make some palaeographic observations. The inscription, scratched in one long, thin vertical line presents very angular letter-shapes: the thin writing instrument on the hard surface probably made it particularly difficult for its author to draw curves **[Fig. 7.13]**. The *dalet* takes the form of a 'zigzag' more than the rounded 3-shape of the neighbouring dipinti; the *mem* appears almost more triangular than rounded. The graphemes are also very disproportionate to one another, no doubt again because of the writing conditions: with this graffito, we are far from the carefully executed dipinti of the frescoes. Nevertheless, the script style of this inscription is somewhat comparable to that in the dipinti in that it combines cursive and monumental versions of the same graphemes, sometimes within a word. Here again, 'monumental' letters typically occur in word-initial and more often word-final position to effect flourish. Other stylisations include the exaggerated elongation of the main stem of the *lamed*, the lower stroke of the *bet* and sometimes also of the left tail of the *alef*.

Three Parthian graffiti are also engraved at the synagogue.[1023] Like the Middle Persian example they are scratched with a thin instrument which contributes to make the letters angular and disproportionate, making it difficult to tell such letters as the *samekh* and *pe* apart. One is engraved in the background of the Triumph of Mordecai and two on the Elijah cycle: the authors of the graffiti identify themselves as scribe and great scribe (*'prs'm* SPRA and *syh'r dpyr* RBA). Since these are the frescoes that concentrate many of the dipinti by the Persian scribes, it is tempting to see that the evocation of the authors' function, 'scribe', is a way of linking their graffiti to the dipinti. Their short signatures are much less carefully executed than the Middle Persian graffiti, however. Unusually for Parthian, two of the graffiti present ligatures of the pairs *alef*+*mem* and *alef*+*pe*: this may be due to the cursive script style; or perhaps the scribes were more used to writing Middle Persian and displaying their skills in Parthian cursive.

[1022] Brunner 1972, 497.

[1023] Noy and Bloedhorn 2004, 196-198, 199-200, 202-204.

III. The Pahlavi Psalter.

The peculiar case of the so-called "Pahlavi Psalter".

The written vestiges of Dura Europos constitute a precious record of the early Sasanian Middle Persian and Parthian scripts. They are also the last documented examples of manuscript Middle Persian for much of the remainder of the Sasanian period: the other Middle Persian manuscripts to have reached us all date to the very end of the Sasanian period or are post-Sasanian vestiges. Before closing this chapter however, the peculiar case of the manuscript known as the "Pahlavi Psalter" ought to be mentioned. Its date is much debated; while several scholars place it in the sixth or seventh centuries, Skjærvø has recently argued for a much earlier date, in the fourth century. Because of the possibility of this earlier date, and also because the manuscript offers an example of an unusual Middle Persian script which has crystallised scholarly debates, it seems relevant to briefly discuss it here.

The so-called Pahlavi Psalter is a manuscript of a Middle Persian translation of the Syriac Psalter that was found in Bulayïq near Turfan at the turn of the twentieth century during a series of German archaeological expeditions to Central Asia commissioned by the Königliche Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin.[1024] It consists of twelve fragmentary pages, many of which have suffered damage in the middle, as well as two additional smaller fragments, all belonging to a much larger and now lost book.[1025] The Pahlavi Psalter was found along with Syriac, Christian Sogdian and Christian Turkish material. The circumstances of its composition are difficult to establish. Middle Persian is not otherwise attested as a liturgical language used by Christians of Central Asia, although Manichaean Middle Persian, written in Manichaean script, is. The Middle Persian fragment constitutes an exception in this context and Desmond Durkin-Meinsterernst has convincingly identified it as a product of Sasanian Iran – it is likely to have been composed by a Christian community in Iran, which, when it moved to Central Asia, took its written documents with it.[1026] When this community left Iran and why – because of Sasanian persecutors or because of Arab conquerors? – and whether there was a Middle Persian scribal school established in Central Asia are questions that have to remain open for the present.

[1024] Andreas and Barr 1933; Asmussen 1964; Gignoux 1969; Skjærvø 1983; Gignoux 2002; Durkin-Meisterernst 2006.

[1025] For reproductions of the manuscript, see Andreas and Barr 1933, Tab. I-XI.

[1026] Durkin-Meisterernst 2006, 6-8.

The translator of the Middle Persian Psalter: Syriac or Persian?

Scholars strongly disagree concerning the identity – Syriac or Persian – of the translator of the psalter. Philippe Gignoux, in his careful comparison of the Middle Persian translation with the Syriac original, concluded that the translator was perhaps more at ease in Syriac than in Middle Persian.[1027] Gignoux namely notes a certain hesitation in the choice of Middle Persian words to render Syriac concepts, with a tendency to favour the transcription of Syriac terms rather than find adequate Persian equivalents. Durkin-Meisterernst more recently observed that the translator's recourse to Syriac transcriptions may have been a strategic 'exaggeration' of the Middle Persian script's tendency to use heterographic writing.[1028] Syriac, a younger form of Aramaic, presents identical spellings of some words which have become aramaeograms in Middle Persian: this means that entire lines of the translation are, at times, nearly identical to the Syriac original, a feature which may have been particularly attractive to the translator and an important motivation for his peculiar choice of words. Durkin-Meisterernst does agree with Gignoux however that there is, as a result, some ambiguity as to whether the translator meant certain terms as heterograms or Syriac transcriptions. The translator also often concurrently uses the transcription of a Syriac term and an equivalent Middle Persian translation; in some cases, both options are even juxtaposed in a rather awkward manner.[1029] Furthermore, the literal, etymological use of certain Middle Persian words to render Syriac concepts may either be a device used by the translator to stay as close as possible to the original or another indication that he was not a native Middle Persian speaker. Gignoux highlights his choice of the word *dastgird* to render Syriac *'bād īdayā* 'the work of hands': etymologically, Middle Persian *dastgird* is indeed composed of the elements *dast* 'hand' and *kard-* 'to do' but the term never appears in literature with this sense, widely taking on the meaning of 'domain, property'.[1030] Based on the translator's at times awkward linguistic choices, Gignoux suggested that he may have been one of the Nestorian missionaries sent throughout Asia in the 6th century, under the impetus of the Patriarch of the Church of the East, Mar Aba.[1031]

By contrast, Skjærvø argued that Middle Persian was the mother tongue of the translator of the Syriac Psalter.[1032] Skjærvø made a systematic investigation of key features of the

[1027] Gignoux 1969, 244.

[1028] Durkin-Meisterernst 2006, 5-6.

[1029] Gignoux 1969, 236.

[1030] Gignoux 1969, 241-242.

[1031] Gignoux 1969, 244.

[1032] Skjærvø 1983, 179.

morphological and syntactical structure of inscriptional Middle Persian and Parthian and compared his results with the language of the Pahlavi Psalter: his study showed that the Middle Persian translation was perfectly consistent with the early Sasanian inscriptions. In particular, like the inscriptions, the Pahlavi Psalter follows a two-case system in nouns and pronouns, in which the direct and oblique are formally and syntactically separate; this distinction disappeared in later manuscript Middle Persian texts.[1033] Skjærvø not only concluded that the author of the translation was Persian, but that the text may have been composed as early as the fourth century.[1034] The one important difference that Skjærvø did highlight between the inscriptions and the Psalter concerned the phonetic complements added to verbal ideograms: while early inscriptions lack a consistent system for the spelling of phonetic complements, the Psalter presents a regular system. However, he ascribed this difference to the divergence in local scribal traditions and the translator's endeavour to render the Syriac original in a consistent manner.[1035]

Dating the Pahlavi Psalter.

The studies of the language of the Pahlavi Psalter come hand in hand with a disagreement concerning its date. The manuscript's peculiar palaeography has also played an important part in the discussions concerning the text's composition **[Fig. 7.14]**. Friedrich Carl Andreas initially considered – like Gignoux – the 6th century as a *terminus ante quem*: Mar Aba, who composed some of the canons contained in the Middle Persian translation, died in the middle of the sixth century. However, he judged the script archaising and for palaeographic reasons decided to date the original translation – before the addition of Mar Aba's canons – to the 5th century.[1036] Barr, who published Andreas' edition posthumously, preferred to disregard the text's palaeography as a dating criterion, pointing out that the archaic script style it displays may have survived in Central Asia without being affected by scribal developments back in Iran.[1037] Based on the punctuation marks and diacritics that appear in the manuscript and that are unknown in Syriac manuscripts before the seventh century, he favoured this later date; he

[1033] Skjærvø 1983, 48.

[1034] Skjærvø 1983, 178-179.

[1035] Skjærvø 1983, 179.

[1036] Andreas and Barr 1933, 5-6.

[1037] Andreas and Barr 1933, 6.

agreed nevertheless that the initial translation may have been older.[1038] Durkin-Meisterernst supports Barr's rejection of the text's palaeography as a being a solid clue to its dating.[1039] He points out that although the Pahlavi Psalter does present the tendency – unlike later Middle Persian manuscripts – to differentiate graphemes, its peculiar script was apparently still used/read in the late or post-Sasanian period. Two letters belonging to the Psalter script have even been identified as inspiring the creation of graphemes for the later Avestan alphabet.[1040] For Durkin-Meisterernst, this shows that the 'Psalter script' was just "one representative of what must have been a number of (possibly local) scripts in use in the Sasanian empire".[1041] He even considers the possibility that the translation first existed in a more common cursive Middle Persian form, and was later copied into an 'archaising' palaeography because this formal script was "felt more appropriate to the character of the holy text".[1042] Indeed, Barr had already tentatively suggested that some of the misspellings found in the Psalter may have been due to the misreading (or mis-rendering) of an original cursive hand.[1043]

The script of the Pahlavi Psalter: combining monumental forms with ligatures.

One of the most striking features of the Pahlavi Psalter script is its systematic recourse to ligatures: the words are regularly spaced out and form clear units of attached letters **[Fig. 7.14]**. Another characteristic of this text is the 'formal' shape of the individual graphemes. These are very similar – in most cases identical – to the letter style used in the dipinti and in the larger parchment fragment from Dura. The Psalter is thus highly comparable to the Dura manuscript vestiges in that it combines a ligatured style with formal, un-simplified lettering. The main difference concerns the Psalter's *systematic* use of ligatures: throughout the text and whenever the ligature-conventions allow him to, the scribe who wrote the Middle Persian translation does not lift his writing instrument from the page. While the hand of the Dura scribes often favoured ligatures, particularly for oft-occurring words and common letter pairs, many graphemes within words are still separate and there is an overall sense that the 'detached' style is, like the formal lettering, more elegant. In the Pahlavi Psalter by contrast, the highly regular, systematically

[1038] Andreas and Barr 1933, 6.

[1039] Durkin-Meisterernst 2006, 7.

[1040] Hoffman and Narten 1989, 25; Durkin-Meisterernst 2006, 5, n. 3.

[1041] Durkin-Meisterernst 2006, 5, n. 3

[1042] Durkin-Meisterernst 2006, 5, n. 3.

[1043] Andreas and Barr 1933, 6.

ligatured script is an intrinsic part of the scribe's writing style and the manuscript's elegance: as Durkin-Meisterernst observed, clearly much attention was devoted to the composition and writing of this holy text. As such, the Psalter represents a marked shift in both scribal practice and aesthetics – could this change in paradigm have been influenced, at least in the case of the Psalter, by the rounded and ligatured Estrangelo Syriac script? It is, at this stage, impossible to decide on a date for the Psalter script but it evidently belongs to a scribal tradition that was definitely removed in time (and probably space) to the Dura manuscript vestiges.

As mentioned above, most of the graphemes in the Psalter manuscript correspond to the 'formal' Middle Persian letter style displayed at Dura: the *shin* is a straight horizontal line with two hooks resting upon it; the *yod* can either take the form of a comma or a 'hook' open to towards the bottom, a shape that – like at Dura – is more common in word-final position. The *mem* is a simple loop neatly crossed to the left; the lower stem of the cross always links with the following letter and never trails downwards as at Dura, however. The Psalter furthermore contains no examples of the 'monumental' *mem* – with the dent in the loop – which may have been used at Dura to tell the *qof* apart from it. True to the monumental style, the *ḥet* in the Psalter is a neat horizontal wave – it does not have the tendency to fall below the line of writing as it does at Dura. The *resh* and *waw* are, characteristically, indistinguishable; the upper hook of the 2-shape of these graphemes is much less pronounced in the Psalter script. The *lamed*, again like at Dura, is either a straight vertical line curving to the left at the bottom, linking with the next letter, or the 'hooked' Aramaic *lamed*: the latter is reserved for short ideograms like OL. The *ṣade* takes the distinctive shape displayed in plate V of the Dura dipinti: an *alef*-type head and a long curling tail which curves back to the right and links with the preceding letter. The *kaf* is a large 2-shaped grapheme, familiar from Dura in word-final position (such as in the aramaeogram AYK): in the Psalter however, this is the main form of this letter; in the dipinti, the *kaf* in other positions takes the monumental 3-shape with cedilla. The *pe* is a neat loop closed and linked to the right with the letter that precedes it; like in the dipinti, it can sometimes be reduced to a simple full circle, particularly if it is not linked. The *taw* in the Psalter typically takes the form of a circle attached to the left to a short vertical line; this shape is also common in the dipinti although in that corpus, as in the Dura parchment, the grapheme also often takes a more monumental form (a Latin 'L' with a hook in the upper middle of the stem).

As in the Dura parchments, the main stylisations consist in the exaggerated horizontal elongations of certain graphemes: the lower horizontal line of the *bet* and the lower right foot of the *nun* and *kaf* typically underline the entire word following (for the *bet*) or preceding (in

the case of the *kaf* and *nun*) the grapheme. This embellishment is overemphasized at the end of lines, where the left stems of graphemes in word-final position – including *alef*, *shin*, *mem* – will typically be elongated to fill in any blank space left between the last word and the end of the line: the Psalter manuscript is neatly justified both to the left and to the right. The Psalter thus supports the possibility evoked above that writing on parchment favoured horizontal elongations, whereas on ostraca flourishes occupy the vertical plane.

By contrast to the Dura scribes, the author of the Psalter manuscript was careful to be systematic in his lettering style and avoids 'mixing' formal and simplified, cursive, letters: the *waw* and *resh* for instance can very rarely (if ever) be confused with the *nun* or *kaf*. There are also some notable differences between the Dura and the Psalter letter shapes. Most striking is the *dalet*, which in Dura maintains the 3-shape of late Persis and Sasanian monumental script but in the Psalter has lost the 'dip' in the middle and been simplified to a large comma-like character: as such, it is comparable to the *yod*, although it is kept firmly apart from this grapheme by its size, which is twice as large. The *he*, which at Dura is the wavy 'hat' on top of an L-shaped base – familiar from monumental script – takes in the Psalter an innovative form: it resembles a '2' that has been turned 90° anti-clockwise. The *samekh* at Dura is again the monumental grapheme directly derived from the Aramaic/Parthian prototype (like a cursive Latin 'n'), while in the Psalter in takes the form of two little hooks linked to one another on the line of writing. This shape is identical to much later Middle Persian cursive. In the Psalter however, particularly when it is ligatured, this grapheme is very difficult to distinguish from the *shin*, which is much closer to its monumental form in this manuscript (see above).

Preliminary conclusions: investigating the lost manuscript vestiges of Sasanian Iran.

The overview of the manuscript vestiges from Dura Europos, and in its own way the more difficult to place Pahlavi Psalter also, testify to a diversity of cursive styles flourishing in Sasanian Iran. These were not only due to variant scribal traditions: the Dura vestiges, which can all be dated with much precision to the same period and placed within a similar archaeological and administrative context, illustrate the Sasanian scribes' conscious play on different graphic registers to better adapt their productions to administrative and formal circumstances, different writing surfaces, create embellishments or display their scribal skills. These earliest manuscript vestiges namely document the combined use of cursive and more formal letter shapes within the same text, as well as the rise of the use of ligatures in manuscript, including when using monumental-style graphemes. The Parthian manuscript vestiges from

Dura testify to the resolutely bilingual nature of the Sasanian royal chancery in this early period. They also indicate that ever since this early date, the tendency towards ligatures was a particular feature of Middle Persian manuscript: in often-occurring words or letter pairs, towards the end of words or texts, the scribe's hand appears to have favoured links between graphemes and avoided lifting his writing instrument. Yet, while at Dura there is still a sense that a more formal and elegant style includes detached lettering, the Pahlavi psalter shows that a change of aesthetics eventually occurred, with regular ligatures becoming an intrinsic feature of an elegantly written document. The case of later 'corrupted' cursive forms is particularly striking. The Dura vestiges contain the prototype of such forms, which eventually underwent such transformations that the graphemes that constitute them become nearly impossible to identify. The early Sasanian evidence indicates that their development stems from a combination of scribal practices from this period: on the one hand the use of cursive and monumental letters – the latter, typically in word-final positions – within single words to effect embellishments and the increasingly frequent recourse to ligatures to link these letters belonging to different graphic registers together. There is a substantial gap in the manuscript vestiges of Sasanian Iran which makes it impossible to trace with any more precision the local developments of Middle Persian manuscript: the next corpuses of manuscript vestiges all date to either the much later Sasanian period or post-date. Nevertheless, the Sasanian monumental inscriptions, which constitute the bulk of our written material for this era, refer frequently to a wealth of hand-written documents which remain to be discovered. It is to these that we now turn.