Universiteit Leiden
The Netherlands

Historiography and palaeography of Sasanian Middle Persian inscriptions

Ramble, O.K.C.

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Conclusions

The research developed in this doctoral dissertation hopes to contribute to Sasanian studies in particular, and to ancient Iranian studies more generally, in three main ways. First, it offers a critical study of the history of research surrounding the decipherment of the Middle Persian script, thereby helping to define the contribution of Sasanian epigraphy to the broader historiographical debates concerning the study of Late Antiquity. Then, through the palaeographic analysis of the earliest pre-Sasanian and Sasanian Middle Persian written vestiges, it highlights the existence of an active and innovative scribal tradition that was local to Persis throughout the Seleucid and Parthian periods. This tradition presents a wealth of cursive and stylistic innovations that are generally regarded as characteristic of much later Middle Persian manuscripts. Finally, it investigates a possible model for the study of Sasanian inscriptions which takes into account the references made in these monumental texts to both (now lost) manuscript documents, as well as to key features of their natural and built environment: this helps bring into sharp focus the often overlooked legal, administrative and religious functions of Sasanian rock-cut texts.

Isolated passages in Late Antique historiography allude to "Persian inscriptions", while several historiographers from this period evidently entertained the notion of a script specifically used by the "Persians". However, whether this was only an assumption on their part, hearsay, or any real knowledge of written Middle Persian is less clear. The close examination of the relevant descriptions in the works of Roman, Byzantine, Syriac and Armenian authors reveals that any details concerning the epigraphic commissions of Sasanian kings and the alphabet used by the Sasanian administration are only fanciful literary embellishments: Late Antique historiography had little or no contact with either cursive or monumental Middle Persian. What the accounts do record are certain aspects of epigraphic practice that were characteristic of – but not exclusive to – Sasanian Iran, such as the composition of multilingual inscriptions, the inscription of boundary stones, cases of *damnatio memoriae* or again the dedication of inscribed votive objects: generally, such instances are only recorded because they were displayed by the crown outside the empire's heartland, in Armenia and Mesopotamia, and in languages other than Middle Persian, such as Greek. The closest reference to a "Persian" alphabet and writing system is Epiphanius' excursus on what is probably the Manichaean script, which he enquired about only because he considered its creator as a dangerous rival. In the main, there seems to have been a certain lack of distinction in most sources between Syriac and

‘Persian’. This echoes the similar ambiguity in earlier Greek and Roman historiography concerning what exactly is meant by ‘Syriac/Assyrian’, the adjectives often used to describe Old Persian cuneiform inscriptions. As such, Late Antique accounts illustrate the huge importance of Syriac as a mediatory language (or rather, script) in the exchanges between the Sasanian empire and Byzantium, an aspect of the linguistic landscape of Late Antique Iran that is also testified by Arabo-Persian chronicles.

By contrast, Arabo-Persian accounts dating from the early centuries after the fall of the Sasanian empire record a wealth of detailed information concerning the different languages spoken within the borders of the Sasanian empire and in particular the scripts used to transcribe the (Middle) Persian language. Some of the chroniclers were of Iranian origin and acquainted with Middle Persian; a (Zoroastrian) priest is sometimes cited as the main source for their account. Yet, the passages are often difficult to interpret and frequently slip into fantastical interpretations, suggesting that the literary landscape of Sasanian Iran and its many scripts was soon becoming the stuff of legends. Some of the better-informed accounts keep a trace of the synchronic use of different script styles in pre-Islamic Iran, and, most remarkably, present strikingly accurate explanations of the Middle Persian heterography writing system. These were to be pivotal in 19th century Western scholars’ understanding of the workings of the Middle Persian writing system.

The European rediscovery of ancient Persian inscriptions was a complex phenomenon with its own intricate history, involving aspects as disparate and seemingly unrelated as the chance documentation of Achaemenid sites, the success of travel literature in Europe, the rivalry between European learned societies (especially French and British), European missionary ambitions, and merchants’ commercial encounters with local Zoroastrian and non-Zoroastrian communities. The early European travellers to Persia who left us accounts of their expeditions were priests, noblemen and wealthy merchants; they had all received a solid education in the Classics and this was their reference for all things Persian, old and new – a standard against which they checked their observations and information systematically. Travellers relied on classical historians – whose works they physically took with them to the field – to help them to identify and interpret ancient monuments and sites as well as natural features of the Iranian topography like mountains and rivers. Against this background, the rediscovery of the legendary Persepolis spurred a contagious enthusiasm for ancient Persia, which the growing popularity for travel literature only encouraged further. Čehelmenār-Persepolis soon became a major focus of international scholarly attention, precipitating the documentation of its magnificent architectural vestiges and strange cuneiform inscriptions.

Buried in travellers' drawings of the sumptuous vestiges at the site of Naqš-e Rostam was a set of short trilingual inscriptions with Middle Persian, Parthian and Greek versions that was to be the key to the decipherment of the monumental Middle Persian script. The unknown script was variously described as Coptic or Palmyrene and the inscriptions erroneously attributed to Alexander the Great. It was also around this time that European travellers in India collected the first Zoroastrian manuscripts to reach Europe, heralding the beginning of a textual critical study of Zoroastrianism. No link was yet made, however, between the language of the rock-cut texts of Naqš-e Rostam and the Zoroastrian manuscripts deposited at the Bibliothèque du Roi by Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil du Perron (1731-1805) in 1762.

The painstaking comparison of the Middle Persian versions of the Sasanian inscriptions copied at the site of Naqš-e Rostam with their Greek counterparts allowed Antoine Isaac Silvestre de Sacy (1758-1838) to identify a first series of letters and to begin work on the Middle Persian monumental script. As his decipherment progressed, he secured a small vocabulary of Middle Persian words which firmly associated the language of the inscriptions with that of the commentaries in the Zoroastrian manuscripts, as well as those engraved on the coins dating to the reigns of the Sasanian kings. This allowed scholars to anchor the use of Middle Persian within that dynasty, bringing Iran's Sasanian history into the spotlight. It was also based on Silvestre de Sacy's breakthrough with the decipherment of the Sasanian inscriptions, and in particular his reading of formulaic Sasanian royal titulature, that Georg Friedrich Grotefend was able to lay the groundwork for determining the phonetic value of Old Persian cuneiform characters, opening the way for the decipherment of cuneiform scripts.

Still, inscriptional and manuscript Middle Persian were not considered identical, and the degree to which they were related was the subject of much disagreement. Most importantly, the Semitic-looking words in the inscriptions and manuscripts were taken to be loanwords rather than part of the language's writing system, giving way to serious misreadings and sparking a major debate in scholarship concerning the nature of the Middle Persian idiom: was it an Indo-European language with Semitic loanwords or a Semitic language presenting significant Indo-European syntactic features? Middle Persian was even brandished as an emblem of the peaceful coexistence between Semitic and Aryan peoples, born from the happy alliance between Armenians and Chaldeans (Syrians) under the aegis of Zoroastrianism.

Western scholarship's misunderstanding of Middle Persian heterography, and in particular the assumption that aramaeograms were loanwords pervaded the study of Sasanian inscriptions and Zoroastrian manuscripts all the way until the second half of the 19th century. It was the cause of serious misreadings and lay at the root of the fierce debates that polarised

scholars concerning such issues as the nature of the Middle Persian language as well as the linguistic relationship between inscriptional and manuscript Middle Persian. This is particularly well illustrated by the history of the slow but steady progress made on the decipherment of the Sasanian inscription of Hājjiābād as successive researchers tackled it. Some scholars even called into question the 'genuineness' of the suspiciously 'mixed' Middle Persian language and by extension expressed doubts concerning the authenticity of the Zoroastrian manuscripts brought back from India by Anquetil Duperron: such accusations must be understood against the backdrop of a fierce antagonism between the learned circles of France and England. European scholars' appreciation of the articulation of Aramaic (Semitic) and Iranian (Aryan) elements in Middle Persian reflects the tropes of scholarly debates and ideology in their time – predominantly the historical relationship between Semitic and Aryan peoples – while the forced readings of key terms betray a strong Christian bias. It was eventually the close collaboration with experts of the Zoroastrian scriptures in India for the publication of Middle Persian glossaries of aramaeographic forms, and in particular the first-hand witnessing of the reading of manuscripts by priests in the second half of the nineteenth century which finally provided the key to unlocking the mechanisms of heterographic writing for Western scholarship.

As it became clear, the heterograms (or aramaeograms) in Middle Persian, which for so many centuries were thought to be 'loanwords' by Western scholarship and had proved so difficult to apprehend, were not borrowed into the language but inherent to the writing system and directly linked to the history of its emergence. The Middle Persian script derives from Imperial Aramaic, which was extensively used for administrative purposes in the chanceries of the Achaemenid empire. Middle Persian did not only inherit the shape of its graphemes from the Aramaic alphabet. Imperial Aramaic came along with a distinctive administrative protocol, conventions for writing letters and contracts with their precise fixed formulae. These are central aspects of the mechanisms that gave rise to the heterographic Middle Persian writing system. The nineteenth century debates concerning the nature – Semitic or "Aryan" – of Middle Persian are reflected to some extent in more recent studies which highlight the difficulty of determining, in the case of early Parthian and Middle Persian (and Elymaean) texts and inscriptions, whether these present 'corrupted', faulty, Aramaic or already a form of heterography. What such controversies illustrate is the difficulty in distinguishing a language from its writing system.

The appearance of Greek in the Seleucid period as an important language of administration as well as the new language of prestige for representational purposes contributed

to the fragmentation of the many centuries-old monolithic Aramaic scribal tradition. The latter did not disappear, however: although only very few traces of it remain for this period, evidence suggests that Aramaic continued to be used locally in administration, and in some rare cases, for representational purposes (on coinage) also. Greek was eventually uniformly abandoned as a language of administration, progressively disappearing in Iran in the course of the 1st century CE and giving way to a mosaic of Aramaic-derived Iranian scripts, anchored in provincial chanceries. One such script, Parthian, dominates the scene: it gained an imperial status with the rise to power of the Parthian Arsacids and benefited from the normalising influence of a centralised administration. Nevertheless, the more conservative shapes maintained in local scripts such as Characenean and Elymaean, and the existence of cursive shapes that appear to have evolved from Aramaic prototypes without following the same trajectory as Parthian counterparts, suggest that these local chanceries were direct heirs of the Achaemenid Aramaic scribal tradition. It is against this background that the first traces of the Middle Persian script in the former Achaemenid heartland of Persis must be examined.

Very few written vestiges have survived from pre-Sasanian Persis. Our understanding of the use of Aramaic in Persis and the evolution of this alphabet from the fall of the Achaemenid empire until the beginning of the Sasanian period rests entirely on a corpus of locally struck coins, to which can be added two inscribed silver vessels. One of the more remarkable characteristics of the Persid coinage is that the Greek alphabet apparently never made its way into the coin legends, setting it starkly apart from the Parthian, Elymaean, and Characenean numismatic issues. Historical evidence suggests that Persis was not spared Seleucid and Parthian domination, and there is no reason to believe that the Persid kings chose to have their legends engraved in Aramaic either out of rejection of Greek or out of lack of access to this language and script. Persis, the ancient heartland of the Achaemenid empire, had enjoyed a special administrative status at least up until Seleukos I (r. 305-281); it was also an old imperial administrative hub and likely hosted an important local chancery which had maintained a strong Aramaic heritage. A close study of the palaeography of the Persis coins and pre-Sasanian engraved silver vessels, as well as its comparison with other regional Aramaic-derived scripts from this period, reveals the emergence of a flourishing scribal tradition: it presents local innovations, with the effort to differentiate, through the use of diacritics, certain graphemes that had become virtually indistinguishable; the synchronic existence of different shapes for the same grapheme; and the juxtaposition of different script-styles – archaising, ornamental, cursive, detached and linked – within a given legend. Most importantly, the introduction of certain features such as simplifications, linked graphemes and

proto-corrupted forms, can only reasonably be explained as reflecting manuscript practice. As such, the close study of the scant written material from pre-Sasanian Persis serves to highlight the existence of a rich and lively local manuscript tradition which has left no vestiges because of the perishable media it was written on.

From the ruins of Dura-Europos were recovered a number of parchment fragments, ostraca and ink dipinti which can be securely dated to the first decades of the Sasanian empire. Not only are they the earliest written vestiges that can be attributed to this period: they are also some of the only manuscript remains of Sasanian Iran. The important archives of administrative Middle Persian documents and the Zoroastrian religious texts that have survived all belong to the very late or post-Sasanian era. The absence of manuscript material for this period has contributed to misleading scholars' understanding of Late Antique Iranian writing practices, often leading 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.

The extant written material from Dura indicates that both Parthian and Middle Persian were used in day-to-day scribal practice in the context of early Sasanian royal chanceries – whether some or all scribes could write both languages is a question that must remain unanswered at present. Remarkably, the texts present a marked tendency towards ligatures and stylistic embellishments. These are most striking at the beginning and at the end of lines: in often-occurring words or letter pairs, especially towards the end of words or texts, the scribe's hand appears to have favoured links between graphemes and avoided lifting his writing instrument. Such features have no counterpart in the Parthian documents from the same finds, indicating that even in this early period, they were particular to Middle Persian cursive. Above all, the Middle Persian manuscript vestiges from Dura show different versions of the 'standard' cursive hand of the early Sasanian period. In this way, cursive, formal cursive, numismatic, inscriptional Middle Persian – with many intermediary forms creatively interwoven in single inscriptions by scribes, such as a 'ligatured inscriptional' style, well illustrated by the dipinti – are better regarded as different but synchronically used graphic registers rather than a diachronic evolution from the latter to the former.

The careful palaeographic study of the pre-Sasanian and early Sasanian written material serves to outline the rich and prolific now lost manuscript tradition of Sasanian Iran. In the main, the inscriptions commissioned by Sasanian kings and important dignitaries constitute the

only primary written sources for this period[1170] and therefore dominate the textual and palaeographic research dedicated to it. Yet, if we are to reconstitute Late Antique Iranian scribal practices, the first step is to acknowledge that inscriptions were only a fraction of the written output of the Sasanian empire.

Now, the rock-cut texts themselves allow us a glimpse into the vanished Sasanian manuscript literature. The inscriptions record a wealth of specialised terminology to refer to manuscript texts, testifying to a dynamic administrative and legal scribal activity in this period. Elements of the inscriptions' palaeography also betray the manuscript models that were the basis for the monumental stone versions, and are testimonies to cursive forms that were being used alongside the lapidary, ornamental script in this period. Furthermore, the recurring references to manuscript documents and archives reveal that these formed the political, legal, administrative and even religious backdrop to the monumental inscriptions: rock-cut texts were conscientiously inscribed within a much broader Sasanian landscape of manuscript sources. The question remains what role monumental inscriptions played within this textual landscape and what special status they enjoyed with respect to other Sasanian written sources. The manuscript documents alluded to certainly served to underpin the legal authority and validity of the monumental texts; the inscriptions, in turn, acted as enduring stone testimonies of royal deeds, religious foundations, fiscal transactions, sealings and signatures. From these observations it is possible to infer an administrative and juridical role of the monumental stone inscriptions.

To go further in determining the specific significance of rock-cut texts, it is necessary to take a closer look at certain key passages in which the content of the inscription alludes to the physical phenomenon of the engraved words. Such 'auto-referential' passages are pivotal moments in the structure of a rock-cut text: they contribute to making tangible its materiality and three-dimensionality and allow its indexation to its environment – as such, they are specific to monumental inscriptions. The allusions to key features of their physical context calls attention to the importance of a rock-cut text's direct environment for understanding both its significance and its author's purpose in having it engraved. Aspects of the inscriptions' surroundings that are mentioned include Sasanian royal bas-reliefs and sanctuaries, ancient ruins, soul foundations, springs and lush grottos endowed with a certain numinous aura, as well as other, older inscriptions in their vicinity. Such aspects of the monumental texts' natural and

[1170] Along with seals, that are not examined in detail in the context of this study: these sources are problematic because of their lack of provenance, context and date.

built environment are strongly suggestive of a religious and ritual role of the early Sasanian rock-cut texts – an aspect that should probably not be divorced from their legal and administration functions.

A more complete picture of the now lost manuscript Sasanian tradition would be gained from the systematic study of the remaining Sasanian written vestiges that have not been discussed in this dissertation, such as masons' marks, later funerary inscriptions and seal legends. These present a wealth of script styles and peculiar palaeographic features used synchronically that would contribute to further enriching our understanding of Sasanian manuscript practice. Similarly, the systematic examination of the entire corpus of Sasanian inscriptions that survives and that continues to be documented as new finds are published will refine the nature of the administrative and legal status of monumental texts in Late Antique Iran and help us to confirm their role in Sasanian religious life and ritual practice.