The Middle Persian Inscription from Meshkinshah

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The Middle Persian inscription dated in the 27th year of the reign of Shapur II (309–379), son of Hormazd II (302–309), grandson of Narseh (293–302), found at Meshkinshah, has since its first publications received but scant attention. The reason is no doubt the lack of satisfactory photographs.1 Sadly, before photographs were taken, the inscription was retouched, turning the less legible passages into gibberish. The unsatisfactory photographs in fact allowed Henrik S. Nyberg to read an additional, older inscription between the lines.2 As can be seen from the photographs published here, there is no other inscription.

Richard N. Frye traveled to the site in 1967 and made copies of the inscription, but, since Gerd Gropp had arrived earlier, the publication was entrusted to him. Frye did, however, take a latex squeeze of the inscription, of which photographs were made. As these are the only reliable photographs of the inscription and since the inscription is now, we are told, no longer visible, they obviously deserve to be published. It is our great pleasure to offer this piece of Sasanian epigraphy to a great epigrapher and Iranist.

The town of Meshkin, or Khiyav, as found on maps and documents in Persian, is located in eastern Azerbaijan, 74 km northwest of Ardabil and 72 km northeast of Ahar, thus halfway on the road between the two larger towns. Its geographical situation is 47° 30’ east longitude and 38° 24’ north latitude, to the north of the Sabalan mountain range.3 The site itself lies in hilly terrain, and there are numerous large boulders, on one of which the inscription was found. As far as we know, no archaeological work has been carried out in the region. A number of ruined mosques and shrines in the town testify to the significance of the site in Islamic times, although no pre-Islamic monuments have been reported in the area, and there is no written record of the town in the pre-Islamic period. The town is mentioned by Yağt in his Mu’jam al-buldân, and by Qazvini in his Nuzhat al-qulûb, while several contemporary authors have assembled the information in the sources about the meager history of the town, which is summarized here.4 The old name of the site was Varâvi but in the time of the Seljuk Alp Arslan, a Georgian noble called Beškin or Peşkin was taken prisoner on the Seljuk campaigns in the Caucasus. He converted to Islam and was given Varâvi as a fief. Since in the old Iranian Azeri language b- changes to m-, Meshkin replaced Beškin. This new lord of the region was an enemy of the Seljuk Aqsungur, but, as Yağt notes, the fief remained “the domain of Ibn Beškin, lord of the area.”

As mentioned, the town is situated on a main road on the northern foothills of the Sabalan and in ancient times was located on the border between Iranian, Armenian, and Arranian [later the kingdom of Shirvan, at present the northern Azerbaijan republic] lands. Whether the castle mentioned in the inscription was a Sasanian military outpost against the Mughan steppe to the north is speculative. Other historical data on the person or family of the person, who was obviously proud of his handiwork in rebuilding the castle, are lacking. It should be mentioned that the Pahlavi inscriptions to the north at Derbent are much later and written in the cursive script.

The history of the discovery and publication of the inscription is in brief as follows.5 In the
summer of 1966, Kambakhsh Fard discovered the inscription and took photographs. In April 1967 Gerd Gropp received photographs from Fard, who next published a brief report in *Majalle-ye barastihay-e tariki* [2.1] [1346/1967], p. 4, n. 2] with a “rather muddy” [thus Nyberg] photo-


Text and Translation

(italics = uncertain reading; x = illegible letter)

1 BYRH mtry QDM ŞNT
2 10 10 IIIIII šhpwhly MLKAAn
3 MLKA ZY hwvlwzd[k]n AMT
4 LY nrshy hîwzdy ZY
5 gwpt'n ZNE dzy ZY plhw
6 dhwh x wdy plkndy [A]xpm
7 PWN ŞM ZY yzd'n GDE ZY
8 MLKA An MLKA PWN IIIIII ŞNT
9 PWN ic'my krt'y KON
10 šld'ly LBA 'z'ly GBRA
11 MNW LCDr ZNE Psy BRA YATWN
12 ZNE dzy psnd't ADYN
13 [n]rsry hî[w]zdý 
14 Q[D]M lwb'n 'plyny

[to the right]
15 'yw OBYDWN
16 MNW LA psnd't
17 ADYN dzy 'yw
18 OBYDWN'y MNW MN
19 [ZN]E SPYR
20 HWE

[lower left corner]
21 traces of letters

hwvlwzd[k]n: The spelling with the extra -w also in the inscription of Kerdir at Sar Mašhad, KSM 6, "hwvlmzdwy, with which Gignoux (1972, 18 in. 19) compares the Bactrian spelling Ωωρο-

m- can have been lost before the word. At any rate there seems to be no way of fitting a "mowbedán " of the mobeds" into the context.

The occurrence of a family of Gôbeds in northern Azerbaijan supports Humbach's reading of Gôbedestân in the Bundahš, where it, together with Ėrânwêz, the mythical homeland of the Iranians, is located in Azerbaijan: "Ėrânwêz (is) in the area of Ėdurbadagan, the land of Gôbe-
destân, on the road from Turkestân to Cinestân" (Bundahš, chap. 29.12–13).

The verbs fragandén and frazâmândán (for our pad frazâm kerd) are used in the Şahres-
There is no support for Nyberg’s reading of ‘-y as -ē.

For the literary use of injunctions to 2d person cf. from the Old Persian inscriptions of Darius and Xerxes: “You who shall be king hereafter (do this and that)” (DB 4.37, cf. XPh 46–47; Kent 1953, 129, 151).

This means taking diz ēw...kē as “a castle which” like in modern Persian: dež-i...ke with the same meaning, see Brunner, 43–44, on the use of ēw to express indefiniteness and before a relative pronoun. This is preferable to assuming a “hortative” construction with ēw plus an otherwise unattested 3d sing. kunā.¹³

HWE: either [prospective] subjunctive hād “will be” or [conditional] optative hē “would be.”¹⁴

The sentiments expressed in this inscription have counterparts in both earlier and later inscriptions, both Old and Middle Persian. The most remarkable correspondence with the Old Persian inscriptions is to be found in Darius’ inscription at Susa (DSē), in which he tells us: “At Susa I saw a castle [di đā]. It was poorly made [dišḵartā], the one that had been made before. From there [= for that reason?] I then made another castle. Thus says Darius the king: May Ahuramazda protect me together with the [other] gods and my house and that which is written in this inscription” (Kent 1953, 142; Stève 1987, 62).

On the other hand, the expression “[you] whom it may not please [kē nē passandād], then you make a castle that is better than this!” recalls in part Darius’ “by the greatness of Ahuramazda I made all that. Let that which I have made seem excellent to everyone [viš]šañā frōṣm šadāyātāiy” (DSa 4–5, cf. DSj 5–6; Kent 1953, 141, 145).

Among the Middle Persian inscriptions those of Śapūr Sāgan šāh at Persepolis and of Mihr-narseh at Firuzabad contain similar formulas:

“At that time when Śapūr Sāgan šāh... went on this road [pad ēn rāh...šud] via Staxr to Sahestān he came here to Sahestān... And he blessed [ū-š...āfrīn kerd] [his] father and grandfathers...” (ŠPs I, Bāck 1978, 492–94).

“This bridge Mihr-narseh... ordered to be built. Whoever comes along this road [kē pad ēn rāh ayēdāyā], let him say a blessing for Mihr-narseh and his children [mihrnarseh u-s frōzendān āfrīn ēw gōwēd]!” (Mnf; Henning 1954, 434).
Fig. 2. Later squeeze of entire inscription.
Fig. 1. Photo of retouched stone.
Notes

1. It was not included by M. Back in his corpus of Sassanian inscriptions, see Back 1978, 5.
6. Humback 1985, 331–33, with different translation.
7. As pointed out by Gropp, the verb is found in the Pahlavi Psalter, where it renders Syriac bond.
8. Cited by Andreas and Barr (1953).
12. See Brunner 1977, 204–5; Henning 1933, 236 [Selected Papers, vol. 1, 143].
13. See Skjærve 1989, 341, for the forms of the “hortative.”

Reference List

Fard 1347/1969] "Sang-nebestrāh-1 dar ātâf-1 Sabalân." Bâstânšenâši

Sa’di 1354/1976 See Markwart 1931.
Skjærve 1983 P.O. Skjærve. "Case in Inscriptional Middle Persian, Inscriptional Parthian and the


Stève 1987

Waldschmidt and Lentz 1933
