Another pre-Sasanian Middle Persian inscription

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Abstract

A pre-Sasanian Middle Persian inscription on a silver bowl is published here for the first time and compared with a similar inscription published by P. O. Skjærvø in 2000 and identified by him as naming members of the dynasty which ruled Persis (Fārs) in the 1st century BCE. The commentary concentrates on the word š’thw, apparently a name for this type of bowl, and on the importance of these inscriptions for the history of the Pahlavi script.

Keywords: Middle Persian; inscription; Pahlavi script; Persis; Waxšahr; šʾthw ‘bowl’

Twenty years ago, P. O. Skjærvø published a well-preserved but rather clumsily written Middle Persian inscription on a silver bowl with gold inlay.¹ By identifying the names of several members of the dynasty which ruled Persis in the 1st century BCE, including that of Prince (later King) Waxšahr,² who is named at the end of the inscription as the owner of the bowl, Skjærvø established both the region in which the text was written and the fact that it is far older than any other Middle Persian inscription (other than the coin-legends of the same dynasty). I shall refer to this inscription as “Persis 1”.

The new inscription “Persis 2”, published here in honour of my esteemed colleague and collaborator François de Blois, is inscribed in pointillé around about two-thirds of the circumference of the outer rim of a silver bowl. Although much more neatly written than Persis 1 it strongly resembles it in ductus and can certainly be ascribed to the same period and region. It seems that this bowl may once have borne an earlier inscription in the same pointillé technique, which has been almost entirely obliterated but of which traces can be seen, in particular immediately after the end of the present inscription. The bowl itself (weight: 498g; diameter: 24 cm; height: 5.1 cm) has repoussé decoration in what I am told is a pre-Sasanian, perhaps even Achaemenian style (Fig. 1). It belongs to a private collection in London, to whose owner I am grateful for permission to publish it. I am also grateful to Prods Oktor

¹P. O. Skjærvø, “The joy of the cup: A pre-Sasanian Middle Persian inscription on a silver bowl”, Bulletin of the Asia Institute, XI (1997 [published 2000]), pp. 93–104. See below, on the sixth to eighth page of this article.
²For this name and its reading see below, seventh to eighth page of this article and Fig. 4. For help in tracking down a coin on which the name is clearly written I am grateful to Vesta Curtis, Chris Hopkins and Alexandra Magub.
Skjærvø and Shaul Shaked, both of whom know Middle Persian much better than I, for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this edition.

The language of Persis 2 is certainly Middle Persian, as is clear in particular from the two verbal logograms in -WN, but the orthography is somewhat archaic, most notably in the case of the spelling $YHWWN$ for later $YHWWN$, as are the shapes of the letters. It is noteworthy that aleph has two distinct forms, one like that in the earlier part of Persis 1, the other like that in the added final sentence which names the prince as the owner of the bowl. Here too the older form occurs in the early part of the inscription and the later form towards the end, but in this case there is nothing to suggest that the last part of the inscription is a later addition.

An important feature of the new inscription is the fact that, in my opinion, it preserves a distinction between the letters $w$ and $r$, which have become completely identical in all later varieties of Middle Persian script. Here $w$ is rounded at the top, with a bottom stroke which may be either straight (giving a form resembling “2”) or rounded (like a reversed “S”), while

Fig. 1. The bowl bearing the inscription “Persis 2”. Photograph used by permission of the owner.

3Skjærvø, ‘The joy of the cup’, p. 95.
r is flatter at the top (like an upside-down “2”). The two letters can be seen side by side in \textit{wrdpt} and \textit{KTRWN}, whose -\textit{nw-} may be contrasted with the -\textit{uw-} of \textit{YHWWN}.

The distinction between \textit{w} and \textit{r} is less obvious in Persis \textit{\textcircled{1}}, where the writing is altogether sloppier, but here too the few examples of \textit{w} are closer to the “reversed S” form, while most examples of \textit{r} look like the “upside-down 2”. I admit, however, that even the new inscription includes some intermediate forms which could equally well be read either as \textit{w} or as \textit{r}.

Two letters which are surprisingly difficult to distinguish in the new inscription are \textit{y} and \textit{z}. While some examples of \textit{y} are easily identified by a sharp bend or curve, as in \textit{mwydyt} (twice), \textit{BYN} and \textit{’YK}, other examples, in which the bend or curve has been largely straightened out, as in \textit{WHYL}, \textit{kwpdy} and \textit{YHWWN} (for this last see the tracing above), could easily be read as \textit{z}:

Both forms of \textit{y} are also found in Persis \textit{\textcircled{1}}, for example, the curved form in \textit{’Hyn} and a much straighter form in \textit{d’ryn}:

Finally, it is worth noting that the letters \textit{T}, \textit{S} and \textit{Q} are not attested in either inscription. There is no \textit{ayin} in Persis \textit{\textcircled{1}}, but the new inscription has one example (in the logogram \textit{’L}); this seems to be distinct from both \textit{w} and \textit{r}.

\textbf{Inscription “Persis 2”: a tentative reading and translation (Fig. 2)}

\textbf{Commentary}

The word read here as \textit{s’t lwu} must be the same as the sequence in Persis \textit{\textcircled{1}} which Skjærvø read as \textit{s’t lny} “may I be (> give) happiness” and compared with a supposed \textit{s’t lny} in a Parthian
inscription on silver. It is now clear that all three contexts contain the same word and that this is a term which designates the type of vessel on which it is inscribed; only the reading of the last letter is subject to doubt. Assuming that all three examples are identically spelt, it seems to me that this letter must be $\text{-w}$. Philippe Gignoux, the first editor of the Parthian inscription, gave only šʾtḥ in his text, but rightly stated that the last letter “ressemble à un $\text{w}$”.\(^5\) In the new inscription too, the reading $\text{-w}$ is virtually certain. The only problematic example is that in Persis 𐭞, where the letter in question consists of a simple vertical line. Skjærvø read this as $\text{-n}$, which is certainly possible from a palaeographical point of view, although all other examples of final $\text{-n}$ in this inscription have a “foot” which is missing here. However, a reading with $\text{-n}$ would be incompatible with the other two examples, and it does not seem to me impossible that the letter in question is a final $\text{-w}$, of which the inscription contains no other example. The implied simplification of the shape of $\text{w}$ would be comparable to that of the initial $\text{d}$- in the words $\text{dʾrynkn}$ and $\text{dʾryn}$, which, as

\(^5\)Philippe Gignoux, ‘Coupes inscrites de la collection Mohsen Foroughi’, in Monumentum H. S. Nyberg, I (Acta Iranica, IV, Tehran–Liège, 1975), p. 276. In my view Gignoux was right to suppose that the inscription begins with this word and ends with the word which he reads $\text{gʾwhkn}$ (see his Fig. 31 on Pl. XXXVI, which shows that there is a substantial gap after the latter). Skjærvø (‘The joy of the cup’, p. 103 n. 2) took šʾḥn (as he read it) to be the last words of the text.
Skjærvø states “is open to some doubt” from a palaeographical point of view, though in the light of the names of the rulers of Persis known from the coinage it “can hardly be anything else”. Moreover, a ω consisting of a simple vertical line is well attested in the contemporary coin-legends of the rulers of Persis (see below, on sixth and seventh page of this article with Fig. 4, on the writing of the name ṣ̣h ṣ̣šn).

The etymology of š ṣtw “bowl” is a secondary consideration, but it is worth considering the possibility that it is identical with Sogdian šʼtyxw, šʼtwx “happy”, lit. “having a contented mind”. A similar formation is attested in Middle Persian via the abstract noun unrāhm-ox-īh “happiness” (Denkard 3.133.11), to which Skjærvø kindly draws my attention. For the concept of a “happy cup”, i.e. a “cup which gives happiness”, one may perhaps compare Middle and New Persian šādurān in the sense “basin, pond, fountain”, which appears to be a compound meaning “having a contented soul”.

\( mw\)yd-: secondary past stem of the verb attested in Zoroastrian Pahlavi as \( mw\)yd- “to announce, introduce, present”.

\( mtr\)d “Mhrdād” and \( ss\) “Sāsān” are well-attested Middle Persian names. The orthography without aleph for \( ā \) is somewhat archaic.

\( wrd\)t is attested in Inscriptional Middle Persian as a personal name, but in origin it is a title, whose exact meaning is unknown. Cf. Armenian vardapet “doctor, master, archimandrite, etc.”.

\( HLY \) I take to represent Aramaic hyl “strength, power, forces, army”, perhaps as a logogram for spāh “army”. If that is correct, the following word, of which the most likely reading seems to be \( kʼyzn \) or \( kʼżyn \), may well be the name of the region to which the army in question belongs (the ezafe which would be expected in a later Middle Persian text being omitted as it is in Persis 1). Skjærvø has kindly suggested to me that the word might be read \( kʼzhl \), i.e. the name of the town Kāzarūn or Kāzerūn to the west of Shiraz. This interpretation would fit the context perfectly, but I find it impossible to accept from a palaeographical point of view. The first two letters are certainly \( kʼ \), the third may well be \( z \), and the fourth could conceivably be a dwarfed \( l \) (lacking the characteristic tall ascender seen in \( HLY \) and \( L \), the only other examples of this letter). However, the last two letters can hardly be read otherwise than as \( nw \) or, if one rejects the “rule” proposed above for distinguishing these two letters, as \( wr \); in particular, it seems to me that the last letter is far too short to be an \( n \), of which the inscription contains many clear examples, including several in final position. Whatever the correct reading, it does seem likely that the word is a place-name, in which case the same may well apply to the following supskn or supwskn, a formation containing the common suffix -gān, perhaps derived from a personal name. An alternative, perhaps less likely, possibility is that \( kʼyzn \) or \( kʼżyn \) is itself a personal

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6Skjærvø, ‘The joy of the cup’, p. 95.

7Apparently a different word from šādurān in the sense “veil, curtain, carpet” etc., which may contain a variant form of čah “sheet, veil”, see C. A. Ciancaglini, Iranian loanwords in Syriac (Wiesbaden, 2008), pp. 258–259.
name, presumably that of the general commanding the army,⁸ in which case the following word might be his patronymic, family name or title.⁹

kwpdšy appears to be another geographical name, of which the first part is presumably kof “mountain”. It is tempting to compare New Persian Kūfš, Qūfš, Kūf < *kaufāčiya-, the name of a mountainous region in Kerman and the people living there,¹⁰ though -dšy can hardly represent the outcome of the suffix -čiya-.

KTRWN is more archaic than KTLWN, the usual spelling of the logogram for māndan, mān- “to stay, remain”, the Aramaic root being ktr. As Skjærvø kindly points out to me, KTRWN is in fact attested in Zoroastrian Pahlavi beside KTLWN.¹¹

One might expect ‘L = ő “to, at” to introduce the indirect object of the verb nwydyt “presented”, but the following words do not suggest the name of a god or temple. A possible alternative is that ‘uswy (‘uswy?) gwy is yet another geographical term, perhaps designating some smaller locality within the region kwpdšy. I have nothing to propose for ‘uswy or ‘swy, but gwy allows several explanations, of which *gaw “village” from Old Iranian *gaw-, Ossetic gav-,¹² seems to me the most plausible.

yʾndʾyn (zʾndʾyn?) seems to be yet another unknown word, probably a compound. If the phrase YK yʾndʾyn YHWVN expresses a wish, as seems likely, it is possible that yʾn- is the Middle Persian equivalent of Avestan yāna-, Sogdian yʾn “favour, boon, grace”.¹³ If so, a comparison with Christian Sogdian yʾn-Θbʾiqʾyʾ “grace, favour, blessing”, lit. “the giving of a favour”, suggests that the second part of the compound might be a nominal form of dādan, dahu-/day- “to give”, perhaps in origin a present participle middle (= Avestan daṭāna-), though one would expect *-dym or *-dyʾn rather than -dʾyn. It is tempting to read -dʾt, i.e. the past stem dād, but this would amount to an emendation, since -ʾyn is quite clearly written as two letters.

YHWVN = būdan, bau- “to be, become”. The writing with H rather than with ḥ as in Zoroastrian and Inscriptional Middle Persian is an archaism, cf. Aramaic hrwy, hwʾ.

Appendix: Inscription “Persis I” (Fig. 3)

1’rehštā 3MLK 3Ḥʾyn 4ʾdʾrynkn 3BRH 4ʾd ryn 7MLK 8ʾt hw 9ZNH 10YNGDWN 11z 12KSP
13s-20-20-10 14ʾwhwhštā 15BRBYT 16ʾNPŠH

⁸Such a name does not seem to be attested, but could hypothetically be explained as containing "kʾy", a Parthian-style spelling of the title kāy (written kdy on Sasanian coins)—for aleph representing [l] in Parthian monosyllables see W. B. Henning, “Mitteliranisch”, in Handbuch der Orientalistik, I/IV/1, (ed.) B. Spuler (Leiden–Cologne, 1958), p. 62—and *zwn from “zanw- “gold”.
⁹wēʾpasqān as a genuine Middle Persian equivalent of the usual but ultimately non-Persian wārgudrān “courtier, etc.” (D. N. MacKenzie, A concise Pahlavi dictionary, London, 1971, p. 88), in origin “princely”?
¹⁰On the origin and forms of this name see C. E. Bosworth, ‘The Kūṭšīūs or Qūfš in Persian History’, Iran, XIV (1976), p. 9. The Middle Persian form “Kʿfš” cited by W. Brandenstein and M. Mayrhofer, Handbuch des Altpersischen (Wiesbaden, 1964), p. 130, is a reconstruction, not an attested form.
¹¹See for example D. D. Kapadia, Glossary of Pahlavi Vendidad (Bombay, 1953), p. 399.
¹²See I. Gershevitch, Review of G. G. Cameron, Persepolis Treasury Tablets, Asia Major, II/1 (1951), p. 138; J. Cheung, Studies in the historical development of the Ossetic vocalism (Wiesbaden, 2002), p. 214. Other possibilities to be considered include a logogram derived from Aramaic gw “inside” or the old name of the capital of Isfahan, Greek Γάβαι, Arabic Jay, written ḡdy and ḡb respectively in the Middle Persian and Parthian versions of the SKZ inscription (see Henning, “Gābāe”, Asia Major, II/1, 1951, p. 144).
¹³In Zoroastrian Pahlavi yʾn can be “life”, New Persian ān, but here one would expect either the logogram HYʾ or at least a more conservative spelling preserving the Old Iranian initial *uy-.
Of the brothers of King Ardaxšahr (II), descendant(s) of Dārāya (I), son(s) of King Dārāya (II).

This bowl of hammered gold (and) silver (weighs) 50 staters. (Added in a different style:) Property of Prince Waxšahr.

Skjærvø reads the name of the prince as *whyštr* and transcribes it as Wahīxšahr. My preference for the reading *whyštr* is not so much based on the shape of the third letter in this inscription, which is rather indeterminate, as on the form attested on the coins, which on
many good specimens is indistinguishable from the initial $w$- (see Fig. 4).\textsuperscript{14} Otherwise, my reading of this inscription differs from Skjærvø’s only in one letter—$t’$hu rather than $t’$hn, as discussed above—, but the fact that this word can now be seen to be a designation of the object on which it is inscribed necessitates a change in the understanding of the syntax. The other problematic word is $’H$yn, rightly so read by Skjærvø, though his interpretation of the form as $bra$da-$y$-in “our brother” is hard to accept. For this meaning, to judge by Manichaean Middle Persian $pd’$n, i.e. $pida-n$ “our father”,\textsuperscript{15} one might rather expect $*bra$da-$n$. It seems to me more likely that $’H$yn represents the oblique plural $bra$dar$\tilde{n}$, a form attested in the Pahlavi Psalter, where it is written $’HY$ylm.\textsuperscript{16} Admittedly, the spelling is still somewhat awkward, since the basic logogram appears elsewhere in Middle Persian as $’H$Y (representing Aramaic $’h$y “my brother”), or in one early Sasanian inscription as $’H$,\textsuperscript{17} but in itself a logogram $’H$ (emphatic state) is no more strange than MLK.\textsuperscript{18} Since Ardaxšahr II and Waxšahr are both named on their coins as sons of Dārāyān, it seems that they were indeed brothers. The formulation of the inscription is certainly unusual, but can be understood as indicating that the bowl was one of a series made for the brothers of King Ardaxšahr, of which this particular specimen came to be assigned to Prince Waxšahr.

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\textsuperscript{14}See also M. Alram, \textit{Nomina propria ianica in nummis} (Iranisches Personennamenbuch, IV, Vienna, 1986), pp. 174–175. The personal name $whuh$ət $<”wahu-xləθm$ could be taken as alluding to one of the Gathas (Yasa 51), which begins with the words $wahu$ $xləθm$ and is named as $wahu$ $xləθm$– $($± $həmi$) (Chr. Bartholomae, \textit{Altiranisches Wörterbuch}, Strassburg, 1904, col. 1432).

\textsuperscript{15}See W. Sundermann, \textit{Der Semon von der Seele} (Berliner Turfertexte, XIX, Turnhout, 1997), p. 37 n. 150 (with references). Since $–n$ was no longer recognizable as a pronominal suffix, the form was recharacterized by adding the standard later form of the 1 pl. suffix: $pd’n$-$n$ $’n$ (M 102 headline, in F. W. K. Müller, \textit{Handschriften-Reste in Estrangelo-Schrift aus Turfan, Chinesisch-Turkistan, II. Teil}, Anhang zu den Abhandlungen der Königlichen Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften vom Jahre 1904, Berlin, 1904, p. 64).

\textsuperscript{16}See P.O. Skjærvø, ‘Case in Inscriptional Middle Persian, Inscriptional Parthian and the Pahlavi Psalter [Part 2]’, \textit{Studia Iranica}, XII/2 (1983), p. 164. The unexpected ending $–n$ is perhaps borrowed from $fraz$and $’n$ “children” (see W.B. Henning, ‘The inscription of Firuzabad’, \textit{Asia Major}, IV/1, 1954, p. 101) or $xu$â$\tilde{m}$ “sisters”.

\textsuperscript{17}See P.O. Skjærvø, ‘The earliest datable inscription on a Sasanian bowl: Two silver bowls in the J. Paul Getty Museum’, \textit{Bulletin of the Asia Institute}, VII (1993 [publ. 1994]), p. 186.

\textsuperscript{18}Cf. the case of KSP and KSP’ discussed by Skjærvø, ‘The joy of the cup’, p. 94. It will be seen that I am not convinced by the interpretation of $’h$yn as $’aliyân$ “former”, which is proposed by M. R. Shayegan, ‘Nugae Epigraphicae’, \textit{Bulletin of the Asia Institute}, XIX (2005 [publ. 2009]), pp. 169–171.