

Middle Persian Papyri from the Sasanian Occupation of Egypt in the Seventh Century CE (I)

Touraj Daryaee
California State University, Fullerton

“After Kīsrā (Xūsūrō II) had reigned for fourteen years, the Byzantines deposed Mawrīq (Maurice) and killed him, also exterminating all his heirs, apart from one of his sons who fled to Kīsrā, and they raised to the throne as their king a man name Fūqā (Phocas). When Kīsrā heard the news of the Byzantines’ breaking their allegiance to Mawrīq and their killing him, he became violently aroused, regarded it with revulsion, and was gripped by anger...commander was called Šāhīn was the Fādhūsban (Pādūsban) of the West. He proceeded onward until he captured Egypt and Alexandria and the land of Nubia, and sent back to Kīsrā the keys of the city of Alexandria in the twenty eighth year of his reign (617 CE).¹

For the second time in history the Persians reached North Africa and occupied it for over a decade. They not only conquered Egypt, but also Northern Libya (Libye) and to the south all the way to Thebaid, the border of the Nubian kingdom.² The Sasanian Persian conquest of the Near East and North Africa during the rule of Xūsūrō II (590-628CE), known as Aparwēz “Victorious” was the last great conquest of the Late Antique world before the coming of the Arab Muslims. Because of the chronological proximity of the Persian conquest to the Arab Muslim conquest, the impact of the former on the socio-political makeup of the region and its consequence for the latter Arab victories has been neglected.

For example, one of the lasting Persian influences in Egypt may be the Coptic New Year celebration called *nawrūz*. The *nawrūz* commemorates the Coptic New Year’s liturgy and is one of the great popular feasts. After the Arab Muslim conquest *nawrūz* was still celebrated by Egyptians, dressed in their best attire and exchanging visits and festivities into the night. The celebration was restricted in the fourteenth century by the Mamluk dynasty but continued by the

¹ *The History of al-Tabarī, The Sāsānids, the Byzantines, the Lakmids, and Yemen*, translated by C.E. Bosworth, vol. v, State University of New York Press, 1999, pp. 318-319.

² R. Altheim-Stiehl, “The Sasanians in Egypt – Some Evidence of Historical Interest,” *Bulletin de la société d’archéologie copte*, vol. xxxi, 1992, p. 92.

Coptic Church.³ Another celebration in Egypt which involves the Sasanian Persians is the *Holy Cross Day* which commemorates the finding of the cross on which Jesus was crucified and the return of the same cross from Persia to Jerusalem in 628 CE. Sasanian influence on Coptic art is also known, where textiles from Atinoe, as well as ivory work, show borrowing.⁴

Although al-Tabarī states that the Persians had conquered Egypt in 617 CE, it was in 618 CE that the Sasanian Persians under the command of Šāhīn entered Egypt.⁵ Based on the Coptic sources it appears that the Persians began to subdue the region in a heavy handed way. The initial plundering the relationship became much more amiable between the Coptic authorities and that of the Sasanian rulers. We should not forget that before the Sasanian conquest, the Byzantine Emperor Maurice had sent his own Christian representatives to supplant the Coptic leaders, who were Monophysite, and so there was much tension between the two. John of Nikiou states “This chastisement has befallen the earth owing to the heresy of the emperor Maurice.” Thus, while the initial conquest by the Persians would have been seen as a disaster, the consequence was that, once the Roman forces were kicked out, the Coptic Patriarch was able to become the absolute religious authority over his people.⁶

The sources for this period include Greek, Arabic, Coptic and Middle Persian documents. The last group of sources is mainly papyri documents left by the Persian commanders and soldiers in Egypt in the second decade of the seventh century (<http://www.sasanika.com/pdf/SasanikaBulletin.pdf>). Most of the papyri from Egypt were found

³ Archbishop Basilios, “Nawrūz,” *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, ed. A.S. Atiya, vol. 6, 1991, p. 1784.

⁴ M. Compareti, “The Sasanians in Africa,” *Transoxiana*, vol. 4, 2002, pp. 6-9

⁵ Altheim-Stiehl, *op. cit.*, pp. 88-89; there are disagreements whether it was Šāhīn or Šarhwarāz who was in charge of the Persian forces, T.M. Hicky, “Who Really Led the Sassanian Invasion of Egypt?,” *Nineteenth Annual Byzantine Studies Conference*, Abstract, 1993, Princeton University, New Jersey, 1993, p. 3, as discussed by Compareti, p. 3.

⁶ “Monophysitism,” *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, ed. A.S. Atiya, vol. 5, 1991, p. 1676.

in Fayoum during the reign of Xūsro II,⁷ and are hence an important primary source for the period.⁸ They contain lists of supplies, personal names, ranks, and military organization. The Middle Persian papyri give us such information regarding weights and measures such as (Middle Persian) *drahm* < (Greek) δραχμή; weight measure (Middle Persian) *kīrāt* < (Greek) χεράτιον and (Middle Persian) *lagēnag* < (Latin) *lagena* / (Greek) λεχάνη.⁹ They are instructive in understanding the manner in which letters were written and the way in which the dignitaries were addressed. Since Hansen's work others such as J. de Menasce¹⁰ and, most importantly the expert in this area, D. Weber have published most of them.¹¹

In the Zoroastrian Middle Persian texts Egypt is known as *agiptus* and its location is described as following (*Bundahišn* XVIII.13): *agiptus būm kē misr-iz xwānēnd* “the land of Agiptus which is also called Misr.” The river associated with the land is *rōd ī nīl* the “Nil River.” The papyri mention a number of the cities such as Babylon, Toupis, Kynon and few others in Egypt which demonstrate the center of Persian occupation of the country.

The structure of these letters is uniform in that it can be divided into three sections: I) Opening formula where the letter is written to X with salutations and reverence being paid to them¹²; II) The main content of these letters which are again about orders, food supply and transportation among other matters; and III) Concluding formula with salutations and reverence again being paid to the addressee. The script is particularly difficult to decipher, but its

⁷ O. Hansen, *Die mittelpersischen Papyri der Papyrussammlung der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin*, Verlag der Akademie der Wissenschaften, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, 1938, p. 9.

⁸ For an overall study of the content and importance of the Middle Persian papyri in Egypt see E. Venetis, “The Sassanid Occupation of Egypt (7th Cent. A.D.) According to Some Pahlavi Papyri Abstracts,” *Greco-Arabica*, vols. IX-X, 2004, pp. 403-412.

⁹ Venetis, pp. 405-407. As for Middle Persian *lagēnag* I believe it comes from Babylonian *liganu* / *ligunu*.

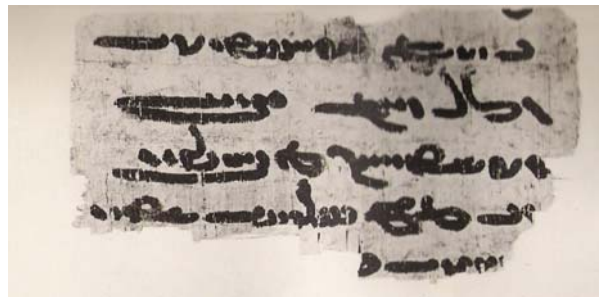
¹⁰ J.P. de Menasce, “Recherches de papyrologie pehlevie,” *Journal Asiatique*, vol. 241, 1953, pp. 185-196; and *Ostraca and Papyri*, *Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum*, Part III. Pahlavi Inscriptions. Volume IV-V. *Ostraca and Papyri*, London, 1957.

¹¹ D. Weber, *Ostraca, Papyri und Pergamente*, *Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum*. Part III. Pahlavi Inscriptions. Volume IV-V. *Ostraca and Papyri*, London, 1992.

¹² We find such people as Yazdāngird and others being the addressee in these letters.

importance is that it demonstrates the common writing system among the Persians in the seventh century and gives us a look into the nature of literacy in Late Antiquity in the Near East.

Sasanika: Late Antique Near East Project (www.sasanika.com) is planning to place a number of these important papyri documents online. This will be a slow task, but further study of these documents will shed light on an important juncture in the history of the Near East and Africa in the Late Antique period. The transcription and transliteration done by Hansen and Weber are consulted, unless otherwise noted by the present author, and further suggestions are made. The phraseology of the Middle Persian papyri is somewhat different from that of the Middle Persian Zoroastrian texts. The script is also more difficult to read as they appear to be daily notes by the Persians in the area. For these reasons their translation is much more difficult and there may be different readings of not only the documents, but their interpretation. It is hoped that this project would in turn bring about other suggestions from the experts in the field. (P. 15056 / Hansen 51):



...
Y NPŠH 'p'yšt' ...
'L L n'č GBR'
npšt' 'YK MN b'pylwn
'D MDM 'dlkš ŠDRWN
...nyw? znd ...

...
ī xwēš abāyst ...
ō nē namāz mard
nibišt kū az bābilōn
tā abar ēr-kaš frēst
... nēw? zand...

...
of one's own must ...
he did not write in reverence to the man
who from Babylon
until salutations be sent
... new? district

Commentary

This 12 x 16.5 cm. papyri is particularly interesting and difficult to interpret. O. Hansen who transliterated the document did not translate papyri as it is particularly difficult, especially with his reading. According to our reading of the document it appears that someone has not given the proper greetings and salutations and until he does things will not be fine.

Line one has been destroyed and so the beginning of the letter is missing. The second line is readable with the exception of the last word which Hansen did not read. It is indeed difficult to make out what it is, but if it is not a word it may be a number (30 +?). That, however, can not be certain as the context of the letter does not warrant such a reading.

In line three the phrase *namāz mard* is of particular interest because it appears only once more, in the Philadelphia E 16.485 (Weber P. 3) papyri.¹³ The word *namāz* in the sense of “adoration, homage, salutation, reverence,” is found in Middle Persian texts, where the action *namāz burdan* “paying homage” is done in the presence of a superior. When coming before the Sasanian king it appears that people had to perform a (Greek) προσχύνησις / *proskynesis* as it appears in the *Kārnāmag ī Ardaxšīr ī Pābagān* (The Vitae of Ardaxšīr the Son of Pābag). The courtiers come before the Sasanian king of kings, Ardaxšīr I (224-240 CE) in the following manner: *ō pēš ardaxšīr šud hēnd ud pad rōy ōbast ud nāmāz burd* (XV.9) “(they) went before Ardaxšīr and fell on their faces and paid homage.” This is ancient Persian custom which Herodotus (I.134) relates about the Persians: “When the Persians meet one another in the roads, you can see whether those who meet are of equal rank. For instead of greeting by

¹³ Hansen, *op. cit.*, pp. 115-117.

words, they kiss each other on the mouth; but if one of them is inferior to the other, they kiss one another on the cheeks, and if one is of much less noble rank than the other, *he falls down before him and worships him.*” While in the Middle Persian texts *namāz* is written with the ideogram ‘*SGDH / OSGDH*, thus Aramaic *sgdh* / Arabic *sjdh*, in the papyri documents the word is written in a condensed form of *nč*, but almost uniquely here as *n’č*.

In line four we come across geographical information. The Fort of Babylon (Middle Persian *Bābilōn*)¹⁴ was established by the Romans and it appears that the Persians were able to occupy it early on during the conquest (618 CE). This is important in that it was to be conquered by the Arab Muslims in 641 CE, just over a decade after the Persian occupation, and the Islamic city of Cairo would get its start as the southernmost area of the city. Babylon was a garrison fort which the Persians occupied after defeating the Byzantine forces there and was important in that it was the in-between center of Upper and Lower Egypt.



Babylon’s defensive walls

¹⁴ This location is mentioned in another piece in the following manner (Weber Papyrus 45, Strasb. Pehlevi 1):

n’mak’ Y hwṭ’k’ MDM l’dynšn Y TMH ‘L ṬḤNN’ [] (p)t’ b’plwn’ krṭn’ LWTH Pg shw(n’) krṭ’ l’d LN(E) ¹⁴ YḤWWNt	nāmag ī xwadāy abar rāyēnišn ī ānōh ō ārdan ... pad Bābilōn kardan abāg arzan saxwan kard rāy amā bawēd	The letter of the lord over the management there at the mill ... in Babylon along with deer (meat), speak for our sake
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The content of this papyrus is that a letter has been received from a superior *xwadāy* about the management of food-supply in Babylon.

It is also interesting to note that it is believed that the original fort was built by the Achaemenid Persians in the sixth century BCE, but the Roman Emperor Trajan moved it from the cliffs, because of water problems, closer to the river. The Fort of Babylon had 40 foot high walls and was an important port and this is the reason that first the Persians and then the Arab Muslims held it. The Arab Muslims, in fact would use the terms Babylon and Fustat, referring to the city which they established next to it, interchangeably, as it appears in the early Arabic papyri documents. In Arabic the place was also to be called Qasr al-Sham “Fortress of the Candle.”



Babylon

Hansen has the following reading for line five ‘D MDM syrkuš štr’ / *ō abar Syracuse šahr* which is quite possible, but as far as I have been able to see no city by such a name existed in Egypt. Hence, I believe his reading is doubtful unless we find such a city. I would like to suggest that the word is not *syrkuš šahr* but rather *’dlkš ŠDRWN / ēr-kaš frēst* “sent salutations.” This fits the beginning of the papyri where a reverence or homage is not paid and so until (*tā*) further salutations are not sent things will not be fine.

Line six is only partially intact and Hansen has taken the word to be *nyw ’kyh* the meaning of which in this context or any context escapes me. While the beginning of the line is torn off, we may be looking at two separate words, where the second may be *zand* “district” which may be again related to geographical matters.