



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

# The letters of Shahrbaraz and Middle Persian historiography on the last great war of Late Antiquity

### Citation for published version:

Hämeen-Anttila, J 2022, 'The letters of Shahrbaraz and Middle Persian historiography on the last great war of Late Antiquity', *Journal of Late Antique, Islamic and Byzantine Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1-2, pp. 65-93.  
<https://doi.org/10.3366/jlaibs.2022.0005>

### Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.3366/jlaibs.2022.0005](https://doi.org/10.3366/jlaibs.2022.0005)

### Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

### Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

### Published In:

Journal of Late Antique, Islamic and Byzantine Studies

### Publisher Rights Statement:

This article has been accepted for publication by Edinburgh University Press in the Journal of Late Antique, Islamic and Byzantine Studies, and can be accessed at  
<https://www.eupublishing.com/doi/abs/10.3366/jlaibs.2022.0005>.

### General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

### Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



THE LETTERS OF SHAHRBARĀZ AND MIDDLE PERSIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY ON THE  
LAST GREAT WAR OF LATE ANTIQUITY

Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, University of Edinburgh

[j.hameen-anttila@ed.ac.uk](mailto:j.hameen-anttila@ed.ac.uk)

19 George Square

Edinburgh EH8 9LD

UK

## **The letters of Shahrbarāz and Middle Persian historiography on the last Great War of Late Antiquity**

*abstract:* The article analyses stories about letters sent by Kisrā Abarwīz to his general Shahrbarāz during the last Great War of Late Antiquity. The analysis sheds light on Middle Persian historiography and the transmission of historical information in the Late Sasanian and Early Islamic periods, information we need in order to understand the history of the period. Based on the study of this episode, supported by wider evidence, the article suggests that Middle Persian historiography was prone to literary embellishment, that it was solipsistic, almost exclusively interested in matters Persian, and that for its Persian sections Arabic historiography inherited this attitude from Middle Persian sources. The article also points to previously unused, or underused, sources that can throw more light on the relations between Middle Persian, Christian, and Islamic historiography.

*keywords:* Middle Persian historiography - Sasanians - Arabic historiography - Heraclius

Letter writing is often mentioned in Byzantine, Syriac, Armenian, Arabic, and Persian historiography, and Persian kings and heroes both send and receive letters in these various, partly interdependent historical traditions. Some of the letters are obviously not historical: when the Sistanian hero Zāl writes a letter to his father Sām, and Sām further to King Manūchīhr,<sup>1</sup> we are in the universe of legend, not history. Some of the letters of the Sasanian period mentioned in historical works may have been historical, but the purpose of the present article is not to throw light on how letters were used in Sasanian Iran. Instead, it offers a case study of *stories* about letters and cunning plots that wandered from one source into another, changing on the way.

The analysis of these stories will shed light on Middle Persian historiography and the transmission of historical information in the Late Sasanian and Early Islamic periods, information we need in order to understand the history of the time. Based on the study of this episode, supported by wider evidence, it will be suggested that Middle Persian historiography was prone to literary embellishment, that it was solipsistic, almost exclusively interested in matters Persian, and that for its Persian sections Arabic historiography inherited this attitude from Middle Persian sources. This

---

<sup>1</sup> Firdawsī, *Shāhnāme*, ed. D. Khaleghi-Motlagh and A. Khatibi, 8 vols., (New York, 1987–2008), I: 205–20 (vv. 611–840), 231–44 (vv. 982–1180).

article will also point to previously unused, or underused, sources that can throw more light on the relations between Middle Persian, Christian, and Islamic historiography.<sup>2</sup>

Islamic historiography of the early seventh-century wars between Persia and Byzantium is remarkably concise and telescopes events of almost two decades into a few pages of a somewhat confused narrative.<sup>3</sup> In stories about these wars, the Persian commander Shahrbarāz is the recipient of a number of letters and the sender of a few.<sup>4</sup> To facilitate following the story, here is a very brief skeleton of what happened in the crucial years: Maurice, the former benefactor of Kīsrā Abarwīz, was executed in 602, and Phocas was proclaimed emperor. Ostensibly to put a son of Maurice back on the throne, Kīsrā sent Persian armies to invade Byzantium, but it was only Heraclius' revolt that led to Phocas' death in 610. The following years were favourable to the Persians, who, e.g., conquered Jerusalem in 614. Heraclius launched a counter-attack in 622, but

---

<sup>2</sup> Though somewhat problematic, I use the term "Islamic historiography" to refer to historical works written by Muslim authors in New Persian or Classical Arabic. Similarly, "Christian historiography" refers to works written by Christian authors, irrespective of the language they write in.

<sup>3</sup> For Christian historians, see J. Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World Crisis. Historians and Histories of the Middle East in the Seventh Century* (Oxford, 2010), 1–341. J. Howard-Johnston, 'al-Ṭabarī on the Last Great War of Antiquity', in H. Kennedy (ed.), *al-Ṭabarī. A Medieval Muslim Historian and His Work* (Princeton, 2008), 73–93, here 74, rather surprisingly claims that al-Ṭabarī's "coverage [of "the last old-style war of antiquity"] is extensive, running to nearly a hundred pages in Nöldeke's German translation" (T. Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser und Araber zur Zeit der Sasaniden aus der arabischen Chronik des Tabari* (Leyden, 1879), 290–382). This is utterly misleading, as al-Ṭabarī only devotes 14 pages (in Nöldeke's translation, 290–303 = C.E. Bosworth, *The History of al-Ṭabarī V: The Sāsānids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen* (Albany, 1999), 317–31) to the war itself, the rest being dedicated to presages of the collapse of Persia, narrated from an Islamic viewpoint, Dhū Qār and other materials of Arab interest, and the fall of Kīsrā, narrated as an internal Persian matter with next to no reference to the Byzantines and largely taken by the imaginary exchange between Shīrūya and Kīsrā. Even the 14 pages contain a lot of duplication and repetition.

<sup>4</sup> There is some unclarity as to Shahrbarāz's name, see Bosworth, *Sāsānids*, 319, note 749; P. Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire. The Sasanian-Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran* (London–New York, 2008), 143; and J. Banaji, 'On the identity of Shahrālānyōzān in the Greek and Middle Persian papyri from Egypt', in A.T. Schubert and P.M. Sijpestein (eds.), *Documents and the History of the Early Islamic World* (Leiden–Boston, 2015), 27–42. Again, his identification is not at stake here. In this article, the names of Kīsrā Abarwīz and Shahrbarāz are throughout given in these Arabic forms, except in the book title to be discussed below. P. Orsatti, *Materials for a History of the Persian Narrative Tradition. Two Characters: Farhād and Turandot* (Venezia, 2019), 56–9 and 'The last years of the Sasanid empire as reflected in the Persian romantic narrative tradition', in L. Capezzone (ed.), *Before Archaeology. The Meaning of the Past in the Islamic Pre-Modern Thought (and after)* (Rome, 2020), 105–17, here 111–2, makes an attempt to identify Shahrbarāz with the "King of Syria" (or his son) in later Persian romances, but his late appearance in Khwājū Kirmānī's *Gul o-Nawrūz*, composed in 742/1341, and Salmān-e Sāwajī's *Jamshīd o-Khwarshīd*, composed in 763/1372, makes her case less strong.

626 saw the siege of Constantinople. Finally in December 627, Heraclius invaded Mesopotamia, which led to the dethronement and death of Kīsrā in 628. Especially the last years of Kīsrā will be in the focus of this paper.<sup>5</sup>

Let us now start with outlining the story as told by al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) in his *Ta'riḫ*, with special attention to letter writing.<sup>6</sup> In the more extensive versions, I have divided the story in sections, [TAB 1] etc., for ease of reference.

### Arabic and Persian sources

[TAB 1] Al-Ṭabarī mentions three army commanders sent by Kīsrā Abarwīz against the Byzantines in various directions, Romyūzān(?), Shāhīn, and Farruhān, the last mentioned having the honorary name of Shahrbarāz ("the Boar of the Land").<sup>7</sup> The newly elected Emperor Heraclius made a countermove and marched through Armenia to Nisibis. Kīsrā had been angered with Shāhīn, the provincial civil governor (*fādhūsban*) of the West and had called him back to his court "and dismissed him from that frontier command (*thaghr*). Shahrbarāz, however, was firmly holding the place where he was stationed because of Kīsrā's command to him to remain and not to leave it."<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> For a reconstruction, largely based on Byzantine sources, of the history behind the stories discussed in this article, see W.E. Kaegi, *Heraclius. Emperor of Byzantium* (Cambridge, 2003), 58–155, especially 148–55. See also J. Howard-Johnston, *The Last Great War of Antiquity* (Oxford, 2021), especially 214–320.

<sup>6</sup> Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḫ*, ed. M.J. de Goeje et al., *Annales quod scripsit (...) al-Ṭabarī*, 15 vols. (Leiden, 1879–1901), I: 1001–9 (= trans. Bosworth, *Sāsānids*, 317–30). W.E. Kaegi and P. Cobb, 'Heraclius, Shahrbarāz, and al-Ṭabarī', in H. Kennedy (ed.), *al-Ṭabarī. A Medieval Muslim Historian and His Work* (Princeton, 2008), 95–112, studies the episode on the basis of Christian historians, al-Ṭabarī, and Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam from the point of view of what actually happened and without giving much attention to the stories about the letters. Pourshariati, *Decline*, dedicates much space to Shahrbarāz (Middle Persian Shahrwarāz), especially 142–9, but her approach is almost diametrically opposed to mine and she seems to consider all the letters as source critically unproblematic (see 144, 147, and 152). Orsatti, *Materials*, 47–59, studies the whole life of Shahrbarāz.

<sup>7</sup> *Ta'riḫ* I: 1001 (= trans. Bosworth, *Sāsānids*, 317–9). Others only know of one general, like al-Tha'ālibī, *Ghurur*, ed. H. Zotenberg, *Histoire des Rois des Perses* (Paris, 1900), 701, but as we will see, Shahrbarāz is also in al-Ṭabarī's version the supreme commander of the other two generals. *Nihāyat al-arab fī ta'riḫ al-Furs wa'l-'Arab*, ed. M.T. Dānishpazhūh (Tehran, 1996), 424, names the three generals Shahrbarāz (first written Shahr-'Nzād and then Shahrīyār), Shahr-BNDād (cf. Nöldeke, *Geschichte*, 291, note 2), and Shāhīn.

<sup>8</sup> *Ta'riḫ* I: 1003–4 (= trans. Bosworth, *Sāsānids*, 321–2). As we will see, a similar letter is mentioned as a Byzantine forgery by Nicephorus.

[TAB 2] Another general, Rāhzādh (written Rāhzār), was sent against the approaching Heraclius. Realising the enemy's numbers, Rāhzādh wrote several times to Kistrā letting him know that the Persians could not stand against them, but Kistrā kept replying that they could, at least, die trying to. Eventually, they did so and were wiped out. Kistrā heard of the defeat and fled from Daskarat al-Malik to al-Madā'in, fortifying himself there. Heraclius approached, but then turned back to Byzantium – this is not motivated in any way in al-Ṭabarī's version. (This marks the end of the first version of these wars, told in a mere four pages.) Kistrā wrote to the three defeated generals asking them to report all who had shown weakness, a fatal letter, which turned men against him. He also wrote to Shahrbarāz ordering him to come post haste and report on the damage done by the Byzantines.<sup>9</sup>

[TAB 3] After this, al-Ṭabarī turns for a while to Qur'ān 30: 1–5 (on the defeat of the Byzantines) and its interpretation and then restarts the story from the beginning. With an *isnād* leading back to 'Ikrima (d. 723),<sup>10</sup> he reports how Kistrā asked a woman, "who gave birth only to kings and heroes," which of her sons should lead the army against the Byzantines. The woman replied by describing three of her sons, So-and-So, Farrukhān, and Shahrbarāz, and Kistrā appointed the last mentioned.<sup>11</sup> The continuation shows that we are to understand that the remaining two became the other two commanders under Shahrbarāz's supreme command.

[TAB 4] The *ḥadīth* continues with a brief description of the battles between the Persians and Byzantines and a reference to Q 30: 1–5. Further, we are told that after the Persians had been victorious Farrukhān had been sitting with his companions and drinking, telling them about his dream in which he had seen himself on Kistrā's throne. When this came to Kistrā's ears, he wrote to Shahrbarāz, demanding Farrukhān's head. Shahrbarāz defended his brother Farrukhān and after some letters had been exchanged on this Kistrā sent a letter to the Persians (i.e., the Persian army) removing Shahrbarāz from command and appointing in his stead Farrukhān. At the same time, he sent another letter, to be given to Farrukhān when he was in power, telling him to execute Shahrbarāz. Farrukhān was about to do so, but Shahrbarāz showed him the earlier correspondence, and Farrukhān gave the command back to Shahrbarāz.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> *Ta'rīkh* I: 1004–5 (= trans. Bosworth, *Sāsānids*, 322–3). The fatal letter resembles the forged letter in the Christian tradition, see below.

<sup>10</sup> Dating *ḥadīths* on the basis of their *isnāds* is a very precarious business, so we cannot take 'Ikrima's date as in any way indicative of the time this story started circulating in Arabic.

<sup>11</sup> *Ta'rīkh* I: 1006–7 (= trans. Bosworth, *Sāsānids*, 326–7).

<sup>12</sup> *Ta'rīkh* I: 1007–8 (= trans. Bosworth, *Sāsānids*, 327–8).

[TAB 5] Then Shahrbarāz wrote to Qayṣar, king of the Byzantines, inviting him to a secret meeting, in which he told the king that he and his brother were willing to rise against Kīsrā, and they joined forces. Together, they killed the interpreter (*tarjumān*) they had used in their negotiations. This ends this part of the story of Shahrbarāz in al-Ṭabarī.<sup>13</sup> It is worth pointing out that in [TAB 3–5] the king of the Byzantines is not identified by name.

Al-Ṭabarī's narrative is not linear but offers variant versions of the same incidents. In [TAB 1], Shāhīn is called back to court, Shahrbarāz told to remain, but in [TAB 2] it is Shahrbarāz who is called back to court. In [TAB 1], there are three commanders, one of them Shahrbarāz, and in [TAB 3] Shahrbarāz is chosen from among three heroic sons, and the continuation makes it clear that the other two also became commanders of armies under Shahrbarāz. In [TAB 2], a commander repeatedly writes to Kīsrā to make him change his order, and the same happens in [TAB 4]. Even the provenance of the reports, as given by al-Ṭabarī, the first being part of an *isnād*-less narrative, the second a long *ḥadīth* with an *isnād*, shows that [TAB 1–2] and [TAB 3–5] are parallel versions of one narrative, rather than one continuous narrative. The first version is relatively sober, while the second is somewhat melodramatic and full of details far beyond ordinary (woman giving birth only to kings and heroes; secret orders to execute people; last-minute deliverance from the gallows; clandestine meetings; silencing of witnesses; etc.).

In broad lines, Miskawayhi (d. 1030), *Tajārib*,<sup>14</sup> follows [TAB 1–4]. [MISK 1] Ignoring the other commanders, Miskawayhi tells how Shahrbarāz devastated Byzantine areas and how the newly elected Heraclius marched to Nisibis through Armenia. The anonymous commander (*ṣāḥib*) of the *thaghr* had been summoned away by Kīsrā because of some grudge, but Shahrbarāz received numerous letters from Kīsrā telling him to stay where he was. [MISK 2] Kīsrā sent a commander of his, Rāhzādh, against Heraclius. Rāhzādh sent numerous letters to Kīsrā, explaining the desperate situation, but Kīsrā replied to him, saying he was strong enough to shed his blood in obeisance of the king.<sup>15</sup> Rāhzādh and his men were wiped out, Kīsrā fortified himself in al-Madā'in and prepared to fight, but Heraclius suddenly turned back to Byzantium. Kīsrā wrote the fateful

---

<sup>13</sup> *Ta'riḫ* I: 1008–9 (= trans. Bosworth, *Sāsānids*, 329–30). Shahrbarāz's rebellion against Ardashīr III and his short reign is later told in *Ta'riḫ* I: 1061–3 (= trans. Bosworth, *Sāsānids*, 400–3), but as an internal Persian matter rather than continuation of the war: more than fifty pages separate the war from the end of Kīsrā's reign. The *ḥadīth* of 'Ikrima is also found in al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl āy al-Qur'ān*, ed. 'Abdallāh ibn 'Abd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī (Cairo, 2001), XVIII: 451–4.

<sup>14</sup> Miskawayhi, *Tajārib al-umam wa-ta'āqub al-himam*, 7 vols., ed. S.K. Ḥasan (Beirut, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> *Tajārib* I: 148–9.

letter giving orders to the commanders to identify those who had not held their place. He also wrote to Shahrbarāz to come and report on the destruction caused by the Byzantines.<sup>16</sup>

[MISK 3] Then there follows the story about the woman and her three sons, after which [MISK 4] Miskawayhi relates Farrukhān's dream, the correspondence between Kistrā, Shahrbarāz, and Farrukhān, and the meeting of the latter two with Qayṣar, the king of the Byzantines.<sup>17</sup> Thus far, Miskawayhi has rather faithfully followed al-Ṭabarī, abbreviating and rephrasing but keeping to the main story line.

[MISK 5] Miskawayhi comes back to Shahrbarāz and Heraclius ten pages later in *Tajārib* I: 162–4. As this passage does not seem to have drawn much attention in studies of the Last Great War and is not, as far as I know, available in translation, it is translated in full in the Appendix. This story derives from a different source and lacks all personal names, except for that of Kistrā Abarwīz, his opponents being "an army commander" (later "the Persian") and "the king of the Byzantines," not Shahrbarāz and Heraclius. This version relates how Kistrā sent one of his major companions with an army against Byzantium. His remarkable success made Kistrā afraid of him, and Kistrā wrote two letters. In one, he ordered him to leave a trusted man in command and come to him, Kistrā, and in the other to stay where he was, since, on second thought, he could not see who could fill his place. The point of the second letter seems to be to lessen the suspicions of the commander and avoid a direct confrontation in case he disobeyed the first letter.

The messenger was told to give the commander the first letter and only after some time, if he did not obey, the second, as if it had just arrived. The commander was suspicious of the first letter, and after three days was given the second, but he did not fancy that, either, writing instead to the king of the Byzantines, offering peace and promising to let him pass on to Iraq unopposed. The king would be given everything he conquered, except for Iraq, which would be the Persian's – i.e., the commander's – share.

So it was done. Kistrā became suddenly aware of the proximity of the king of the Byzantines and realised that he could only rely on cunning, not strength. Thus, he wrote a small letter in fine script – a suitable style for a secret message to be carried across enemy lines – implying that the commander had obeyed his orders and lured the Byzantine king into a trap.

---

<sup>16</sup> *Tajārib* I: 149–50.

<sup>17</sup> *Tajārib* I: 150–1.



Kisrā then went to a monk living close by the town and asked him to take the message to the commander and even made him read the letter.<sup>18</sup> It will come as no surprise that when passing by his fellow Christians, the monk gave away his secret. But this was not all. Kisrā had also sent another messenger, who made haste and passed by the camp of the Byzantines (and then came back from the opposite direction) as if he were coming from the commander and heading toward Kisrā. He let himself be caught, too, carrying a similar message. Having read both, the king of the Byzantines turned away and fled.

[MISK 5] is similar to the version given by al-Tha‘labī (mid-9th century), *Akhlāq al-mulūk*, 180–7.<sup>19</sup> This version has also gone unnoticed in this context and will be translated into English in the Appendix.

Al-Tha‘labī’s version is long but somewhat confused. First, [THA 1] it gives an extensive background, telling how the Byzantine king lost his treasures, when the wind pushed the ships to Shahrbarāz, [THA 2] who sent them to Abarwīz. Abarwīz was first delighted with them, but then his servant Ruste made him believe that Shahrbarāz had kept the larger part to himself.

[THA 3] Instigated by Ruste, Abarwīz called Shahrbarāz back to the court. First, he sent a messenger with a letter ordering Shahrbarāz to come, but immediately thereafter he sent another messenger with two letters. The first of these commanded Shahrbarāz to stay where he was and the second to come post haste. The second messenger was advised to hand in the second letter if he saw Shahrbarāz about to return to the court, but the first one if he was not preparing for his return, thus actually confirming whatever Shahrbarāz was doing.

[THA 4] Shahrbarāz realised that Abarwīz was planning something, as he had been informed about the talks between Abarwīz and Ruste by his deputy, who had remained in the court. Realising that Shahrbarāz was not going to come, Abarwīz wrote to Shahrbarāz’s brother to take over the command, by force, if need be. The anonymous brother showed the letter to Shahrbarāz and others, and they made peace with the king of the Byzantines.

[THA 5] Shahrbarāz would have liked to lead the armies, but the king of the Byzantines ordered him to stay behind and himself took the command. Shahrbarāz prepared a detailed map of the route and advised him where to camp and where not. When the king came with

---

<sup>18</sup> This is not as obvious a trick as might seem. Letters were often transmitted orally and the physical copy was more ceremonial than practical. For reading the letter one was about to carry, see also Kay Kā’ūs, *Qābūs-nāme*, ed. R. Levy, *The Naṣīhat-nāma known as Qābūs-nāma of Kai Kā’ūs b. Iskandar b. Qābūs b. Washmgīr* (London, 1951), 97.

<sup>19</sup> Al-Tha‘labī, *Akhlāq al-mulūk*, ed. F. ‘Aṭawī as al-Jāhīz, *Kitāb al-Tāj fī akhlāq al-mulūk* (Beirut, 1970) and translated into French in C. Pellat, *Le livre de la Couronne* (Paris, 1954), 196–202.

his 400,000 men to al-Nahrawān he camped there and prepared for the battle. [THA 6] Abarwīz turned to a Christian, to whose grandfather his grandfather had shown favour, and asked him to carry a secret message to Shahrbarāz. On the way, the Christian heard the sound of the clappers (church bells) and showed the letter to the king of the Byzantines, who fled. The story ends with Abarwīz exclaiming: "One word, which sent 400,000 men to flight, must be of great value and fame!"

The commentary to al-A‘shā’s (d. after 625) verses by al-Qāsim al-Anbārī (d. 916)<sup>20</sup> narrates a version of a priest being sent to carry a letter to Shahrbarāz, who had gone over to Qaysar (the name Heraclius is not mentioned in this version).<sup>21</sup> This story differs in details and vocabulary from all the previous ones, but shows an overall similarity to the version of al-Tha‘labī. As it does not seem to have been translated or used to its full extent, the passage is translated in the Appendix.<sup>22</sup> Ibn Ḥamdūn (d. 1166) has a similar, though much abbreviated version.<sup>23</sup>

Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam (d. 871), *Futūḥ*,<sup>24</sup> 35–7, tells a different version, based on a *ḥadīth* transmitted through al-Zuhrī (d. 742) from Ibn ‘Abbās (d. 687), who heard ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 644) ask al-Hurmuzān, ‘azīm al-Ahwāz about the matter.<sup>25</sup> Al-Hurmuzān told him that [HAK 1] Kisrā had sent Shahrbarāz with armies to Syria and Egypt, but started suspecting that Shahrbarāz preferred his leisure and delayed in conquering Constantinople. He sent him a letter blaming him for this. [HAK 2] He wrote another letter to an anonymous Persian magnate (‘azīm min ‘uzamā’

<sup>20</sup> See F. Sezgin, *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums*, 9 vols. (Leiden, 1967–84), VIII: 148.

<sup>21</sup> Al-A‘shā, *Dīwān*, ed. R. Geyer, *Gedichte von (...) al-‘A‘shā* (London, 1928), 158–9.

<sup>22</sup> Many Arabic and Persian historians of pre-Islamic Iran either ignore these events or discuss them without any mention of letters, cunning plans, or clandestine contacts. See, e.g., *Nihāya*, 424–5; al-Dīnawarī, *al-Akḥbār al-tiwāl*, ed. V. Guirgass (Leiden, 1888), 110–1, al-Ya‘qūbī, *Ta’rīkh*, ed. M.T. Houtsma, *Ibn Wādhih qui dicitur al-Ja‘qubī Historiae*, 2 vols. (Leiden, 1883), I: 196–7 = trans. M.S. Gordon, C.F. Robinson, E.K. Rowson, and M. Fishbein, *The Works of Ibn Wādhih al-Ya‘qūbī*, 3 vols. (Leiden–Boston, 2018), II: 473 (= R.G. Hoyland, *The ‘History of the Kings of the Persians’ in Three Arabic Chronicles. The Transmission of the Iranian Past from Late Antiquity to Early Islam* (Liverpool, 2018), 128); *Mujmal al-tawārīkh wa’l-qīṣaṣ*, ed. M.T. Bahār Malik al-Shu‘arā’ (n.p., n.d.), 81.

<sup>23</sup> Ibn Ḥamdūn, *Tadhkira*, 10 vols., ed. I. ‘Abbās–B. ‘Abbās (Beirut, 1996), VIII: 254–5 (no. 741).

<sup>24</sup> Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam, *Futūḥ*, ed. C. Torrey, *The History of the Conquests of Egypt, North Africa, and Spain* (Yale, 1922).

<sup>25</sup> Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam’s version is detailed. In general outlines, it follows [TAB 4], but without any mention of a dream and rather few exact correspondences in the wording. For a translation of the whole passage, see W.E. Kaegi and P. Cobb, ‘Heraclius’, 108–10. For al-Hurmuzān, king of al-Ahwāz, who according to some converted to Islam and was taken to Medina, where he became the Caliph ‘Umar’s advisor, see A.S. Shahbazi, ‘Hormozān’, *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (<http://www.iranicaonline.org>), and, e.g., al-Maqrīzī, *Khabar*, ed. and trans. J. Hāmeen-Anttila, *al-Maqrīzī’s al-Ḥabar ‘an al-baṣar*, V: 4, *Persia and Its Kings, Part II* (Leiden, forthcoming), §§276–7.

*Fārs*), telling him to kill Shahrbarāz and take the command of the troops. Three times the magnate defended Shahrbarāz. Finally, the enraged Kisrā wrote to Shahrbarāz to execute the magnate. When Shahrbarāz was about to comply, the magnate asked for a respite and showed him the previous letters. In reaction, Shahrbarāz wrote to Heraclius and suggested a clandestine meeting, which Heraclius accepted. In the meeting, they decided to turn against Kisrā together.

If they elaborate on the letters, later Islamic historians usually follow al-Ṭabarī's narrative, sometimes adding elements of Miskawayhi's narrative to it,<sup>26</sup> but Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam's version does not seem to have left traces in later literature. Al-Mas'ūdī (d. 956), *Murūj*,<sup>27</sup> §647, does not relate the events, but sums them briefly up:

(Kisrā Abarwīz) sent Shahrbarāz, the *marzubān* of the West to wage war against the Byzantines. He encamped in Antioch. There were a lot of events, correspondence, and cunning between him, the king of the Byzantines, and Abarwīz, until finally the king of the Byzantines came to fight against Shahrbarāz.<sup>28</sup> He sent his treasuries in advance by sea in a thousand ships, which the wind pushed to the coast of Antioch, where Shahrbarāz looted them and carried the loot to Abarwīz, and the treasures were called the Windfall.<sup>29</sup> After that the relations between Abarwīz and Shahrbarāz deteriorated. Shahrbarāz won the king of the Byzantines on his side and sent him toward Iraq until al-Nahrawān. Abarwīz plotted by writing letters, which he sent through a Christian bishop, who was under his protection, until he (Abarwīz) was able to send him (the king of the Byzantines) back to Constantinople,

---

<sup>26</sup> E.g., Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī l-tārīkh*, 13 vols. (Beirut, n.d.), I: 475–9; al-Maqrīzī, *Khabar/Persia* II §§211–21. Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam was probably ignored because his book deals with the conquest of Egypt, North Africa, and Spain, so the story is out of its natural context.

<sup>27</sup> Al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, ed. Barbier de Meynard and Pavet de Courteille, revised by C. Pellat, 8 vols. (Beirut, 1966–79).

<sup>28</sup> Ibn al-Balkhī, *Fārsnāme*, ed. G. Le Strange and R.A. Nicholson (London, 1921), 105, also refers to a long tale about Kisrā's plots and deceptions.

<sup>29</sup> This part of the story is found separately, e.g., in Ibn al-Faqīh, *Mukhtaṣar Kitāb al-Buldān*, ed. M.J. de Goeje, *Ibn al-Fakīh al-Hamadhānī, Compendium libri Kitāb al-Boldān* (Leiden, 1885), 140, where Shahrbarāz is called *ghulām li-Kisrā 'alā l-Shām* "Kisrā's servant in charge of Syria." This version gives the Persian name of the treasure: *Bādh-āwurdā*, for which see also al-Tha'ālibī, *Ghurār*, 700–2 (*kanj Bādh-āwurd*) and Ibn al-Balkhī, *Fārsnāme*, 105 (*ganj-e bādh-āwurd*). The name of the treasure points to a Persian source for this part of the story. For a different story about this treasure, see Bal'amī, *Tārīkh*, ed. M.T. Bahār Malik al-Shu'arā' (Tehran, 2010), 758. Cf. also Kaegi, *Heraclius*, 88.

spoiling the relations between him and Shahrbarāz, and so on, events we have mentioned in *al-Kitāb al-Awsaṭ*.<sup>30</sup>

Al-Mas'ūdī repeats this in a more concise form in *Tanbīh*,<sup>31</sup> 157.

The story in Firdawsī's (d. 1020) *Shāhnāme* VIII: 299–305 (vv. 3848–930) differs from the Arabic versions, though most of its elements are by now recognisable. Here, the story starts with the introduction of Gurāz, who guards the frontier – the name is the regular New Persian equivalent of Middle Persian Warāz, in Arabic sources Barāz.<sup>32</sup> Another nobleman, Zādfarrukh, allies himself with Gurāz, who sends a letter to Qayṣar, invites him to invade Iran, and promises to help him. The reason for this treason is not given, although just before the story starts unravelling Kisrā's injustice has been spelt out. However, Gurāz, too, is described in negative terms. Al-Bundārī's Arabic translation, *al-Shāhnāma*,<sup>33</sup> 246, though, does give the reason, probably based on a manuscript variant: despite the alliance, Zādfarrukh remains, like the anonymous deputy of Shahrbarāz in al-Tha'labī's version, in the court of Abarwīz and betrays his secret correspondence to Gurāz. Al-Bundārī does not elaborate on this, but it is clearly a remnant of the intercepted letter motif in earlier literature.

Qayṣar invades Iran, but Abarwīz cunningly writes a letter to Gurāz, thanking him for luring Qayṣar into a trap. Abarwīz selects a wise and eloquent man from his court – not a Christian priest, monk, or bishop – and tells him to be conspicuous and act spy-like, so that Qayṣar will stop him, interrogate him, and find the letter. This happens, and there is in Qayṣar's camp a man able to read Pahlavi – the ability of the Byzantines to read Middle Persian letters is elsewhere taken for granted, even though in the clandestine encounter between Shahrbarāz and Heraclius the need for an interpreter is emphasised. Qayṣar turns away and is later not convinced by Gurāz's letter, where he asks why Qayṣar has turned against him and pleads innocent. Meanwhile, Abarwīz sends a letter to Gurāz, giving him orders to send to him from among his troops all who had been mutinous, reflecting the ill-omened letter of his in al-Ṭabarī's version.

---

<sup>30</sup> Al-Mas'ūdī often refers to his *al-Kitāb al-Awsaṭ*, which has later been lost.

<sup>31</sup> Al-Mas'ūdī, *Tanbīh*, ed. M.J. de Goeje, *Kitāb at-Tanbīh wa'l-Ischrāf auctore al-Masūdi* (Leiden, 1894).

<sup>32</sup> "Shahrbarāz" does not fit the *mutaqārib* metre of Firdawsī, having two consecutive short syllables: Shah-r<sup>e</sup>-ba-rāz (with the opening of the double long Shahr to Shahr<sup>e</sup>). There is also a Shahrāngurāz, who, in *Shāhnāme* VIII: 60 (v. 778) seems to be the same as Gurāz, but in *Shāhnāme* VIII: 388–9 (vv. 26, 33) becomes the murderer of Gurāz, who had meanwhile usurped the kingship.

<sup>33</sup> Al-Bundārī, *Kitāb al-Shāhnāma*, ed. 'A. 'Azzām, 2 vols. (Cairo, 1993).

Al-Tha‘ālibī, *Ghurar*, draws on the same main source as Firdawsī's *Shāhnāme*, the *Prose Shāhnāme* from 957,<sup>34</sup> but only has a very brief mention of Shahrbarāz's Byzantine wars (p. 701) and his subsequent brief period in power (pp. 733–5). This means that either al-Tha‘ālibī has abbreviated the story or Firdawsī depends here on an additional source. Bal‘amī, *Ta'rikh*, 761 (and 821–3) is similar to al-Tha‘ālibī.

The preserved literature shows that by the tenth century there was a wealth of partly contradictory material circulating in Arabic and Classical Persian about Shahrbarāz and his letters. Al-Mas‘ūdī is particularly interesting, as he makes it clear that there was much to tell. Sometimes, he seems to exaggerate the amount of material he has, as can be seen when comparing the cross-references between *Murūj* and *Tanbīh*, but in this case he may, in fact, have written more extensively, since he mentions, besides his *al-Kitāb al-Awsaṭ*, another book of his, titled *Maqātil fursān al-‘Ajām* "Deeds of the Persian knights," written as a *mu‘āraḍa* (counter writing) to Abū ‘Ubayda Ma‘mar ibn al-Muthannā's (d. 824) *Maqātil fursān al-‘Arab* "Deeds of the Arab knights" (*Tanbīh*, 102).<sup>35</sup>

The lost *Maqātil fursān al-‘Ajām* was obviously a compilation of the heroic deeds by Persian kings and heroes, one of which was Shahrbarāz.<sup>36</sup> Although only one of many, he must have received much attention in it, as he is the only king under whose name the book is mentioned – the reference comes within the list of Sasanian kings, where Shahrbarāz is no. 24.

In addition, there existed a book about Shahrbarāz that does not seem to have been referred to in studies of this period. Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 995 or later), *Fihrist*,<sup>37</sup> 364, mentions a *Kitāb Shahrbarāz ma‘a Abarwīz* "Shahrbarāz and (literally: with) Abarwīz"<sup>38</sup> in a section dedicated to what was considered serious Persian history ("Titles of books composed by the Persians concerning

<sup>34</sup> See J. Hämeen-Anttila, *Khwadāynāmag. The Middle Persian Book of Kings* (Leiden–Boston, 2018), 141–6.

<sup>35</sup> The passage has been translated in Hoyland, *Three Arabic Chronicles*, 98. For Abū ‘Ubayda, see Sezgin, *Geschichte*, VIII: 67–71. Howard-Johnston, 'al-Ṭabarī,' 80, claims that Abū ‘Ubayda was one of al-Ṭabarī's main sources for this section, which is somewhat misleading, as Abū ‘Ubayda only discusses matters related to the Arabs. Elsewhere, though, Abū ‘Ubayda is quoting Persian materials and some books of Persian interest are attributed to him, see Hämeen-Anttila, *Khwadāynāmag*, 74–5, 104–5.

<sup>36</sup> There is no information on whether the book included legendary and mythical kings and Sistanian heroes, an otherwise interesting topic, but I find it more probable that it only covered the Sasanians.

<sup>37</sup> Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. R. Tajaddud (Tehran, 2003).

<sup>38</sup> B. Dodge, *The Fihrist of al-Nadīm. A Tenth-Century Survey of Muslim Culture*, 2 vols. (New York, 1970), 716, reads this as Shahr-Bazār. In both ed. Tajaddud and Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. G. Flügel, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1871–72), 305, the name is given as Shahrīzād. The book is very briefly mentioned in A. Tafaddulī, *Tārīkh-e adabiyāt-e Īrān pīsh az Islām* (Tehran, 1998), 274.

their kings' history (*siyar*) and true tales (*al-asmār al-ṣaḥīḥa*"), not tales of entertainment, to which another chapter is dedicated.<sup>39</sup> Nothing more is said about this book, but its title implies that it focused on Shahrbarāz, rather than the king. Most of the ten books listed in this section are here or elsewhere said to have been translated from Middle Persian, which has to be our default assumption for this book, too, although there always remains the possibility that some of the books were first composed in Arabic, based on Persian oral lore, learned or popular. In any case, it represents the Persian tradition.

As the book is lost, we can only speculate about its contents, but seeing that Islamic historiography is very poor in details of the Last Great War, it would seem probable that it concentrated, true to its title, on the conflict between Shahrbarāz and Kisrā and the internal, national history of Iran, which is also the case in Islamic historiography of pre-Islamic Iran and Iranian storytelling in general.<sup>40</sup> Until the Arab conquest, Iranian history is told strictly from an Iranian view point: with very few exceptions, internal schisms and machinations are much more important than details of wars against non-Iranians. The latter only set the scene on which Iranian heroes and traitors make their appearance.

Ibn al-Nadīm does not say anything about the date of *Shahrbarāz and Abarwīz*. The heyday of Middle Persian translations is marked by the activity of Ibn al-Muqaffa' (d. ca. 756), but otherwise the translators and their dates remain shadowy.<sup>41</sup> It is difficult to say more about the work's date except that the interest in Middle Persian literature was at its height early on in the activity of the translation movement, so a date around the mid-eighth century or soon thereafter would be the most probable.

## **Greek, Syriac, Armenian, and Christian Arabic sources**

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibn al-Nadīm's division does not follow our ideas of fact vs. fiction – *Rustam and Isfandiyār* would not be classified by any serious scholar as historical information – but it reflects contemporary ideas and the mode of transmission: *Rustam and Isfandiyār* would have been transmitted as history, not as entertainment. Almost all books in these two sections are anonymous.

<sup>40</sup> For a somewhat similar case, cf. *Sharwīn of Dastabay*, discussed in J. Hämeen-Anttila, 'Sharwīn of Dastabay: Reconstructing an early Persian tale', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (forthcoming).

<sup>41</sup> For translations of historical texts from Middle Persian into Arabic in general, see Hämeen-Anttila, *Khwadāynāmag*, 28–45, and 'Translations of historical works from Middle Persian into Arabic', *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 16 (2021), 42–60.

Let us now turn to another group of sources. Christian historiography in Greek, Syriac, Armenian, and Arabic narrates the same events differently. It is possible that an older layer<sup>42</sup> is represented by the version of Nicephorus in his *Breviarium*,<sup>43</sup> 56–7 (§12), according to which Kistrā was afraid of the Byzantines' movements and sent a letter to Shahrbarāz, ordering him to come to him, but Heraclius intercepted the letter and altered it to say that Shahrbarāz should stay where he was, which opened the way for Heraclius.<sup>44</sup> This section of Nicephorus may reflect an early Greek source from the 640s,<sup>45</sup> in which case this version would almost be contemporary with the events themselves – which, obviously, does not guarantee its historicity. This version, in any case, is simple. It contains in embryonic form two motifs that are prominent in later historiography: the letter ordering someone to come and, when altered, to remain and interception and forgery of a letter. It should be pointed out that the altered command is not very dramatic, merely replacing one strategic and reasonable command with another. Whether from the 640s or not, the version does not show much literary development.

A possibly later, and in any case typologically more complex, version is shared by several historical works and seems to derive from Theophilus of Edessa's (fl. second half of the eighth century) lost *Chronicle*.<sup>46</sup> The relevant sources are Theophanes, *Chronicle*, especially 452–3, Agapius, *Unwān*, 461–2, Michael the Syrian, *Chronique* IV: 408 (text), II: 408–9 (translation), and

---

<sup>42</sup> For this division of the Christian tradition into two branches, see Kaegi–Cobb, 'Heraclius', 101.

<sup>43</sup> Nicephorus, *Breviarium*, ed. and trans. C. Mango, *Nicephori Patriarchae Constantinopolitani Breviarium historicum* (Dumbarton Oaks, Washington D.C., 1990).

<sup>44</sup> Kaegi–Cobb, 'Heraclius', 100. The letter and its forged version may be compared with the two letters in [MISK 5].

<sup>45</sup> Kaegi–Cobb, 'Heraclius', 101; Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses*, 248.

<sup>46</sup> Theophanes, *Chronicle*, ed. C. Mango and R. Scott, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor* (Oxford, 1997). Cf. Kaegi–Cobb, 'Heraclius', 107. The role of Theophanes as informing later historians is contested by several scholars, but I do not wish to take part in that discourse, as for my purposes it is enough to show that later authors were most probably influenced by Arabic historiography, itself in debt to Middle Persian historians. Theophanes would be a suitable candidate as a transmitter, but even if the transmitter was some other historian, the process of transmission remains the same, as later historians do share many common elements that have to derive from one or more common sources. For the debate on the role of Theophanes, see M. Debié, 'Theophanes' "Oriental Source": What can we learn from Syriac historiography?', in M. Jankowiak and F. Montinaro (eds.), *Studies in Theophanes* (Paris, 2015), 365–82, here 365–71, 377–82, M. Conterno, 'Theophilus, "the More Likely Candidate?" Towards a Reappraisal of the Question of Theophanes' "Oriental Source"', in *ibid.*, 383–400, here 393–400, and A. Hilken, *The Anonymous Syriac Chronicle of 1234 and its Sources* (Leuven–Paris–Bristol, 2018). For these references I am indebted to Dr Marie Legendre (Edinburgh).

*Chronicon 1234* (Dionysios of Tel-Mahrē), 135–7 (§§33–5).<sup>47</sup> According to these, some Persians had slandered Shahrbarāz, and Kisrā sent a word to his fellow-commander or a *marzubān* in his army to have Shahrbarāz assassinated – in most Islamic versions the earlier commander is to be executed, not assassinated. Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam and the commentary on al-A‘shā imply assassination, even though the passages are not quite explicit about this, and al-Tha‘labī’s version speaks of fighting against him (*fa-ḥāribhu*). This fellow-commander is called Qardārīgān or Qardīgān (Michael the Syrian, *Chronicon 1234*) or Mardīf (only Agapius).<sup>48</sup> Some of the versions explicitly say that Qardārīgān/Mardīf is to take the command after having killed Shahrbarāz, which reverses the order in [TAB 4].

In the version of Theophilus and the sources dependent on him, the same letter gave orders for the fellow-commander to hasten home to assist the king, but the Byzantines intercepted the message. This combines the motifs of killing and ordering to come home, usually separate in the Islamic versions. Heraclius invited Shahrbarāz and showed him the message, and Shahrbarāz moved over to his side. Here, contrary to the Islamic narratives, the Byzantines take an active role in creating the contact with Shahrbarāz.

Shahrbarāz then altered the letter to say that beside him, 400 (or 300) other men in high positions were to be killed. In the Islamic sources, it is Kisrā who sends false letters, and the fatal letter threatening to kill, or at least punish, those who left their positions is a genuine letter by Kisrā. According to Theophanes, after this, the letter was shown to the Persians, who, the fellow-commander included, were furious and made peace with the Byzantine Emperor.<sup>49</sup>

*Chron. Siirt*,<sup>50</sup> 540, agrees with this, although it does not have the motif of a letter being falsified. There, the fellow-commander Fardinjān – an obvious corruption from Qardījān<sup>51</sup> –

---

<sup>47</sup> Agapius, *Unwān*, ed. A.-A. Vasiliev, *Kitab al-‘Unvan (Histoire universelle, écrite par Agapius de Menbida)* II/2, *Patrologia Orientalis* VIII/3 (Paris, 1912); J.-B. Chabot, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien* (Paris, 1899–1910); *Chronicon 1234*, trans. A. Palmer, *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles* (Liverpool, 1993), 111–221. Excerpted in Hoyland, *Three Arabic Chronicles*, 69–72, partly also in Kaegi–Cobb, 'Heraclius', 98–100. Where the names are identifiable and the identification is certain I will use the forms of the Islamic tradition.

<sup>48</sup> It is within the limits of possibility that Mardīf derives from some form of the name Qardārīgān, e.g., Qardīq(ān).

<sup>49</sup> This is also roughly the version of Ibn al-‘Amīd, *Majmū‘*, ed E. Pococke, *Historia Saracenica* (Leiden, 1625), 13, also used by al-Maqrīzī, *Khabar/Greeks*, ed. M. Penelas, *al-Maqrīzī, Kitāb al-Ḥabar ‘an al-bašar. Vol. V, Section 6: The Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Franks, and Goths* (Leiden–Boston, 2021), §§261–2. Both read Shahriyār for Shahrbarāz.

<sup>50</sup> S.G. Addai Scher and R. Griveau (eds.), *Histoire nestorienne (Chronique de Séert)* II/2, *Patrologia Orientalis* XIV/4 (Paris, 1919).

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Kaegi–Cobb, 'Heraclius', 99.



changes sides merely because of the threat on Shahrbarāz, here called Shahriyūn. This version adds the reason for the falling out of Kisrā and Shahrbarāz: the latter's daughter had been insulted by the former's favourite Shamṭā ibn Yazdīn, and the king refused to punish him.<sup>52</sup>

## Analysis

All these stories and their versions share a handful of motifs in various combinations, used differently in the sources and in different parts of the narrative. Those related to letters are: CONTRADICTORY LETTERS; FALSE LETTERS; DELAYED LETTERS; REPEATED PLEADING LETTERS IGNORED; FATAL LETTER. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that various narrators have used the same motifs but situated them in different contexts, sometimes adding considerable literary embellishment. Moreover, it is evident that the motifs have proliferated in Islamic historiography, whereas Christian historiography shows far less development.

The most striking difference between Christian and Islamic versions of the story concerns agency and viewpoint. All Christian sources present Heraclius as the resourceful protagonist, who intercepts letters, contacts Shahrbarāz, and ends up the winner – Christian sources tend to continue directly to the dethronement of Kisrā, which is seen as the immediate result of Heraclius' campaign.<sup>53</sup> The focus stays all the time on the external conflict between Byzantium and Persia with Heraclius the *primus motor* at all stages.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Sebeos, *History*, trans. R.W. Thomson, *The Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos*. Historical commentary by J. Howard-Johnston, 2 vols. (Liverpool, 1999), I: 80–4, relates the events without any reference to Shahrbarāz's letters, although there is the familiar motif of Heraclius being caught between two armies. *The History of Alwank'*, trans. C.J.F. Dowsett, *The History of the Caucasian Albanians by Movsēs Dasxurançi* (London–New York–Toronto, 1961), 77–82, contains an interesting reference to a letter by Kisrā to Shahrbarāz, ordering him to come and help him (p. 79). This letter is neither intercepted nor forged, and Shahrbarāz does come to Kisrā's aid (see also Tim Greenwood, 'Sasanian echoes and apocalyptic expectations: a re-evaluation of the *Armenian History* attributed to Sebeos', *Le Muséon* 115 (2002), 323–397, here 340–341). *Chronicon Paschale 284–628*, trans. M. Whitby and M. Whitby (Liverpool, 2007), 157–62, 170–6, also lacks any reference to Shahrbarāz's letters, as does Eutychius, *Annales*, ed. L. Cheikho, *Eutychiei patriarchae alexandrini Annales*, I (Paris–Leipzig, 1906), 215, which tells of two commanders sent against Byzantium, Kisrā himself being the third.

<sup>53</sup> See, e.g., Hoyland, *Three Arabic Chronicles*, 74–9.

<sup>54</sup> Something similar may be seen in the case of dreams. While Christian sources relate some prophetic dreams of Heraclius about the pending collapse of Kisrā, Islamic sources concentrate on Kisrā's dreams (e.g., al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḫh* I: 1013–5 = trans. Bosworth, *Sāsānids*, 335–8), although with a clear Islamic twist.

Islamic sources, on the contrary, focus on internal tensions within Persia, and Heraclius is merely an outside threat that helps these to surface. Kistrā and/or Shahrbarāz are the resourceful protagonists, who take the story forward. It is symptomatic that the version of al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj* §647, even uses expressions such as Shahrbarāz *sending* Heraclius (*sayyarahu*) to Iraq and Kistrā *sending* him *back* (*raddahu*) to Byzantium: Heraclius has no agency of his own and is sent around by the Persian protagonists. In these versions, the story ends in a triumph of the resourceful Kistrā, especially clear in the version of Miskawayhi. Al-Ṭabarī leaves the story at a cliffhanger, Shahrbarāz and Farrukhān having gone over to Heraclius, and proceeds to tell of the ominous collapse of Kistrā's palace and then his equally ominous dreams, but Heraclius has no role in the final defeat of Kistrā and the Persian Empire, which are explained partly in terms of internal schisms, partly as divine retribution. Often, this is discussed in the context of the letter of the Prophet Muḥammad said to have been torn to pieces by Kistrā, symbolically mirrored in the tearing to pieces of his Empire, not by the Byzantines but by the conquering Arabs.<sup>55</sup>

When Miskawayhi proceeds to relate the downfall of Kistrā,<sup>56</sup> the (according to him) defeated Heraclius has no part to play, and it is Kistrā's fateful order to his commander of the guard (*ḥaras bābihi l-khāṣṣa*) Zādhānfarrukh to kill 60,000 prisoners in his prisons – a reflection of the fateful letter – his contempt of the nobility, his appointing a brute (*‘ilj*) called al-Farrukhānzādh<sup>57</sup> to collect the remaining unpaid taxes, and his decision to execute those who had fled from Heraclius – another reflection of the fateful letter – that are explicitly said to have caused Kistrā's downfall, not Heraclius and his campaign. Al-Ṭabarī and other historians share this viewpoint.

This is very much a Persian version of the events and in its Persian solipsism it matches the title of *Shahrbarāz and Abarwīz*, as if narrating a series of internal Persian events. It is obviously impossible to prove that this is the source, or perhaps rather the main source, of information for this part of the Islamic historiography, but it would be the most economical solution, instead of assuming the existence of both this work and an otherwise undocumented text, East Syriac or Persian, that would have been the main source for the Islamic tradition.<sup>58</sup> In addition,

---

<sup>55</sup> See, e.g., al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh* I: 1572 = trans. M. Fishbein, *The History of al-Ṭabarī VIII: The Victory of Islam* (Albany, 1997), 111–2. Cf. also S. Anthony, *Muhammad and the Empires of Faith. The Making of the Prophet of Islam* (Oakland, California, 2020), 182–6.

<sup>56</sup> *Tajārib* I: 164–5. Cf. al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh* I: 1042–3 = trans. Bosworth, *Sāsānids*, 377–8.

<sup>57</sup> Zādhānfarrukh and Farrukhānzādh most probably refer to the same person, as does Firdawsī's Zādfarrukh, again *metri gratia*.

<sup>58</sup> Even though I am afraid of repeating myself, it may be useful to point out that the *Khwadāynāmag* was *not* a voluminous storybook but a rather dry list of kings and their regnal years, with very little narrative material, see

of course, there must have circulated learned, and popular, oral traditions of the last days of the Persian Empire. As the events date to the last years of the Sasanian Empire, it may be superfluous to ask whether a version was written down before the Arab conquest or after it. As there is no evidence of writing histories of contemporary events in pre-Islamic Persia, it would seem more probable that versions were only written down after the collapse of the Empire, but, in any case, the viewpoint is definitely Persian.

The traditions concerning Shahrbarāz form, rather unsurprisingly, two branches, a Christian branch with a Byzantine viewpoint focusing on Heraclius and an Islamic branch with a Persian viewpoint focusing on Kisrā and Shahrbarāz. The Christian branch can further be divided into Nicephorus' probably earlier and in any case less developed version and another version deriving from the East Syrian Theophilus from the second half of the eighth century. The Islamic branch is more developed and also more variegated. It shares with *Shahrbarāz and Abarwīz* the focus on internal Persian affairs and a pro-Persian viewpoint – although we have little information of the contents of *Shahrbarāz and Abarwīz* it would seem clear that it must have had a pro-Persian viewpoint and its focus is implied by the title.

If we accept *Shahrbarāz and Abarwīz* as the Arabic translation of a Middle Persian text, its most probable date would be around 750 when translations from Middle Persian were eagerly made. The Arabic text would, thus, be roughly contemporaneous with Theophilus. In Theophilus's version, Kisrā sends an order to assassinate Shahrbarāz, which finds a parallel in the Islamic tradition, but the interception of the letter by Heraclius ties Theophilus together with Nicephorus, as they both show Heraclius as the protagonist, whereas the Islamic tradition lets Kisrā run the show and stage the interception to trick Heraclius.

The most natural way to explain the changes in Theophilus as compared to Nicephorus is to see his version as a combination of an earlier Byzantine or Christian version and this pro-Persian version, from which Theophilus could have received the more dramatic story of intercepting an order to kill the Persian commander, which he added to the Byzantine version harmonising the two by focusing on Heraclius as the hero of the story and relating it accordingly.

Theophilus was in a position to be familiar with the pro-Persian version. First of all, his interest in astrology makes it probable that he was able to read Middle Persian,<sup>59</sup> that being the

---

Hämeen-Anttila, *Khwadāynāmag*, and, thus, hardly the source for these stories, especially since they relate to the final years of the Sasanian Empire.

<sup>59</sup> See D. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture. The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbāsīd Society (2nd–4th/8th–10th centuries)* (London–New York, 1998), 16; D. Pingree, 'Classical and Byzantine

dominant language of astrology in the 8th century, or he could have profited from oral lore circulating in the formerly Sasanian area. He could also have used the Arabic translation of *Shahrbarāz and Abarwīz* or learned oral lore based on it, as he was in contact with the 'Abbāsīd court and the Caliph al-Mahdī himself.

Transmission to the other direction, from Theophilus (or some unknown predecessor of his) to the Islamic tradition, is more problematic.<sup>60</sup> Even though modern scholarship<sup>61</sup> has discussed the possibility of the influence of Syriac historiography, in general, on Arabic historiography, in this case it seems unadvisable to assume the influence to have gone this direction, as it would raise all too many questions. Islamic stories have a Persian viewpoint, which points to a Persian source. They have very little to say about the Byzantines, which points to a non-Byzantine source. Ibn al-Nadīm is able to name a monograph, which he considers to be a translation of a Persian book, and its existence is partly verified by Arab and Persian authors who refer to an abundance of material concerning Shahrbarāz. This being the case, it is rather superfluous to speculate on other, non-attested sources. Firdawsī's information on Gurāz could be taken as an indication that a similar story was available to him in the *Prose Shāhnāme*, which is known to have used primarily Middle Persian sources.<sup>62</sup> Even the motif of Shahrbarāz using the king's letter to incite other Persians to rebel, found in Theophilus' version, is a motif that is also used elsewhere in the autochthonous sources on the history of Persia in, e.g., the case of Bahrām Chūbīn,<sup>63</sup> and it would be the easiest way to explain it as a Persian topos attached to this story.

---

astrology in Sassanian Persia,' *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 43 (1989), 227--39, here 236--9. In Sasanian times, many learned East Syrian Christians would probably have been able to read Middle Persian and there is some evidence that this continued at least occasionally until the ninth century. For a particular case, see F. de Blois, 'The Middle Persian inscription from Constantinople: Sasanian or post-Sasanian?', *Studia Iranica* 19 (1990), 208--18, and R.E. Payne, *A State of Mixture. Christians, Zoroastrians, and Iranian Political Culture in Late Antiquity* (Oakland, California, 2015), 202. Note also that some of the Christians of the area spoke Early New Persian as their mother tongue.

<sup>60</sup> Kaegi-Cobb, 'Heraclius', 103, 107, consider both directions equally possible. Somewhat surprisingly, they only discuss the relations between Arabic and Christian historiographies, but do not even mention the possibility of Middle Persian historiography being involved.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Kaegi-Cobb, 'Heraclius', 107. See also Z. Rubin, 'Ibn al-Muqaffa' and the account of Sasanian history in the Arabic codex Sprenger 30," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 30 (2005), 52--93, here 84; and E. Zychowicz-Coghill, *The First Arabic Annals. Fragments of Umayyad History* (Berlin--Boston, 2021), 47--9.

<sup>62</sup> For the sources of the *Prose Shāhnāme*, see Hämeen-Anttila, *Khwadāynāmag*, 143. It must be pointed out, though, that there is no firm evidence that the *Prose Shāhnāme* only used Middle Persian sources.

<sup>63</sup> Cf., e.g., Miskawayhi, *Tajārib*, ed. L. Caetani, *The Tajārib al-Umam or History of Ibn Miskawayh*, 8 vols. (Leiden--London, 1909), I: 221. This version of Bahrām Chūbīn's rebellion resembles Shahrbarāz's story in several details.

Thus, it seems probable that the Arabic historiography received its Shahrbarāz material from Iran, and Theophilus possibly from Arabic sources, although he might also have directly benefitted from the Persian tradition.

Persian historical material was transmitted to the Islamic historiography in several ways. Even though early historians wrote in Arabic, some of them were of Iranian origin and lived in areas dominated by Iranian culture, so they could well have themselves been transmitters of Persian cultural material. Few, if any, would have been able to read Middle Persian sources in the tenth century from where our sources date, but they had the Arabic translation of *Shahrbarāz and Abarwīz* at their disposal.

Then there was the oral lore. In modern scholarship, the term usually refers to popular lore (folklore), and such lore there must have existed, as there is no reason to assume that the people of Iran suffered of any kind of collective amnesia. The more detailed, however, the information is the more probable it is that it has been carried over the linguistic boundary by learned oral tradition. We know several learned transmitters of pre-Islamic Persian material, such as ‘Umar Kisrā and *al-mōbad al-Mutawakkilī*,<sup>64</sup> and, e.g., directly after the story of Shahrbarāz, *Futūḥ*, 37, Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam mentions someone transmitting from Persians their traditional lore: *ḥaddathanī man yasūqu l-aḥādīth min al-a‘ajim fīmā tawārathū min ‘ilmihī* "I have been told by someone who reported stories from the Persians concerning what they transmitted about him" (i.e., Dhū l-Qarnayn) (on the identity of Dhū l-Qarnayn).

Such learned tradition may partly have depended on written books or notes and it is only the transmission that was oral, which also explains why this mode of transmission was able to preserve names and other details that popular folklore tends to miss or distort.

The late Sasanian period was fertile ground for creating new stories, as has been shown by Orsatti, 'The last years'. Some of these were set back in time and relocated in the mythical past, like the story of Gushtāsp and Katāyūn, clearly modelled after Kisrā Abarwīz and Maryam, whilst others were attached to the names of the late Sasanian rulers themselves, like Bahrām Gūr, Bahrām Chūbīn, and Kisrā Abarwīz. In earlier studies, I have shown that some stories must have existed already in the late eighth century, like *Sharwīn of Dastabay*,<sup>65</sup> or certainly by the mid-ninth

---

Likewise, the suspicion in al-Tha‘labī's version that Shahrbarāz only sent a small amount of the loot to the king resembles the similar suspicion in Bahrām Chūbīn's story.

<sup>64</sup> See Hämeen-Anttila, *Khwadāynāmag*, 74–6.

<sup>65</sup> Hämeen-Anttila, 'Sharwīn of Dastabay'.

century but probably already a century earlier, like the *Story of Balāsh*.<sup>66</sup> *Shahrbarāz and Abarwīz* fits the late Sasanian context that was productive of historical stories. Almost all of this narrative literature has later been lost, and we only have some references to stories and books and the bare skeleton of the story buried in the historiographical literature in Arabic and Persian.

A detailed study of the available sources and their mutual relations should always precede the use of these sources to create a narrative of past events. The case study of the letters of Shahrbarāz shows that in this case at least the existing narratives in Islamic sources result from literary embellishment around a core story that is created from a Persian point of view, focusing on the Sasanian king and his commanders and leaving Heraclius and the Byzantines in secondary roles, as marionettes, who are brought on stage to motivate the action of the main characters.

## APPENDIX

### 1. Excerpt from Miskawayhi, *Tajārib*

The following excerpt from Miskawayhi, *Tajārib*, is translated from Caetani's facsimile edition, I: 257–61.<sup>67</sup> The use of personal names in the translated excerpt follows their use in the original. The Arabic text is also based on Caetani's facsimile.

#### ذکر حيلة لأبرويز على ملك الروم

كان أبرويز وجّه رجلا من جلة أصحابه في جيش جرّار إلى بلاد الروم فنكا فيهم وبلغ منهم وفتح الشامات وبلغ  
الدرّب في آثارهم فعظم أمره وخافه أبرويز فكاتبه بكتابين {يأمره} في أحدهما أن يستخلف على جيشه من يثق  
به ويقبل إليه ويأمره في الآخر أن يقيم بموضعه فإنه لما تدبّر أمره وأجال الرأي لم يجد من يستد مسدّه ولم يأمن  
الخلل إن غاب عن موضعه. وأرسل بالكتابين رسولا من ثقاته وقال له: "أوصل الكتاب الأول بالأمر بالقوم فإن  
خفت لذلك فهو ما أردت وإن كره وتناقل عن الطاعة فاسكّث عليه أياما ثم أعلمه أن الكتاب الثاني ورد عليك  
وأوصله إليه ليقيم بموضعه."

<sup>66</sup> J. Hämeen-Anttila, 'When Scheherazade fails: the story of Balāsh and the Indian Princess', *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* (forthcoming).

<sup>67</sup> = Miskawayhi, *Tajārib al-umam wa-ta'āqub al-himam*, ed. A. Emāmī (Tehran, 2001), 8 vols., I: 243–6 = ed. Hasan I: 162–4. These two editions are in practice identical and even share the same mistakes, which implies that one is a simple copy of the other, and it seems ed. Emāmī was published a year before ed. Hasan. The passage is also quoted in al-Maqrizī, *Khbar/Persia* II §§ 218–21, where I give the text translated according to al-Maqrizī's reading.

فخرج رسول كسرى حتى ورد على صاحب الجيش ببلاد الشام فأوصل الكتاب إليه. فلما قرأه قال: "إمّا أن يكون كسرى قد تعيّر لي وكره موضعي أو يكون قد اختلط عقله بصرف مثلي وأنا في {نحر} العدو." فدعا أصحابه وقرأ عليهم الكتاب فأنكروه. فلما كان بعد ثلاثة أيام أوصل الكتاب الثاني بالمقام وأوهمه أن رسولا ورد به. فلما قرأه قال: "هذا تخليط." فلم يقع منه موقعا ودرّس إلى ملك الروم من ناظره في إيقاع صلح بينهما على أن يخلي الطريق لملك الروم حتى يدخل بلاد العراق على غرّة من كسرى وعلى أن لملك الروم ما تغلب عليه من دون العراق وللفارسي ما وراء ذلك إلى بلاد الفارس.

فأجاباه ملك الروم إلى ذلك وتنحى الفارسي عنه في ناحية من الجزيرة وأخذ أفواه الطرّوق فلم يعلم كسرى حتى ورد خبر ملك الروم من ناحية قرقيسياء وكسرى غير معدّ وجنده متفرقون في أعماله. فوثب من سريره مع قراءة الخبر قال: "هذا وقت حيلة لا وقت شدة!" وجعل ينكت في الأرض مليا ثم دعا برقّ وكتب فيه كتابا صغيرا بخط دقيق إلى صاحبه بالجزيرة يقول فيه: "قد علمت ما كنتُ أمرتُك به من مواصلة صاحب الروم وإطماعه في نفسك وتخليّة الطريق له حتى إذا تولّج في بلادنا أخذته من أمامه وأخذته أنت ومن ندبناه لذلك من خلفه فيكون ذلك بواره وقد تمّ في هذا الوقت ما دبّرناه وميعادك في الإيقاع به يوم كذا."

ثم دعا راهبا كان في دير بجانب مدينته وقال له: "أيّ جار كنتُ لك؟" قال: "أفضل جار." قال: "قد بدت لنا إليك حاجة." قال الراهب: "الملك أجّل من أن يكون له حاجة إلى مثلي ولكن عندي بذل نفسي في الذي يأمر به الملك." قال كسرى: "تحمل لي كتابا إلى فلان صاحبي؟" قال: "نعم." قال كسرى: "فإنك ستجتاز بأصحابك النصارى فأخفه." قال: "نعم." فلما ولى عنه الراهب قال له كسرى: "أعلمت ما في الكتاب؟" قال: "لا." قال: "فلا تحمله حتى تعلم ما فيه." فلما قرأه أدخله في جيبه ثم مضى.

فلما صار في عسكر الروم ونظر إلى الصليبان والقسيسين وضجيجهم بالتقدس والصلوات احترق قلبه لهم وأشفق مما خاف أن يقع بهم وقال في نفسه: "أنا أشرّ الناس إن حملتُ بيدي حتف النصرانية وهلاك هؤلاء الخلق." فصاح: "أنا لم يحمّلني كسرى رسالة ولا معي كتاب!" فأخذوه ووجدوا الكتاب معه.

وقد كان كسرى وجّه رسولا قبل ذلك اختصر الطريق حتى مرّ بعسكر الروم وكأنه رسول إلى كسرى من صاحبه الذي طابق ملك الروم ومعه كتاب فيه: "إن الملك كان قد أمرني بمقاربة ملك الروم وأن أختدعه وأخلي له الطريق فيأخذه الملك من أمامه وآخذه أنا من خلفه وقد فعلتُ ذلك فرأي الملك في إعلامي وقت خروجه إليه." فأخذ ملك الروم الرسول وقرأ الكتاب وقال: "قد عجبْتُ أن يكون هذا الفارسي أدهن على كسرى!"

ووافاه أبرويز في من أمكنه من جنده فوجد ملك الروم قد ولى هاربا فاتّبعه يقتل ويأسر من أدرك وبلغ صاحب كسرى هزيمة الروم فأحبّ أن يجلي نفسه ويستردّ ذنبه لما فاتته ما دبّر فخرج خلف الروم الهاربين فلم يسلم منه إلا القليل.

#### *Mention of a trick Abarwīz played on the king of the Byzantines*

Abarwīz had sent one of his chief companions with a huge army against the Byzantines, and he caused great damage among them. He conquered Syria and reached al-Darb, pursuing them. He grew powerful, and Abarwīz became fearful of him. He sent him two letters, in one of which he ordered<sup>68</sup> him to leave someone whom he trusted to take over the command of the army and to come to him. In the other, he ordered him to stay where he was, because when he had further considered the matter and thought about it, he had realised that no one could take his place and if he were to leave his place, he was afraid that some damage might be caused. He sent the two letters with a trusted messenger, advising him: “Give him the first letter, which orders him to come here. If he is fine with that, I have got what I wanted, but if he dislikes it and is reluctant to obey, let him be for a couple of days. Tell him then that another letter has arrived and give it to him, so that he will stay where he is.”

The messenger of Kistrā left and came to the commander of the army in Syria and gave him the (first) letter. When he (the commander) read it, he thought: “Either Kistrā has changed his attitude towards me and dislikes what I have achieved or his reason has left him, as he calls back a man like me when I am busy killing enemies.”<sup>69</sup> He called his companions and read the letter to them, and all disapproved of it. After three days, the messenger gave him the second letter ordering him to remain (where he was) and implied that a messenger had brought it. He read it and thought: “This is all confused!” He did not care to obey it, but sent a messenger to the king of the Byzantines to negotiate a peace between the two of them on the condition that he leaves the way open for the king of the Byzantines to enter Iraq without Kistrā noticing it and that the king of the Byzantines gets what he conquers except for Iraq itself and the Persian (commander) gets everything else, until the country of Fārs. The Byzantine king accepted this, and the Persian (commander) withdrew to one part of the Jazīra and guarded the mouths of the roads. Kistrā noticed nothing until he received word of the Byzantine king approaching from the direction of Qirqīsiyā. Kistrā was unprepared and his army was dispersed in various provinces.

---

<sup>68</sup> Both editions read *amruhu*, but Caetani's facsimile has clearly *ya'muruhu*, which is the correct reading.

<sup>69</sup> Both editions read *baħr*, but Caetani's facsimile has *naħr*.



When he read the report, he jumped from his throne and said: “Now is the time for cunning, not force.” He tapped the soil for a while and then asked for some parchment to be brought and wrote a small-size letter with thin script to his commander in the Jazīra saying: “You will remember that I ordered you to make contact with the Byzantine to make him desirous of you changing sides and I ordered you to leave the roads open for him, so that he becomes entangled in our country. Then I will attack him from front and you and those who we have commissioned to do so from behind. That will be his end! What we have planned is now going to happen. You are to attack him on the day so-and-so.”

Then he called a monk from a monastery close to his city and said: “What kind of a neighbour have I been to you?” The monk replied that he had been a very good neighbour, and he went on: “Now I have something to ask from you.” The monk replied: “The king is all too great to have to ask someone like myself, but I am ready to sacrifice myself to accomplish what he commands.” Kistrā said: “Would you carry a letter of mine to my commander so-and-so?” The monk promised to do so, and Kistrā continued: “You will go through the area of your Christian coreligionists, but hide the letter from them.” The monk promised to do so. When he was ready to go, Kistrā asked: “Do you know what there is in the letter?” The monk said he did not, and he said: “Don’t carry it without first reading it.”

When the monk had read the letter, he put it in his pocket and left. When he was in the Byzantine camp and saw the crosses and the priests and heard their voices chanting glorifications and prayers, his heart burned for them and he was concerned about what would befall them. He thought: “I will be the worst of all people if I carry by my own hand the destruction of Christianity and the death of all these people.” Then he shouted: “Kistrā has not given me a letter to carry! I do not have a letter!” They took him and found the letter. Before this Kistrā had sent another messenger, who took shortcuts and went by the camp of the Byzantines as if he were a messenger going to Kistrā from the commander who had come into an understanding with the Byzantine king. He carried a letter, which said: “The king gave me orders to make friends with the Byzantine king in order to deceive him. He also ordered me to let him pass freely so that the king may attack him from the front and I from behind. I have done this. The king may now decide whether to inform me when he will set out for him.” The king of the Byzantines caught the messenger, read the letter, and thought: “I did wonder why that Persian was deceiving Kistrā!” While he was thinking about this, Abarwīz attacked him with what he had been able to assemble of his army and found that the king of the Byzantines had turned away, fleeing. He followed him, killing and taking prisoner whomever he could catch. Kistrā's commander heard about the defeat of the Byzantines and wanted to clear

himself of suspicions and hide his guilt, as he had already lost what he had planned. He followed the fleeing Byzantines and left only few of them alive.

## 2. Excerpt from al-Tha'labī, *Akhlāq*, 180–7

مكايد كسرى أبرويز

وكان كسرى أبرويز بعد بهرام جور صاحب مكايد وخذع في الحروب ونكاية في العدو. وكان قد وجّه شهربراز لمحاربة ملك الروم وكان مقدما عنده في الرأي والنجدة والبسالة ويؤمن النقيبة. وكان شهربراز قد ضيق على ملك الروم قرار داره وأخذ بمُخَنِّقَه حتى همّ بمهادنته وملّ محاربتَه وطلب الكف عنه فأبى ذلك عليه شهربراز.

واستعدّ له ملك الروم بأفضل عدّة وأتمّ آلة وأحدّ شوكة وتأهّب للقائه في البحر. فجاءه في جمع لا تحصي عدته. قد أعدّ في البحر كل ما يحتاج إليه من مال وسلاح وكُراع وآلة وطعام وغير ذلك والسفن موقرة. فبينما هو كذلك إذ عصفت ريح في تلك الليالي فقلعت أوتاد تلك السفن كلها وحملتْها إلى جانب شهربراز فصارت في ملكه. وأصبح ملك الروم قد ذهب أكثر ما كان يملك من الأموال والخزائن والعُدَد والسلاح.

فوجّه شهربراز بتلك الخزائن والأموال إلى أبرويز. فلما رأى أبرويز ما وجّه به شهربراز كُبر في عينه وعظّم في قلبه وقال: "ما نفس أحقّ بطيب الثناء ورفيع الدعاء والشكر على الفعل الظاهر من شهربراز. جاد لنا بما لا تسخو به النفوس ولا تطيب به القلوب." فجمع وزراءه وأمر بتلك الأموال والخزائن فوضعتْ نُصَبَ عينيه. ثم قال لوزرائه: "هل تعلمون أحدا أعظم خطرا وأمانة وأحرى بالشكر من شهربراز؟" فقامت الوزراء وتكلم كل واحد منهم بعد أن حمد الله وشكره ومجّده وأثنى على الملك وهنّأه ثم ذكر ما خص الله به الملك من يمين نقيبة شهربراز وعفافه وطهارته ونبله وعظيم عنايته حتى إذا فرغوا أمر بإحصاء تلك الأموال والخزائن. ثم قام أبرويز فدخل إلى نسائه.

وكان للملك غلام يقال له رُسْتَه وكان {سيء} الرأي في شهربراز فقال: "أيها الملك قد ملأ قلبك قليل من كثير وصغير من كبير وتافه من عظيم. خانك فيه شهربراز وأثر نفسه. ولئن كان الملك مع رأيه الثاقب وحزمه الكامل يظنّ أن شهربراز أدّى الأمانة لقد بعد ظنّه من الحقّ وحُسن نصيبه." فوقع في نفس أبرويز ما قال رسته فقال له: "ما أظنّك إلا صادقا فما الرأي عندك؟" قال: "تكتب إليه بالقدوم وتوهمه أن بك حاجة إلى مناظرته ومشاورته في { } أمر لم تجز الكتابة به فإنه إذا قدم لم يخلف ما يملك وراءه إذ كان لا يدري أيرجع إلى ما هناك أم لا فيكون كل ما يقدم به نُصَبَ عينيك."

فكتب أبرويز إلى شهربراز يأمره بالقدوم عليه لمناظرته ومشاورته في أمر يدقّ عن الكتاب والمراسلة. فلما مضى الرسول أرفه برسول آخر وكتب إليه: "إني كنت كتبت إليك أمرًا بالقدوم لأنظرك في مهمّ من أمري. ثم علمتُ أن مقامك هناك أقدر في عدوك وأنكى له وأصلح للملك وأوفر على المملكة فأقم وكُنْ من عدوك على حذر ومن غرته على تيقظ فإنه من ذهب ماله حمل نفسه على التلف أو الحتف والسلام."

قال للرسول الثاني: "إن قدمت فرأيتك قد تأهّب للخروج إليّ وظهر ذلك في عسكره فادفع إليه هذا الكتاب." وكتب: "أما بعد فإنني كتبتُ إليك وقد استبطأتُ جواب قدومك وحركتك وعلمتُ أن ذلك لأمر تصلحه من أمر نفسك أو مكيدة عدوك. فإذا أتاك كتابي هذا فخلّف أخاك على عملك وأعدّ السير ولا تعرّج على مهمّ ولا غيره إن شاء الله." "وإن لم تره استعدّ للخروج ولا تأهّب له فادفع إليه الكتاب الأول." فقدم الرسول الثاني وليس لشهربراز في الخروج عزم ولا خاطر ولا همّ به فدفع إليه الكتاب الأول. فقال شهربراز: "أول كل قتلة حيلة."

وكان خليفة شهربراز بباب الملك قد كتب إليه ما كان من قول رسته للملك وما كان من جواب الملك له. ثم نازعت أبرويز نفسه ودعاه شرهه إلى إعادة الكتاب إلى شهربراز بالقدوم عليه. فلما قرأ شهربراز كتابه الثالث قال: "كان الأمر قبل اليوم باطنا فأما اليوم فقد ظهر."

فلما علم أبرويز أن نية شهربراز قد فسدت وأنه لا يقدم عليه كتب إلى أخي شهربراز: "إني قد وليتُك أمر ذلك الجيش ومحاربة ملك الروم. فإن سلّم لك شهربراز ما وليتُك وإلا فحاربهُ." فلما أتاه كتابه أظهره وبعث إلى شهربراز يخبره أن الملك قد ولّاه موضعه وأمره بمحاربتة إن أبى أن يسلم إليه ما ولّاه. فقال له شهربراز: "أنا أعلم بأبرويز منك. هو صاحب حيل ومكايد وقد فسدت نيته لي ولك فإن قتلتني اليوم قتلتك غدا وإن قتلتك اليوم كان قتلي غدا أقوى."

ثم إن شهربراز صالح ملك الروم لما خاف أبرويز وتوثق كل واحد منهما من صاحبه واجتمعا على محاربة أبرويز. فقال له شهربراز: "دعني أتولى محاربتة فإنني أبصر بمكايده وعوراته." فأبى عليه ملك الروم وقال: "بل أقم في دار مملكتي حتى أتولى أنا محاربتة بنفسني." فقال شهربراز: "أما إذ أبيت عليّ فإنني مصور لك صورة فاعمل بما فيها وامتثلها." ثم صوّر له كل منزل ينزله بينه وبين أبرويز في طريقه كله وأي المنازل ينبغي له أن يقيم فيها وأيها يجعلها طريقا وسيرا ماضيا حتى إذا أقامه من طريقه كله على مثل وضح النهار قال له: "فإذا صرت بالنهروان فأقم دونه ولا تقطعه إليه واجعله منزلك وجهز جيوشك وعساكرك إليه." فمضى ملك الروم نحوه.

وبلغ أبرويز الخبرُ فضاق به ذرعه وارتجّ عليه أمره فكان أكثر جنوده قد تفرقوا لطلب المعاش لقطعته عنهم ما كان يجب لهم من إقطاعاتهم وأزاقها فبقي في جند كالميت أكثرهم هزلى أضراء. وكان ملك الروم يعمل على ما صوّره له شهربراز في طريقه كله حتى إذا أشرف على النهروان عسكر هناك واستعدّ للقاء أبرويز. وقد بلغه قلة جموعه وتفرّق جنوده وسوء حال من بقي معه وكان في أربعمائة ألف قد ضاقت بهم الفجاج والمسالك فطمع في قتل أبرويز ولم يشكّ في الظفر به.

فدعا أبرويز رجلا من النصارى كان جدّه قد أنعم على جدّ النصراني واستنقذه من القتل أيام قتل ماني وكان من أصحابه الذين استجابوا له فقال له أبرويز: "قد علمت ما تقدم من أيادينا عندكم أهل البيت قديما وحديثا." قال: "أجل أيها الملك وإني لشاكر ذلك لك ولأبيائك." قال: "فخذ هذه العصا وامض بها إلى شهربراز فأتته في قرار ملك الروم فادفعه إليه من يدك إلى يده."

وعمد إلى عصا مثقوبة فأدخل فيها كتابا صغيرا منه إلى شهربراز: "أما بعد فإني كتبتُ إليك كتابي هذا واستودعته العصا. فإذا جاءك فحرّق دار مملكة الروم واقتل المقاتلة واسب الذرية وانهب الأموال ولا تتركنا عينا تطرف ولا أذنا تسمع ولا قلبا يعي إلا كان لك فيه حكم واعلم أنني واثب بملك الروم يوم كذا وكذا فليكن هذا وقتك الذي تعمل فيه ما أمرتُك."

قال: وأمر للنصراني بمال وجهّزه وقال: "لا تعرّجنّ على شيء ولا تقيمنّ يوما واحدا وإياك ثم إياك أن تدفع العصا إلا إلى شهربراز من يدك إلى يده." ثم ودّعه ومضى النصراني. فلما عبر النهروان اتّفق أن كان عبوره مع وقت ضرب النواقيس فسمع قرع عشرة آلاف ناقوس أو أكثر فانهملت عيناه وقال: "بئس الرجل أنا إن أعنتُ على دين النصرانية وأطعتُ أمر هذا الجبار الظالم."

فأتى باب ملك الروم فاستأذن عليه فأذن {له} فأخبره بقصة أبرويز حرفا حرفا ثم دفع إليه العصا فأخذها ونظر فيها ثم استخرج الكتاب منها فقرأ عليه فنخر وقال: "خدعني شهربراز. ولئن وقعت عيني عليه لأقتلته." وأمر ففوّضت أنبيته من ساعته ونادى في الناس بالرحيل وخرج ما يلوي على أحد. ووجّه أبرويز عينا له يجيئه بخبره فانصرف إليه فأخبره أن الملك قد مضى ما يلتفت لفتة فضحك أبرويز وقال: "إن كلمة واحدة هزمت أربعمائة ألف لجليل قدرها ورفيع ذكرها."

After Bahrām Jūr,<sup>70</sup> Kisrā Abarwīz was a man of plots and deceptions in war, a real grievance to his enemies. He had sent Shahrbarāz to wage war against the king of the Byzantines. Abarwīz had a high opinion of Shahrbarāz's judgement, courage, fearlessness, and fortunate disposition.

Shahrbarāz had forced the king of the Byzantines into a difficult position and had him by the neck, so that the Byzantine king wanted to call for a truce with him and had grown weary of fighting, asking him to hold back. Shahrbarāz refused all this. Then the king of the Byzantines prepared himself in the best way, with full arms and all his might, preparing to meet him at sea. He came with innumerable men and had arranged at sea all that he needed, money, arms, horses, utensils, food, and everything, so that the ships were heavily loaded.

Then, during those nights, a heavy wind started blowing and all the anchor chains of the ships were broken and the wind pushed the ships towards Shahrbarāz, who took them. In the morning, the king of the Byzantines had lost most of the money and treasures, equipment and arms that he had had.

Shahrbarāz sent those treasures and moneys to Abarwīz. When he saw what Shahrbarāz had sent to him Abarwīz was impressed and liked it in his heart and said: "No one is more deserving of praise, exaltation, and gratitude than Shahrbarāz! He has been generous towards us in a way most would not and hearts would not agree to!"

Abarwīz gathered his viziers and gave orders that the money and treasures were to be displayed before his eyes. Then he said to them: "Do you know anyone more important and faithful and better entitled to gratitude than Shahrbarāz?" Each of the viziers rose and spoke, first praising God, thanking and glorifying Him. Then they praised the king and congratulated him, mentioning how God had favoured him with the intelligence, virtue, purity, nobility, and great solicitude of Shahrbarāz. When they had finished, Abarwīz ordered the money and treasures to be counted, after which he rose and went to his wives.

The king had a servant called Ruste, who thought badly<sup>71</sup> of Shahrbarāz, and he said: "O King, a little out of much, a small part of a multitude, and a trifle from a hoard has filled your heart!

---

<sup>70</sup> Bahrām is mentioned here as the preceding story was about his military stratagems.

<sup>71</sup> For the text's *shay'* read *sayyi'*.

Shahrbarāz has deceived you and prefers to keep the treasure to himself. If the king, with all his penetrating discernment and perfect determination, thinks that Shahrbarāz has acted loyally, his belief is far from the truth and his share diminished."

What Ruste said penetrated Abarwīz's mind, and he said: "I think you are right. What should I do?" Ruste answered: "Write to him and give him orders to come here, intimating that you want to discuss something<sup>72</sup> with him and ask his opinion, something that cannot be put in writing. If he comes, he will not leave behind his property because he would not know whether he is going to return or not. Then you will have everything that he brings before your eyes."

Abarwīz wrote to Shahrbarāz ordering him to come, so that he could ask his opinion about and discuss with him a matter that was too delicate to be put down in writing and sent by mail. When the messenger was gone, Abarwīz sent after him another one, writing: "I have written to you, ordering you to come so that I can discuss an important matter with you. Then I realised that your presence there is more detrimental and calamitous to your enemy and more useful to the king and more beneficial to the kingdom. So stay there and watch out for your enemy and be ready to use their unguarded moments. Who has lost his money, brings himself to destruction or death.<sup>73</sup> Greetings."

To the second messenger Abarwīz said: "Coming to him, if you see that he is making preparations to come to me and that is noticeable in his camp, give him this letter." (In this letter), he said: "To come to the point, I write to you as I have found you slow in coming and setting on the road. I know that it is either because you are organising your matters or because of some ruse of your enemies, but when this my letter comes to you, leave your brother in charge of your affairs and come post haste, without turning to see to any matter, important or not, if God so wills."

(Abarwīz said to the messenger): "If you see that he has not prepared and readied himself to come, give him the first letter." The second messenger came (and saw that) Shahrbarāz had no intention to go and did neither have this in mind nor preoccupied himself with it, so he gave him the first letter.

---

<sup>72</sup> The text has a redundant *lam* before *amr*.

<sup>73</sup> There is a manuscript variant, *fath* "victory" for *ḥatf* "death," which would make better sense, i.e., such a person is ready risk everything.

Shahrbarāz thought: "Every murder begins with a ruse." The deputy of Shahrbarāz was in the court of the king and had written to him about what Ruste had said to the king and how the king had answered him. Abarwīz was tempted by his lower soul and his greed drove him to write again to Shahrbarāz to tell him to come to him. When he read the third letter Shahrbarāz thought: "Before today this matter was concealed but today it has become evident."

When Abarwīz realised that Shahrbarāz had become disloyal and was not going to come to him, he wrote to Shahrbarāz's brother: "I have put you in command of this army and the fight against the king of the Byzantines. If Shahrbarāz hands the command over, fine, but if not, you must make war on him!" When the letter came to him, he showed it (to others) and sent a word to Shahrbarāz, letting him know that the king had appointed him in his stead and ordered him to fight if Shahrbarāz refused to hand the command over to him.

Shahrbarāz said to him: "I know Abarwīz better than you do. He is full of ruses and deceptions and has grown suspicious of both you and me. If he kills me today, he will kill you tomorrow, and if he kills you today, he will all the harsher kill me tomorrow."

Now that he had become afraid of Abarwīz, Shahrbarāz made peace with the king of the Byzantines. They took sureties from each other and decided to fight Abarwīz (together). Shahrbarāz said: "Let me take charge of the war, as I know better his ruses and weak points." The king of the Byzantines refused this and replied: "No! You stay in my capital, while I take charge of the war."

Shahrbarāz replied: "As you refuse my wish, let me draw a map for you. Proceed according to it and follow it!" He drew all the stopping places on the road from where he was to where Abarwīz was and indicated where he should camp and where he should continue marching on, until he had made his whole route clear as daylight. Finally, he said: "When you come to (the canal of) al-Nahrawān, stay there and do not cross it to his side. Take it as your campsite and send your troops and armies against him (from there)."

The king of the Byzantines then marched against Abarwīz, who heard about this. He was shocked and unable to defend himself, as most of his armies were dispersed to support themselves because he had discontinued their land tenures and salaries. All he was left with was like an army of the dead, most of his men emaciated and poorly.

The king of the Byzantines followed Shahrbarāz's map all the way until he was close to al-Nahrawān where he encamped and prepared to meet Abarwīz. He had heard that Abarwīz's troops were few, his armies dispersed, and those who remained with him were in poor condition. The Byzantine king had 400,000 men, so that roads and mountain passes were cramped with them. He wanted to kill Abarwīz and was certain of his victory.

Abarwīz called a Christian, to whose grandfather his grandfather had bestowed favours and saved him from death at the time Mani had been killed. He had been one of those who became his followers. Abarwīz said to him: "You know the favours that we, the royal family, have bestowed on you in past and present times." The Christian replied: "Yes, I do, o King. I am thankful for that to you and your fathers." Abarwīz said: "Take this rod to Shahrbarāz. You will find him in the capital of the king of the Byzantines. Give it to him from your own hand."

Abarwīz had inserted a small letter to Shahrbarāz, into a pierced rod.<sup>74</sup> (The letter said): "To come to the point, I have written this letter to you and put it into the rod. When you receive it, burn the capital of the Byzantines, kill the soldiers, take their families captive, loot their property, and leave no seeing eye, nor hearing ear, nor perceiving heart outwith your power. Know that I will attack the king of the Byzantines on such-and-such day, which shall be when you shall do what I have told you to."

He said:<sup>75</sup> Abarwīz ordered some money to be given to the Christian and sent him on his mission, saying: "Do not turn aside or stop for a single day. Beware, beware of giving the rod to anyone else than Shahrbarāz from your own hand!"

Abarwīz said farewell to the Christian. The latter happened to cross (the canal of) al-Nahrawān at the time they were sounding the clappers.<sup>76</sup> When he heard the sound of ten thousand or more clappers, his eyes filled with tears and he thought: "Wretched man would I be if I helped someone

---

<sup>74</sup> Al-Tha'labī probably understood *mathqūb* as "hollow," Abarwīz inserting (*adkhala fihā*) a letter in it. This should, however, probably be taken as an example of the secret script of the Sāsānians, called the script of the rod (*kitābat al-ʿaṣā*), the use of which is explained in Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-Tanbīh ʿalā ḥudūth al-taṣhīf*, ed. M.A. Ṭalas (Beirut, 1992), 24–5.

<sup>75</sup> Reference to the (unidentified) narrator. Such intervening, "empty" references to the narratorial voice are common in Arabic literature.

<sup>76</sup> I.e., ringing the church bells.



against Christianity and obeyed that oppressive tyrant." So he went to the court of the Byzantine king, asked for an audience, and told him his story with Abarwīz, word by word. Then he gave the rod to the king, who took it and inspected it. The king pulled out the letter, which was read to him. He snorted and said: "Sharbarāz deceived me! If I get him in my hands, I will kill him!" The king gave orders for the tents to be immediately taken down and the marching signal be sounded and set on the road without turning to anything.

Abarwīz had sent a scout to bring him news, and when he returned and told how the king had left without turning to anything Abarwīz laughed and said: "One word, which sent 400,000 men to flight, must be of great value and fame!"

### 3. Excerpt from the commentary of *Dīwān al-A'shā*, 158–9

قال: كان من حديث مسير قيصر إلى كسرى بن هرمز بن كسرى أنوشروان وكان رجلا سيء الظن شديد الملك وكان يبعث شهربراز الإصبهد إلى الروم في جيش عظيم فأعطي من الظفر ما لم يُعطه أحد قبله وهو الذي أصاب خزائن الروم وكانوا عملوها ليحوّلوها إلى غير مكانها فضربتها الريح وهي في الخور فانتهت إليه فأخذها فبعث بها إلى كسرى. فلما بلغ تلك المبالغ حذره وحسده فبعث إليه رجلا من آذربيجان. فلما رأى مكانه وهينته قال: "ما يصلح قتل هذا من غير جرم." فأخبره لما أرسله كسرى إليه.

فأرسل شهربراز إلى قيصر: "إني أريد لقاءك." فالتقيا فقال: "إن هذا الخبيث قد أراد قتلي ظالما ووالله لأريد منه ما أراد منّي فأجعل لي ما {أطمئن} إليه وأعطيك مثل ذلك. لأن قتلته وأخذت لك ملكه لتجعلني عليه وأجعل لك ألا أغزوك أبدا ولا أتناول شيئا من أرضك وأن أعطيك من بيوت أموال كسرى مثل ما أنفقت في مسيرك هذا." فأعطاه قيصر ما سأل وسار قيصر في أربعين ألف مقاتل وخلف شهربراز في أرض الروم وقد أخذ منه العهود والمواثيق ولم يعلم كسرى بذلك حتى دنا منه قيصر.

فلما بلغه ذلك علم أن شهربراز هو الذي فعل ذلك. وكانت جنوده قد تفرقت وكان كسرى قد أبغضه أهل مملكته وعرف بلاءه عند الناس فاحتال له فعمد إلى قس نصراني مستبصر في دينه فقال: "إني أكتب معك كتابا لطيفا في جريدة واجعله في قناة إلى شهربراز." وأعطاه على ذلك ألف دينار وقال للقس: "إن الروم قد هلكت {وغرهم} شهربراز {وخذعهم}." وقد عرف كسرى أن ذلك القس لا يذهب بكتابه ولا يحب هلكة الروم. وكتب في كتابه إلى شهربراز: "إني كتبت إليك وقد دنا قيصر مني وقد أحسن الله إليك بصنيعتك وقد فرقت له الجيوش

وأنا تاركه حتى {يدنو} من المدائن ثم أتت عليهم الخيول في كل يوم كذا وكذا. وإذا كان ذلك اليوم فاعُدْ على ما قبلك فإنه استئصالهم."

فخرج القس بالكتاب حتى لقي قيصر به وقد كانت صُورَتْ لقيصر العراق وصُورَتْ له نهروان في غير حين المدّ ولم يصوّر بجسر. فلما انتهى إليه انتهى في المدّ وليس عليه جسر. فلما قرأ الكتاب قال: "هذا الحق!" ورجع منهزما وتبعه كسرى بإياس بن قبيصة بن أبي عفر الطائي وكان يتيمين به ويفزع إليه في حروبه ويعجبه. فأدرکهم بساتيدمی مرعوبين مغلوبين من غير قتال.

قال: فقتلوا {قتل} الكلاب ونجا قيصر في خواصّ من أصحابه.

He (= al-Qāsim al-Anbārī) said: (The following) is from the story of the campaign of Qayṣar against Kisrā ibn Hurmuz ibn Kisrā Anūshirwān, who was a suspicious and harsh ruler. Kisrā had sent the commander (*al-iṣbahbad*) Shahrbarāz against Byzantium with a large army. Shahrbarāz was granted greater victories than anyone before him – he was the one who got hold of the treasuries of the Byzantines. These had been prepared for transport to another place, but winds took them when they were in a bay, and they ended up to Shahrbarāz, who took them and sent them to Kisrā.

When Shahrbarāz had achieved all this, Kisrā became wary and envious of him. He sent to him an Azerbaijanian man (to assassinate him), but when the man saw Shahrbarāz's standing and bearing, he said to himself: "It is not right to kill a man like this without reason." So he told Shahrbarāz why Kisrā had sent him. Shahrbarāz sent a word to Qayṣar: "I want to meet you." So the two met, and Shahrbarāz said: "That evil Kisrā wanted to have me killed without right. By God, now I want for him what he wanted for me! Give me what satisfies me and I will give the same to you. If you kill him and take his kingship and give it to me, I will promise you that I will never raid you and will never take any of your land, but I will give you from the treasuries of Kisrā as much as you have spent in your campaign."

Qayṣar gave him what he had asked and marched (against Kisrā) with 40,000 soldiers, leaving Shahrbarāz in Byzantium after receiving his pledges and promises. Kisrā was unaware of all this until Qayṣar was close by. When he heard about this, he knew that it was Shahrbarāz who had done this. His armies had been dispersed, and his subjects hated him. Kisrā knew what people thought of him, so he decided to plot. He went to a Christian priest, well versed in his religion, and said to him: "I will send with you a small letter written on palm-leaf stalk put in a hollow reed to

Shahrbarāz." For this, he gave the priest a thousand dinars and said: "The Byzantines are now lost. Shahrbarāz has deceived and duped them!"<sup>77</sup>

Kisrā knew that the priest would not deliver the letter and that he did not like to see the Byzantines lose, so he wrote in his letter to Shahrbarāz: "I write to you now that Qayṣar is drawing closer. God has done well to you due to your good deed! I have dispersed the troops to receive him. I will leave him in peace until he<sup>78</sup> has drawn closer to al-Madā'in. Cavalry will attack them during the whole of such-and-such day. On that day, attack them from your direction.<sup>79</sup> That will be the end of them!"

The priest left with the letter and took it to Qayṣar. Iraq and Nahrawān had been depicted to Qayṣar at a time of low tide and he had not thought about a bridge. Now he came there during high tide, and there was no bridge. When he read the letter, he said to himself: "This is true." He turned away, fleeing, and Kisrā followed him together with Iyās ibn Qabīṣa ibn abī 'Ufr al-Ṭā'ī, whom he considered a good omen and trusted and admired in all his wars. Iyās caught them in Sāfīdamā frightened and defeated without a battle.

He said: They were killed like dogs,<sup>80</sup> but Qayṣar managed to escape with his retinue.

---

<sup>77</sup> The text's *'azzahum* is an obvious mistake for *gharrahum*, as is also the next sentence's *khara'ahum*, for which read *khada'ahum*.

<sup>78</sup> Read *yadnū* for the text's *tadnū*.

<sup>79</sup> Read *qibalaka* for the text's *qablaka*.

<sup>80</sup> Read *qatl al-kilāb* for the text's *qabl al-kilāb*.