

Some Remarks on the Proto-Middle Persian Inscription Persis 2 and the Oblique Case

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Received: June 20, 2023 • Accepted: August 8, 2023

Published Online: November 23, 2023

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with a pre-Sasanian inscription written in Middle Persian script recently published by N. Sims-Williams, who named it 'Persis 2'. First, some observations on the reading and interpretation of the text are proposed. Then, it is argued that the instances of final *-y* in this inscription could correspond to a phonetic notation of the oblique singular ending *-ē*, hitherto only reconstructed for proto-Middle Persian. Finally, a discussion on the origin of heterographic writing with respect to the graphical representation of Iranian morphological endings is proposed, in the attempt to explain why a final *-y* for the ending *-ē* is not regularly noted in all the comparable documents from the middle Arsacid period.

KEYWORDS

Persis 2, Middle Persian, Pahlavi, Oblique Case, Final *y*, Heterography

INTRODUCTION

In a recent article N. Sims-Williams (2021, henceforth abbreviated as SW) published a short inscription ('Persis 2') engraved on a silver bowl, which represents one of the most ancient written attestations of the Persian language after the Achaemenid period, and surely the most interesting one. It can be dated between the 1st century BCE and the 1st century CE on palaeographic grounds, since the shape of some letters is extremely similar to that of another pre-Sasanian Middle Persian inscription, renamed 'Persis 1' by SW, which certainly dates between the reigns of the

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rulers of Persis Dārayān II and Artaxšahr II (end of 1st century BCE).¹ In this paper I shall propose some punctual observations on the reading and interpretation of Persis 2, as well as a discussion on the occurrences of final -y in this text and, in general, on the problem of the emergence to writing of Iranian morphological features in the transition from Official Aramaic to the Middle Iranian heterographic writing systems.

PRELIMINARY NOTE

Before presenting my own reading of the inscription, it is worth clarifying a minor methodological point on which I do not completely agree with SW. In the attempt to establish the most plausible reading for words of uncertain interpretation, SW relies on a quite subtle analysis of the tracing of the letters, trying to detect even in small details some of the features by which similar signs seem to be distinguished throughout the text. Thus, he often prefers readings that he regards as palaeographically more justified leaving aside options for which a more plausible interpretation is at hand (e.g. he reads <swprskn> rather than <swpwskn>, <y'nd'yn> rather than <y'nd't>). In my view, in dealing with this kind of inscriptions, it should be kept in mind that the artisan who engraved the text was not necessarily the same person who composed it in the first place. He was probably copying from a draft written on a different material, most likely in a more cursive variant of the script. Moreover, being a metalworker rather than a professional scribe, he could well have only possessed the knowledge of the repertoire of signs needed to engrave inscriptions in a given variant of the script (in this case, the 'epigraphic' one), without being able to read and understand the texts – there is no need to emphasize how huge is the gap between these two abilities. So, when faced with signs that were not clearly distinguishable in the draft (e.g. <w> and <r>), the engraver may have been forced to choose between two different shapes in the epigraphic script only based on his personal judgement, possibly making some mistakes.² Thus, if SW's analysis is totally shareable inasmuch as it refers to the abstract repertoire of signs typical of the script found in this inscription (distinction between <r> and <w>, confusion between <y> and <z>, etc.), I would not be so sure that palaeography is always a reliable guide to choose between different possible readings.

A further argument which in my view supports the idea of a draft written in cursive script is the difference in the shape of <'> between the beginning and the end of the inscription. Such variation is difficult to account for in the context of epigraphic writing, but is quite conceivable if applied to a cursive script. Actually, in ancient non-calligraphic writing – as well as in everyone's daily experience – it is totally normal for texts to begin with a more careful handwriting and gradually shift to a more cursive *ductus* towards the end. In this case, the triangle-shaped <'> represents the older and more accurate tracing of the letter, whereas the other one, which

¹ The inscription was first published by Skjærvø 1997. See now SW (2021: 614–616) for an improved edition made possible by the comparison with Persis 2.

² A quite similar circumstance is encountered in the Parthian version of ŠKZ, where an apparently unjustified interchange between letters such as <w> and <r> or <z> and <g> is often found. This was convincingly explained by Henning (1952: 513 n. 2 and 3) as due to the fact that the Parthian version had been translated from a copy of the Middle Persian text, where the above-mentioned letters were not distinguished in writing; cf. also Huyse 1999/2: 193. In this case as well, it is clear that the scribe of the Parthian version was not as skilled as his Middle Persian colleague, since he provided quite random transliterations of the toponyms he did not understand.



was going to be generalized in the future, represents the more cursive one. In front of these two fundamentally different shapes, the engraver could have simply chosen to reproduce them as they were written in the draft.

TEXT AND COMMENTARY

Having discussed this point, which serves to justify my preference for some readings, I present hereafter my attempt to transliterate, transcribe and translate the text. Since the text is very old, I will not follow MacKenzie's (1967) system of transcription, which is aimed at representing the phonology of MP in the 3rd century CE. Instead, I will try to offer a plausible reconstruction of the proto-Middle Persian stage to which this inscription belongs, along the lines of what was done by other scholars dealing with pre-Sasanian Parthian.³ On the rendering -y- for <d> and -ē for final <y> see the commentary below.

ZNH š'tḥw nwydyt mtrdt wrdpt ssn wrdpt WHYL' k'zyrw (?) wswpwskn MNW BYN
kwpdšy KTRWN 'L 'wsry (?) gwy 'YK y'nd't YHWWN

*ēn šātaxw niwēyēt Mihrdāt wardpet, Sāsān wardpet ut spāh (?) ... wāspusakān kē andar
Kōfēčē mānēt ō ... gawē. kū yāndāt bawāt.*

'Mihrdāt the *wardpet*, Sāsān the *wardpet* and the personal army of *k'zyrw* which is stationed at Kōfēč to/at the village of 'wsr presented this bowl. May there be fortune.'

The following comments are confined to the aspects in which my opinion diverges from that of SW:

nwydyt: the verb *niwēy-* 'announce, consecrate' < Ir. **ni-vaid-* (here in the sense of 'offer', found in the Arm. loanword *nowēr* 'offering, present, gift') in Pahl. shows a regular Ppt. *niwist*, so it seems unlikely that, especially in a very old text, the attestation of a secondary Ppt. **niwēyīt* is found (so SW).⁴ This form is more likely to be a present or maybe an imperfect.⁵ Actually, SW (2013: 109) himself has thought of an imperfect or a 'performative' present of the verb 'to give' discussing the verbal heterogram <YNTNW> found, in similar context, in a pre-Sasanian Parthian inscription on a bronze mortar. The verb in the 3rd person singular rather than plural can be easily explained as agreeing with the nearest subject (i.e. Mihrdāt the *wardpet*), the first in a series of three subjects in the singular.

³ See, for example, D'jakonov and Livšic 1976–2001 and Schmitt 2016.

⁴ See MacKenzie 1971 s.v. Strangely, Cheung (2007: 409) accepts Molé's emendation <nwydyt> in Dk. 7 § 2.46 (1967: 164–165) and cites it as the only example of Ppt. of MP *niwēy-*, but the manuscript has the expected form <nwst>, comparable to MParth. *nwyšt* 'invited' (see Nyberg 1974: 142). Other examples could surely be found: e.g. Pahl. Vr. 9.3 *abar niwist* <QDM nwst> translating Av. *aīβi.vaeḍaiiamna*. One should also keep in mind that the Pahl. spelling <nwydyt> theoretically expected for the secondary Ppt. † *niwēyīd* could always be read as <nwyst>, which is an equally possible rendering of *niwist* (compare Pahl. *frāhist* <plh(y)st> 'most', *rist* <lyst> 'dead', *xwīstan* <hwystn> 'to sweat').

⁵ On the 3rd.Sg. imperfect ending MP -ēd, formally identical with that of the present, see Skjærvø 1985: 224, Skjærvø 1997: 175, and Ferrer-Losilla 2015: 99–121.



k'zyrw: in light of the meaning 'personal, private' of the word *wāspusakān* (see below), it seems reasonable that this word represents a personal name or a title. Since <y> and <z> are almost identical in this inscription, SW gives <k'yzrw> and <k'zyrw> as two equally possible readings. However, the graphic string <y> is extremely rare in MP since ancient *-āya- and *-āi- are mostly simplified to -ā- (e.g. OP *xšāyaθiya-* > MP *šāh* 'king'; Ir. **vāi-sa-puθra-* > MP *wāspuhr* 'prince, noble', see below) and in the rare instances where the sequence -āy- is preserved it is usually written by means of inverse spellings with <d> (e.g. IMP <nm'dty> *nīmāyēd*). Therefore, the reading <k'zyrw> seems in principle preferable to <k'yzrw>. In absence of an obvious Iranian etymology (*kay-zarr* proposed by SW in n. 8 is ingenious but far from certain), one should consider the possibility of a foreign name. The ending -w is widely attested in Arabic anthroponyms in Palmyrene and Nabataean Aramaic (cf. IMP <'mrw>, the name of the Lakhmid king 'Amrū, see de Blois 1995: 196–198). However, considering the mention of the toponym *Kōfēč* (see below), one might also think of the masculine singular ending -ō (<OInd. -ah>) of a western Middle Indic dialect (Masica 1993: 222). Unfortunately, the lack of any information concerning the place where the bowl was found makes it difficult to formulate a plausible hypothesis.

wswpwskn: despite being apparently regarded as unlikely by SW, this reading seems to me quite convincing, just as much as his transcription of it '*wās"pusagān*'. As suggested by SW in n. 9, this word can be interpreted as the genuinely Persian counterpart of later MP *wāspuhragān* (<*vāi-sa-puθra- + suff. -akāna-). The writing of <w> as unetymological *Kompositionsfuge* in a labial context has a very close parallel in the name of the king of Persis which I would interpret as <rmwpt> *Rāmpāt* (mid-1st cent. CE, traditionally read as <nmwpt> 'Namopat' or 'Nambēd'),⁶ but also in IMP spellings such as <hlgwpt> *hargbed* <*harka-pati- (a reading **harguft* is hardly acceptable in light of some attestations from parallel sources);⁷ <d'twbl> *dādwar* 'judge' <*dāta-bara-;⁸ <slwmwky> *ahlmōy* 'heretic' <Av. *ašmaoya-*, etc.; and in the isolated case of Parth. (Nisa) <mrzwpn> *marz(u)pān*

⁶ Unfortunately, the coins preserving the name of this king in a legible guise are few. I propose the reading <rmwpt> *Rāmpāt* 'protected in peace' or 'protected by (god) Rām' (see below) based on the following observations formulated by examining the plates dedicated to *Rāmpāt* (pl. xii) and his son *Napāt* (pl. xiii) in Alram 1986: the <n> of *Napāt* always shows a straight vertical stroke, often ending with a small corner on the right, whereas in the same legends the <r> of *Rāmpāt* usually assumes the shape of a 2 (cf. Alram's pl. xiii n. 612); the <w> in <rmwpt> often assumes the shape of a slightly curved vertical stroke, clearly distinguished from <n> and <r> for lacking the lower horizontal stroke (cf. Alram's pl. xi nn. 579–586 for a comparable shape in the name <whwštr>). The element *Rām-* 'peace', perhaps referring to the genius of the 21st day of the month, is well attested in Middle Iranian onomastics, also in typically theophoric compounds such as Parth. *Rāmdātak* (Schmitt 2016: 179) and *Rāmfrazend* (uncertain language, Colditz 2018: 433). The writing of -pāt 'protected' as <pt> with zero notation for internal -ā- is totally normal at such an early stage, and the fact that *Napāt* is written with <'> does not constitute a counter-argument (compare <š'thw> alongside <mtrdt> and <ssn> in Persis 2).

⁷ Cf. especially the late Arab. transcription *arjabid* (Nöldeke 1870: 107–108), which implies a MP antecedent *hargbed* or *harg(u)bed* (so Szemerényi 1975: 366ff., with further material). As to the other MP compounds where *-pati- is written as <wpt>, the only one for which an ending -uft is ascertained is MP <hz'lwpt> *hazāruft* (Arm. *hazarawowxt*, Bactr. *vačapoχto*, Gr. *Ἀζαρέφθης*, see Schmitt 2007: 355–364), otherwise a reading -bed remains more likely, cf. Mancini 1988: 82–84, Huyse 1999/2: 141 n. 234 and Huyse 2003: 81 n. 113.

⁸ Already in IMP and in the Pahlavi Psalter <wb> has been generalized as a digraph expressing the phoneme -w even when is not etymologically justified (e.g. *āwām* <'wb'm> 'age, time' <*abi-gāma-, see Henning 1958: 71 n. 4). However, I believe that the only possible explanation of the origin of such a digraph lies in the earlier labialization of the vowel preceding *-b- prior to its elimination (so **dātabara-* > **dātuṣar* > *dādwar*), as suggested by Klíma (1969: 547).



‘margrave’ < **marza-pāna*-. M. Mancini interpreted this unetymological <w> in IMP as a purely graphical phenomenon, lacking any phonetic value: ‘la possibilità stessa che una vocale indistinta labializzata sia registrata nella scrittura medio-persiana è del tutto opinabile’ (1988: 82–83 n. 28). In his view, this kind of orthography should be explained as an analogical extension of the <w> found as historical spelling of an old stem-vowel -u- in titles such as <mgwpt> *mowbed* < **magu-pati*-, <dhywpt> *dehbed* < **dahyu-pati*-, etc. In reality, the notation as <w> of an unetymological labialized vowel is sometimes attested in IMP in verbal forms such as <prm’ywmy> *framāyom* ‘I ordered’ (ŠKZ 24), <whycwmy> *wihēzom* ‘I left’ (NPi 9), both 1st.Sg. historical Pres./Impf., and in superlatives such as <[p’]lswmy> *pahlom* ‘first’ (NPi 8), <twmyktwmy> *tōmīgdōm* ‘strongest’ (NPi 7), etc. (Huysse 2003: 39). Thus, nothing prevents that also in the above-mentioned cases <w> goes back to a phonetic reality – though not surviving anymore in the 3rd cent. CE and only preserved as a historical spelling. All in all, the two hypotheses support one another: it seems reasonable to me that, before disappearing completely, the outcome of OIr. *-u- at morpheme boundary became homophonous with the secondarily labialized *Kompositions-fuge*, and that the regular notation as <w> of the former favoured the emergence to writing of the latter.

In my opinion, the most suitable meaning for *wāspusakān* in this context is not ‘courtier’ but rather ‘special, particular, personal.’⁹ A reference to the concept of ‘personal army’ in a Sasanian context could perhaps be recognized in the title *wāspuhragān framādār* ‘chief of the personal (army)’, attested in some seal inscriptions,¹⁰ and in the toponyms Arm. *Vaspowrakan gownd* and *Sephakan gownd* mentioned by the Armenian historian Sebeos (7th cent. CE) with reference to the Sasanian administration of Armenia.¹¹

kwpdšy: the doubts expressed by SW regarding a possible reading *Kōfēč*, to be connected to OP *Ākaufaciya*- and NP *Kūfēč* (a region in south-eastern Iran partly corresponding to modern Bašākerd) seem excessive to me, since the context requires this word to be a place name.¹²

In my view, the <d> should be regarded as an inverse spelling for <y>, as happens regularly

⁹ See Henning 1964: 95–97, Perikhanian 1968: 16–23 and lastly Colditz 2000: 342ff.

¹⁰ This could be a reference to a garrison directly reporting to the king, just like the Roman *equites singulares Augusti* ‘personal cavalry of the emperor’ who are usually called simply *equites singulares*. Gyselen (2019: 318) prefers a translation such as ‘chief of the noblemen’, which seems to me less likely.

¹¹ See Thomson, Howard-Johnston and Greenwood 1999: 319. On Arm. *sepowh*, *sephakan*, Iranian loanwords of pre-Sasanian age parallel to MP and Parth. *wispuhr*, *wispuhragān*, see Benveniste 1929: 9–10 and again Perikhanian 1968: 16–23.

¹² The identification of OP *Ākaufaciya*- and NP *Kūfēč* is very likely, though not devoid of problems, see Schmitt 1984. The short -e- vowel in the final syllable of the NP form is most probably the effect of a secondary shortening of older *-ē- (compare the shortening of -ā- and -ē- before -š- in Early NP, Lazard 1963: 185–186, Paul 2013: 44), because an old *-ī- would probably have been lengthened to -ī- in MP (Korn 2009: 204–205). Incidentally, one should note that Korn’s assumption that the lengthening of -i- and -u- is due to the sonorization of the following consonant is difficult to prove, and her article aimed at invalidating the Greek evidence for an early lengthening of -i- in the theonym Anahita (Korn 2021) surprisingly neglects the Greek epigraphic material, where the largely attested spelling <ANAEITIS> unequivocally points to a long -ī- (see Diakonoff 1979 for a list of occurrences). Coming back to MP *Kōfēč*, it is impossible to tell whether the -ē- traces back to an OP form like **Ākaufaciya*- with ‘epenthesis’ (so Eilers 1974: 282, comparing the transcriptions Elam. *ha-ku-pi-zī-ia* and Bab. *a-ku-pi-i-iš*) or to a glide metathesis similar to the one observed in MP *wēš* ‘more’ < Ir. **vačyah*-, MP *ēš* ‘victorious, triumphant’ < Ir. **čarya*-. The preservation of post-vocalic -č- in NP is irregular as well, but the problem does not concern the chronological stage we are dealing with, which is certainly earlier than the MP sound change -č- > -z- (Boyce 1975: 18).



in IMP (cf. <štrdstn> *šahrēstān* ‘city’, <nm’ dty> *nimāyēd* ‘he shows’). In fact, the surprisingly large number of inverse spellings with <d> found in IMP and in the Psalter – it is probably the commonest kind of pseudo-historical writing in MP¹³ – supports the idea that the change OP **-d-* > MP *-y-* was old enough to have already happened when our inscription was produced (thus I transcribe *niwēyēt* rather than **niwēdēt* or the like). The employ of <š> to represent Ir. *č* can be interpreted as an archaism preserving the usage of Official Aramaic, survived until Sasanian times in Parthian and superseded in later IMP by adopting the sign <c> (Aram. <š>), whose phonetic value was equated to that of Ir. *č* in more recent varieties of Aramaic.¹⁴ No instance of <c> is found either in Persis 1 or Persis 2 (as already observed by SW), nor in the coins of the rulers of Persis until the reign of Mančīhr I (mid-2nd cent. CE). On the final *-y*, which in my opinion could represent an Obl.Sg. ending *-ē*, see below.

’wsry: once again, I prefer a reading which yields a more plausible linguistic interpretation rather than adopting SW’s rigidly ‘palaeographic’ method. Since the following word is <gwy> *gawē* ‘village’ or possibly <gry> *garē* ‘mountain’ (see below), one expects this word to be a place name.¹⁵ The uncertainty concerning the provenience of the cup, in addition to our imperfect knowledge of the historical geography of Iran in this period, makes the attempt to identify *’wsry* with a known toponym almost desperate. It does not seem unlikely that it represents an Iranian compound whose second element is *-sār* ‘head, direction’: maybe **ōsār* < **ava-sāra-* ‘facing in that (other) direction’ (compare Sogd. *ōrōsār* ‘thither’ < **avaθra-sāra-*) or ‘facing downwards’ or **abi-sāra-* ‘facing towards’.¹⁶

gwy: the reading and interpretation given by SW seem to me very convincing. In addition to the comparison with Av. *gauua-* ‘land’ (referred to Sogdiana) and Ossetic *qæu* ‘village, settlement’, in support of the reconstruction of a MP noun *gaw* ‘village’ < Ir. **gava-* one might also cite the MP title *gōbed* < **gava-pati-* ‘chief of the village’ attested in the Pahlavi literature in the form *Gōbed-šāh* and as a personal name in the Sasanian inscription ŠMŠ.¹⁷

SW has also drawn the attention on the fact that, if <’L> *ō* means ‘to’ as in standard MP, one is faced with the odd circumstance whereby the recipient of the presented bowl is not a person but an entire village. In view of this, it cannot be excluded that the MP preposition *ō* (< Ir. **ava* and **abi*) is used here with a later unattested locational meaning instead of the ordinary directional one: compare Bactr. *αβο* < Ir. **abi* which means both ‘to, towards’ and

¹³ See Klingenschmitt 2000: 197–198, Nyberg 1974: 277 and especially Henning 1958: 67–68 and Schaefer 1935: 573ff.

¹⁴ See Henning 1958: 60 n. 2 and 3 and Ciancaglini 2008: 81.

¹⁵ Note that in Sasanian inscriptions place names are regularly placed before the corresponding noun: e.g. <snclý štrdstn> *Sinzar šahrēstān* ‘the city of Sinzara’ (ŠKZ 9).

¹⁶ On the meaning of **-sāra(h)-* ‘head’ in compounds with directional meaning see Fattori (2023). On *-sār* as part of Iranian geographical names see Eilers 1987: 48–49.

¹⁷ See Bailey 1932: 950–953 and Frye and Skjærvø 1996: 54. The alternative etymology proposed in the literature, i.e. **gau-pati-* ‘lord of the cattle’ (Ved. *gōpati-*), still accepted by Nyberg (1974: 83), is not equally likely. See MacKenzie 2001: ‘failing any marked connection between Gōdbadšāh and cattle in general, and given the apparent traditional placing of his home, the latter explanation [i.e. < **gava-pati-*] seems likelier’. The ghost-word Elam. † *kam-ba-ti-ia-ap*, regarded as an obstacle to Bailey’s etymology **gava-pati-* by Gershevitch (1951: 137–139), is the result of an erroneous reading of Elam. *kam-ka₁-ti-ia-ap*, as demonstrated by the attestation of the same word with a different spelling *kam-kat₁-ti-ia* in the tablet PF-NN 1730 (Hinz 1973: 75).



‘in, at’ (Sims-Williams 2012: 185–186). Thus, the prepositional phrase under examination would simply represent a further specification of the location within the region of *Kōfēč* where the ‘personal army of *k’zyrw*’ is stationed (so already SW). In such perspective, one should also take into consideration the possible reading <gry> *garē*, Obl.Sg. of *gar* ‘mountain’ (so *ō garē* ‘facing the mountain’ or ‘on the slopes of the mountain?’), which would have the advantage of being better attested in Iranian and being consistent with the mention of the mountainous region of *Kōfēč*.

y’nd’t: this reading, which SW deems ‘tempting’, is discarded by him in favour of <y’nd’y’n> ‘since *-yn* is quite clearly written as two letters’. Although it is true that <yn> seems to be written as two distinct signs on the bowl, I think that this could depend on the engraver’s misreading of the draft written in a more cursive script (see above). In fact, in the earliest preserved examples of MP written in ink, one can easily see that the sign <t> is traced in the exact same way as <yn>, and is distinguished from the latter sequence only because the curved stroke slightly touches the vertical one: compare the word read by Henning as <’DYNcyt> *ēg-iz-it* ‘then – also – by you’ in the 3rd cent. CE parchment P.Dura 154R, here reproduced in fig. 1.¹⁸

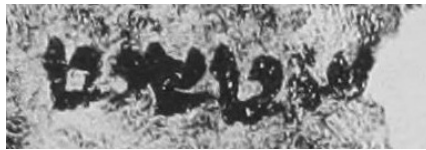


Fig. 1. Detail of P.Dura 154R (Welles, Fink and Gilliam 1959: 415, Pl. LXX)

As can be easily seen, the difference between the tracing of the letters is far less pronounced in comparison to the epigraphic variant. So, it seems totally plausible to me that the engraver of our inscription could have read as <yn> a <t> of the draft, perhaps written with a curved stroke slightly detached from the rest of the letter. This reconstruction is supported by the fact that, as was mentioned above, a word-internal sequence <y> is extremely rare in MP. On the contrary, a reading with <t> yields an etymologically transparent compound, with a clear meaning which was already recognized by SW. I would thus interpret this word as proto-MP *yāndāt* ‘fortune, luck’ (literally ‘fulfilment of prayer’), from Ir. **yāna-dāti-*, where the first element corresponds to MP *ṣān* ‘favour, request, prayer’ (Dhabhar 1949: 140), Av. *yāna-* ‘id.’, OP *yāna-* ‘id.’ and the second one as an abstract noun from the verb **dā-* ‘give’, Av. *-dāiti-*.¹⁹ The association of Ir. **yāna-* with the verb **dā-* was probably idiomatic in Iranian, as it is well attested in Av. and OP (e.g. DPd *aīta-mai yānam Auramazdā dadātu* ‘may Auramazda fulfill this prayer for me’, see Schmitt 2014: 290); compare also the compound Bactr. *λαιοιανο* < **dāta-yāna-* ‘by whom favours are granted’ (Sims-Williams 2012: 225).

¹⁸ Some comparable instances of confusion between <yn> and <t> are found in Abnūn’s inscription from Barm-e Delak, see MacKenzie 1993: 106b.

¹⁹ Peschl 2022: 420–421 regards Pahl. <y’n> as a loanword from Avestan, but the present attestation speaks against this assumption. On Avestan compounds with **-dāti-*, see Duchesne-Guillemin 1936: 85. A similar compound where the element *-dād* does not correspond to the old Ppt. **-dāta-* but probably to the abstract noun **-dāti-* is MP *bāmdād* ‘dawn, morning’, lit. ‘giving of light’.

FINAL -Y IN PERSIS 2

As was anticipated in the previous paragraph, I believe that the occurrences of final -y in this very old inscription can correspond to the real phonetic expression of the Obl.Sg. ending -ē, hitherto not attested directly in Middle Persian. There are several reasons supporting this assumption.

First of all, the distribution of final -y is not the one expected from the ‘rhythmic law’ formulated by Ph. Huyse (2003) based on the early Sasanian epigraphic evidence. According to Huyse’s rule, one expects final -y to occur in polysyllables with a short vowel in their final syllable. Thus, the rule is infringed in <š’tḥw> *šātaxw* ‘cup’ (lit. ‘happy existence’, cf. SW) < *šyāta-ahva- (compare IMP <plḥwy> *farrox* ‘glorious’ < *farnahvant-, <dwšḥwy> *dušox* ‘hell’ < *duš-ahva-) and, theoretically, also in <wrđpt> *wardpet* (compare IMP <dlpty> *darbed*, <dzpty> *dizbed*, <nhwpty> of uncertain transcription, see Humbach and Skjærvø 1983/3: 127) although in compounds with *-pati- also in IMP final -y is often omitted (Huyse 2003: 37–38, 79–81). Conversely, final -y should not appear in <kwpdšy> and <’wsry>, if our interpretation of the former as *Kōfēč* and the latter as a compound with Ir. *-sār ‘head’ is correct. As a consequence, it can be safely assumed that in Persis 2 final -y does not behave as in Sasanian inscriptions, and its distribution must be explained otherwise.

As a matter of fact, in our inscription final -y is consistently found in prepositional phrases for which an oblique case is expected, namely <BYN kwpdšy> and <’L ’wsry gwy>, whereas it is absent from the other nominal elements which represent either the subject or the object of active verbs (*ēn šātaxw niwēyēt Mihrdāt wardpet*, etc.; *yāndāt bawāt*). The only possible counter-example is in the syntagm <WHYYL’ k’zyrw wswpwskn>, where the word to which *wāspusakān* ‘personal, special’ presumably refers has a final <w> instead of <y>. As was said above, the word is problematic in any case, and since it does not offer a plausible interpretation in an Iranian perspective, it could represent a foreign personal name. Even if one accepted SW’s etymology **kavi-zarnu-* (n. 8) – which he proposed with all the due caution –, this would not represent a significant obstacle to our analysis on final -y. In fact, the rare instances whereby a written final <w> in IMP and IParth. traces back to an ancient thematic vowel -u- (e.g. MP <lšnw> *Rašn* < **Rašnu-*, <mgw> *mow* ‘magian’ < **magu-*, see Huyse 2003: 68–69) must represent, so to say, super-historical spellings, fixed in an extremely old chronological stage when not only the Obl.Sg. ending, but all final vowels were preserved, which is manifestly not the case in Persis 2 (otherwise we would have <nwdyty> from Ir. **nivaidayati*; *<wrđpty> from **vardapati-*).²⁰ So, even if <k’zyrw> or <k’y’zrw> represented an Iranian word of this kind – but I regard this as unlikely –, the strongly archaizing nature of the spelling with final <w> would prevent the emergence to writing of an -ē ending anyway.

Ultimately, notwithstanding the uncertainties affecting the interpretation of the lexical element of the words under examination, I believe that taking final -y as the expression of an Obl.Sg. ending -ē constitutes the most economical solution to account for its presence and distribution in this text.

²⁰ This is further confirmed by the fact that similar cases in Parthian can show ‘etymological’ spellings incoherent with the already archaizing system of inscriptional Parthian: e.g. <gtw> for *gāh* ‘place, throne’ with zero notation of -ā- and <t> for intervocalic -h- < *θ- whereas *h*, regardless of its origin, is normally written as <h> (cf. e.g. IParth. <šyhr> *čīhr* ‘lineage’ < Ir. **čīθra-*).



THE WRITTEN EXPRESSION OF THE OBLIQUE CASE IN PRE-SASANIAN DOCUMENTS

All in all, an inscription like Persis 2 is exactly the context where one would expect to find trace of the proto-Middle Persian oblique case. Whatever one's opinion is on Huyse's explanation of the distribution of final *-y* in the Sasanian inscriptions,²¹ when it had already lost its phonetic referent, there can be little doubt that its ultimate origin should be sought in an ancient ending, most probably the Obl.Sg. morpheme *-ē* < Ir. **-ahya*.²² In addition, there exist several linguistic hints pointing to the existence of an Obl.Sg. ending *-ē* in a pre-documentary stage of Middle Persian, even independently from final *-y*.²³ So, in principle, there is nothing strange about finding this ending still preserved and regularly noted in a text approximately 250 years older than the first Sasanian inscriptions and 350 years younger than the last Achaemenid ones.

What should be surprising instead is that in the few other known inscriptions from the same period, namely the coin legends of the kings of Persis and the inscription Persis 1, there is no trace of a final *-y* even where an Obl.Sg. ending is expected. This problem was highlighted by Huyse (2005: 57–58), who pursued an analysis of the pre-Sasanian coin legends from Persis and concluded that a distribution of final *-y* comparable to the one attested in the Sasanian inscriptions seems to become established only around the end of the 2nd cent. CE (at latest in the legends of Mančīhr II). Regarding the earlier period, he states: ‚warum aber das Schluss-*y*, das auf eine alt-persische Kasusendung zurückgeht, erst Mitte des 2. Jh.s n. Chr. plötzlich aus dem Nichts wieder in der Schrift auftaucht, ist zur Zeit noch unklar. Ein gesprochenes Element kann es aber auch bereits dann keineswegs mehr darstellen, denn sonst hätte es in der vorangehenden Periode nicht so einfach verschwinden können.‘ And again, speaking of the disappeared *-ē* ending: ‚bis etwa zur Mitte des 2. Jh.s n.Chr. verschwindet es demzufolge sogar ganz aus dem Schriftbild, bis es dann aus bisher ungeklärter Ursache plötzlich als pseudo-historisches Element in der Form eines Schluss-*y* auf den Münzlegenden der Herrscher in der Persis wieder auftaucht.‘

In reality, the very fact that in the 2nd cent. CE this final *-y* represents a pseudo-historical spelling excludes the possibility that it suddenly emerged out of nowhere: if the old ending **-ē* had really disappeared both from the language and from writing, there would not have been any way to recover it. Indeed, the preservation of final *-y* in the Sasanian inscriptions does not

²¹ Not all scholars have accepted Huyse's reconstruction: e.g. Skjærvø 2009: 202: '[theory] ... which still needs to be assessed'. Personally, I do not see any problem in the postulation of an orthographic rule mirroring an old 'rhythmic law' (Huyse 2003: 97–98), as long as the majority of the examples actually fit within this explanation. This, obviously, does not rule out the possibility that exceptions arose from the interference of this orthographic rule with other scribal tendencies (analogy, graphic economy, early re-functionalisation of *-y*, etc.) as suggested by Milizia 2011.

²² This idea, going back to F. C. Andreas, has been largely accepted in the literature: see e.g. Nyberg 1974: 277, Durkin-Meisterernst 2014: 201–202, Mancini 2019: 542–545, n. 31 and the historical overview offered by Huyse 2003: 19–28 and Milizia 2011: 66–67. A good argument in favour of the desinential origin of final *-y* is the fact that in inscriptional Parthian it only ever occurs in nominal forms, as was shown by Ferrer-Losilla 2014: 33–38.

²³ These are mainly the fixation of some pronominal forms in their old oblique form: *kē* 'who' < **kahya*, *čē* 'which, what' < **čahya*, *ōy* 'he, that' < **avahya*; the preservation in MP of some compounds whose first element goes back to a fossilized oblique case (e.g. MMP *Ardēwahišt*, NP *Ordibehešt* < **Rtahya-vahištahya*; *šabē-xōn* 'night attack', etc., see already Horn 1895–1901: 100 and Klingenschmitt 2000: 192 n. 5); and the comparison with the diptotic system of other Western New Iranian languages (Windfuhr 1990). It is likely that this ending had already evolved into *-ē* in Late Achaemenid Old Persian, since in the Cappadocian calendar the Gen.Sg. of *-a-* stems is represented by Greek <η> (e.g. <MIΘPH> for **Miθrahya*), see Mancini 1992 and Fattori and Ferrari (forthc.).



only prove the former existence of the ending it once represented, but also of some texts where it was regularly written in order for it to become fossilized as a historical spelling. There must have been a documentary continuity between the stage when final *-y* expressed a real ending *-ē* (as in Persis 2) and the recent stage witnessed by the Sasanian inscriptions. Although this aspect is not usually emphasized in dealing with the prehistory of Middle Persian, it is worth stressing that the richness in archaizing and historical spellings in the Sasanian inscriptions presupposes a long and uninterrupted practice of transcribing Iranian words, of which we do not preserve any substantial example due to merely contingent factors. In my opinion, the reason why Persis 2 should be considered a more representative specimen of this documentary tradition than Persis 1 or other pre-Sasanian texts lies in the relationship between the typology of the said texts and the development of the Middle Iranian heterographic writing systems.

HETEROGRAPHIC WRITING AND IRANIAN MORPHOLOGY

In dealing with the problem of the transition between documents written in Official Aramaic and documents written heterographically in Middle Iranian, the attention of scholars has mainly focused on the Aramaic component of the latter.²⁴ W. B. Henning (1958: 21ff.) outlined this transition showing that, in post-Achaemenid times, the texts in Aramaic script found in Iranian lands witness a progressive collapse in the functionality of morphology and syntax, preluding to the later stage whereby Aramaic heterograms do not express any grammatical property having become mere graphical devices to represent Iranian words. So, what Henning did was to evaluate whether, among the scanty material dating to the pre-Sasanian period, a given text could conceivably express a message in ‘badly written Aramaic’ or was too corrupt and therefore must have represented a Middle Iranian text written heterographically. Although he stressed the fact that this must have been a gradual transition (*vielmehr wird es sich um einen unmerklich vorschreitenden Prozess handeln*, *ibid.* 31), his reconstruction, later accepted by most scholars, demands to posit an abrupt conversion from the first to the second scenario. Indeed, a text can either be read in Aramaic or in Iranian: there is no intermediate step. In my view, this contradiction between the reasonable assumption of the graduality of such historical process and the clear-cut boundary distinguishing languages from one another arises from the conceptual inadequacy of the question originally asked, i.e. ‘in what language’ a document is written. Such question implies that the said document must unavoidably encode a fully defined linguistic message in a single language, which could be univocally read as a phonetic utterance. But this is not necessarily true in the case we are examining.

I believe that a better way to look at this problem is the following: rather than asking in what language a document was written, one should try to understand whether the operation of decoding it was conceived as a ‘reading’ or a ‘translation’ by the scribes. There is no doubt that in the Achaemenid period the process of reading and writing in Aramaic in the context of imperial administration normally featured a translation carried out by scribes.²⁵ Evidence coming from the

²⁴ See Durkin-Meisterernst 2004: 585–588 for an overview of the most relevant positions on this matter.

²⁵ See Tavernier 2021: 75–96 for a general discussion on the available material with further literature. It should be said that I am not convinced by Tavernier’s reasoning (2021: 89–90) whence he tries to infer the existence of a written ‘Old Persian copy’ of orders at some point of the administrative process.



administrative formulary allows to elaborate this (simplified) reconstruction: imperial officials dictated their messages in Old Persian, or in whatever other language they spoke, and those were simultaneously translated and written down in Aramaic by a scribe. Mirroredly, once delivered, the messages were simultaneously translated from Aramaic and read aloud by a scribe to the addressee in the Iranian language spoken by the latter. As can be seen, during this process the message was never meant to be read aloud in Aramaic. And it is exactly in the exclusively written usage of Aramaic that lies the core of the matter. The dissolution of the Achaemenid empire resulted in the disappearance of a uniformed practice of scribal training, so that in local scribal cabinets the proper learning of Aramaic grammar was increasingly neglected. This had the consequence that the writing system by which scribes noted the messages dictated to them in an Iranian language gradually lost the properties of a real language and became some sort of stenographic code which did not represent anymore an accomplished linguistic utterance in Aramaic. From the point of view of the addressee, however, there was no difference in the fruition of the text: it was decoded and simultaneously translated in an Iranian language, regardless of its grammatical correctness in an Aramaic perspective. So, if in the 5th cent. BCE an Achaemenid scribe could write <'BY> knowing that his colleague would have translated it as 'my father', in the 2nd cent. BCE in Persis scribes wrote the same word <'BY> knowing that, according to their shared writing code, it was supposed to be translated simply as 'father'. What had changed were only the rules of the writing code, in the direction of a loss of functionality of inflectional morphology and suffixation. But in practice the communicative circuit was still the same as the Achaemenid one, whereby – and this is the crucial point – a message could not be conveyed in the exact form and language it was dictated in, but had to pass through a double translation. So, it does not make a lot of sense to look for a watershed between 'schlechtes Aramäisch' and 'ideographisches Iranisch' (so Henning 1958: 32), as the gradual breakdown of the Official Aramaic grammatical structure must have been an autonomous process, totally detached from any linguistic dynamic and only related to the scribes' bookish learning of the writing code. The true watershed, in my view, was unrelated to the morphological 'freezing' of Aramaic heterograms, and consisted in a change in the scribes' approach to the text from that of a 'translation' to that of a proper 'reading'. In the former perspective, the text did not encode a self-standing linguistic utterance, but had his own semantic referent which had to be translated, as happened in the Achaemenid period. Conversely, in the latter case the text was seen as the faithful transcription of a linguistic act with a purely phonetic reference which could be read mechanically, as was surely the case for Middle Iranian texts from the Sasanian period onwards.²⁶

²⁶ It is obvious that only in this latter category the appearance of phonetic complements aimed at clarifying the phonetic reading of heterograms is justified. Admittedly, Henning (1958: 27ff.) does call into play phonetic complements to support his interpretation of some pre-Sasanian Parthian texts as fully heterographic. However, the only example he can provide (see below n. 29 for another questionable example) is the final <t> of Parthian verbal heterograms, which can be accounted for just as convincingly in an Aramaic perspective. As proposed by Altheim and Stiehl (1959: 298), the verbal heterograms with final <t>, expressing the past stem in Parthian, can be interpreted as 'frozen' forms of the Aramaic 1st.Sg. preterite: e.g. Aram. 'bdt 'I did' → Parth. <BDT> kard 'did, made' (see also Skjærvø 1995: 298). According to Mancini (forthc.), the selection of the first person finds a justification in the pivotal role of the epistolary model in the genesis of heterograms. Since in letters the sender normally speaks in first person, it must have been just natural for scribes to take this form as a basis for the past verbal heterograms (compare the parallel development of nominal heterograms such as Parth. <BRY> puhr 'son', originally 'my son', etc.; see also Harmatta 1981: 219–225).



This distinction, which might seem a purely terminological one, has crucial consequences on an element to which nobody – at least to my knowledge – has given the proper importance in this debate, namely the Iranian words written phonetically. The problem is the same presented above: how could one conceive as gradual the transition between the Achaemenid stage, when Iranian words appeared in Official Aramaic texts in an uninflected *Leitform* just like normal loanwords, to a later stage when those words were supposed to be read phonetically with their regular Iranian inflection? Once again, we are dealing with a clear-cut distinction: either one treats words as alien elements in a foreign text or as elements linguistically coherent with the text. In my opinion, there must have been a period when the two approaches just described co-existed in scribal practice.

We can now come back to the point where we started this digression, in order to exemplify these two different ways of representing phonetically Iranian words in the middle Arsacid period (1st cent. BCE–1st cent. CE). For some categories of texts – and perhaps according to the choice of single scribes – the ‘traditional’ method was still applied, whereby Iranian words were encoded as loanwords not necessarily inflected according to the context.²⁷ This was probably the case for short and formulaic texts such as coin legends and Persis 1, which could be simply copied from earlier models without having to rephrase the entire text. In my opinion, this is the reason why the Obl.Sg. case is not represented by final *-y* in these inscriptions, and one should not take this fact as evidence of the disappearance of the Obl.Sg. ending in a so early period. As a matter of fact, in Persis 1 the lack of morphological inflection does not only affect the Obl.Sg. but arguably also the Obl.Pl., which was surely preserved at that age as it survived until the Sasanian period: if the sequence <’H’YN d’rynkn> translates as ‘of the Daryanid brothers’, as suggested by previous editors (see above n. 1), the regularly inflected form should be **dārayānakānān* rather than *dārayānakān* which is morphologically unmarked.²⁸ A similar explanation applies as well to Arsacid Parthian documents such as the Awromān parchment and the ostraca from Nisa, which belong to very conservative and formulaic textual categories and yet, against linguistic plausibil-

²⁷ This does not totally exclude the sporadic occurrence of inflected words, though as isolated cases of code-switching within a foreign text. A perfect parallel for this practice, stemming from the same scribal milieu, is the usage of Iranian words in the Elamite version of Achaemenid inscriptions (see Stolper 2021: 93–97 for an introduction on the subject). In that context, transcriptions of Iranian lexemes are often found, either representing the Nom.Sg. as a *Leitkasus* (e.g. Elam. *ši-ia-ti-iš* vis-à-vis OP *šiyātim* ‘peace, happiness’ in DE 6) or the exact same inflected form found in the OP version (e.g. Elam. *ši-ia-ti-um* for OP *šiyātim* in DNa 3), without there being any doubt that the text is composed in the Elamite language.

²⁸ Despite being a suffix of relation, MP *-agān* does not replace the function of morphological inflection: compare e.g. the following sentence in MMP <(xw)d’y tr ‘y w’c’rg’ n’n ky(t) [’b]d’xt hynd> *xwadāy tar ī wāzāragānān kē-t abdāxt hēnd* ‘the lord beyond the merchants, who you freed’ (M32b a7–8, ed. Durkin-Meisterernst 2014b: 241) where *wāzāragān* is clearly a noun derived by means of the same suffix *-agān* from the noun *wāzār* ‘market’. The fact that *dārayānakān* in Persis 1 is uninflected makes it difficult to accept SW’s explanation of <’H’YN> as Aram. ‘h’ ‘brother’ (Emph.Sg.) + the phonetic complement <yn> for *brādarin* ‘of the brothers’ Obl.Pl., since this would imply an inconsistent notation of Iranian morphological endings. I regard as more likely that <’H’YN> is a wholly Aramaic formation, though not unproblematic. A possible solution, preserving the translation ‘of the Daryanid brothers’, is to take <YN> as an Aramaic Abs.Pl. ending, either oddly written with an extra <’> or simply attached mechanically to the Emph.Sg. <’H’>. On other nominal heterograms whereby the Aramaic Abs.Pl. ending corresponds to an Iranian Obl.Pl. case in Sasanian Parthian see MacKenzie 1978: 505 (e.g. <MLKYN> *šāhān* ‘of kings’, <SWSYN> *aspān* ‘of horses’, etc.).



ity, show far fewer occurrences of final *-y* in comparison to Sasanian Parthian inscriptions, even where the morpho-syntactic context would demand an oblique case.²⁹

On the other hand, I hope to have shown above that the existence of texts where morphology was regularly noted in writing is a logical premise of the generally accepted assumption that the final *-y* of the Sasanian inscriptions formally descends from an ancient inflectional ending. Indeed, Persis 2 could represent one of these texts, as it stands out for the non-formulaic nature of its content and for the morpho-syntactically coherent distribution of final *-y*. Similar documents, meant to be really read and not just translated, must have existed in great number in the Arsacid period – at least enough to give birth to the orthographic rule of final *-y* studied by Huyse (2003) for IMP and by Ferrer-Losilla (2014) for IParth. – and the reason why they remain mostly unknown to us is surely the severely fragmentary nature of our documentation, worsened by the fact that probably, being more elaborate, they were preferably entrusted to handier but less durable materials such as parchment ad papyrus.

CONCLUSION

To conclude and briefly sum up the practical consequences of the discussion proposed so far, I believe that the real turning point in the genesis of Middle Iranian heterographic scribal systems was not the grammatical corruption of the Aramaic words, but rather the emergence to writing of the morphological inflection of Iranian words. Only the entirely coherent notation of Iranian endings, witnessed in Persis 2 by the verb <nwydyt> and the nominal forms with final *-y*, can definitely prove that a text from the Arsacid period encodes an accomplished utterance in an Iranian language, which justifies the attempt of giving a phonological transcription of it. On the contrary, in my opinion, the lack of notation of morphological endings in coeval texts should not be interpreted as linguistic evidence, but rather as a consequence of the still hybrid nature of the documents, which required the user to treat Iranian words in the same way as loanwords, simultaneously inflecting them according to the context while decoding and uttering out loud the message.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my gratitude to M. Mancini, Ph. Huyse and F. Michetti who were so kind to read a draft of this paper and provide me with precious advice and criticism. Obviously, I am responsible for any error or omission. This paper is a product of the PRIN project ‘Cultural interactions and language contacts: Iranian and non-Iranian languages in contact from the past to

²⁹ It has been suggested that final *-y* in Parthian ostraca from Nisa still represented phonetically the Obl.Sg. ending (Durkin-Meisterernst 2014: 198–199 and Rastorguyeva and Molčanova: 188, quoting Livšić’ opinion), although a critical study of the whole corpus in this respect was supposed to be included in the volume of commentary to D’jakonov and Livšić’s edition (1976–2001), which unfortunately was never published. In my opinion, the fact that Obl.Sg. forms with final *-y* in these documents ‘most often [appear] in constructions with the prepositions MN and B, but [are] used optionally’ (*ibid.* 184b) is better explained assuming that sometimes Iranian words were inserted in the text in their uninflected form rather than postulating the disappearance of the Obl.Sg. ending, as suggested in D’jakonov and Livšić 1960: 45. Likewise, one can imagine that an Obl.Pl. ending *-ān*, which is sometimes written (e.g. <rzpnn> ‘*razpānān*’ ‘to/of the guardians of the vineyard’), could be optionally left unexpressed.



the present' (PRIN 2020, prot. 2020PLEBK4-003, sponsored by the Italian Ministry of Education and Research), Unit at the University of Rome 'La Sapienza' whose coordinator is F. Pompeo, principal investigator E. Filipponi.

ABBREVIATIONS

Arab. = Arabic; Aram. = Aramaic; Arm. = Armenian; Av. = Avestan; Bab. = Babylonian; Bactr. = Bactrian; Dk. = Dēnkard; DE = Darius' inscription on mt. Elvend; DPd = Darius' inscription 'd' at Persepolis; DNa = Darius' inscription 'a' at Naqš-e Rostam; Elam. = Elamite; Emph. = emphatic; Gen. = genitive; Gr. = Greek; IMP = inscriptional Middle Persian; Impf. = imperfect; IParth. = inscriptional Parthian; Ir. = (Proto-)Iranian; MMP = Manichaean Middle Persian; MP = Middle Persian; MParth. = Manichaean Parthian; NP = New Persian; NPi = Narseh's inscription at Paikuli; Obl. = oblique; OInd. = Old Indian; OP = Old Persian; Pahl. = Pahlavi; Parth. = Parthian; Pl. = plural; Ppt. = past participle; Pres. = present; Sg. = singular; ŠKZ = Šābuhr's inscription at the Ka'ba-ye Zardošt; ŠMŠ = Šābuhr's inscription at Meškinšahr; Sogd. = Sogdian; suff. = suffix; Ved. = Vedic; Vr. = Visperad;

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