



The Middle Persian Inscription from Meshkinshahr

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

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

The town of Meshkin, or Khiyav, as found on maps and documents in Persian, is located in eastern Azerbaijan, 74 km northwest of Ardabil and 72 km northeast of Ahar, thus halfway on the road between the two larger towns. Its geographical situation is 47° 30' east longitude and 38° 24' north latitude, to the north of the Sabalan mountain range.³ The site itself lies in hilly terrain, and there are numerous large boulders, on one of which the inscription was found. As far as we know, no archaeological work has been carried out in the region. A number of ru-

ined mosques and shrines in the town testify to the significance of the site in Islamic times, although no pre-Islamic monuments have been reported in the area, and there is no written record of the town in the pre-Islamic period. The town is mentioned by Yāqūt in his *Muʿjam al-buldān*, and by Qazvinī in his *Nuzhat al-qulūb*, while several contemporary authors have assembled the information in the sources about the meagre history of the town, which is summarized here.⁴ The old name of the site was Varāvī but in the time of the Seljuk Alp Arslan, a Georgian noble called Beškin or Peškin was taken prisoner on the Seljuk campaigns in the Caucasus. He converted to Islam and was given Varāvī as a fief. Since in the old Iranian Azeri language *b*- changes to *m*-, Meškin replaced Beškin. This new lord of the region was an enemy of the Seljuk Aqsungur, but, as Yāqūt notes, the fief remained "the domain of Ibn Beškin, lord of the area."

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

The history of the discovery and publication of the inscription is in brief as follows.⁵ In the

summer of 1966, Kambakhsh Fard discovered the inscription and took photographs. In April 1967 Gerd Gropp received photographs from Fard, who next published a brief report in *Majalle-ye bartasihā-ye tārikī* [2.1 [1346/1967], p. 4, n. 2] with a “rather muddy” [thus Nyberg] photo-

graph. Fard then published a more detailed report in 1967, and, finally, Gropp published his edition in 1968, which was summarized by Fard in 1969. Nyberg (1970) himself contributed a few improved readings.

Text and Translation

(italics = uncertain reading, x = illegible letter)

- 1 BYRH mtry QDM ŠNT
 2 10 10 IIIIII šhpwhly MLKAn
 3 MLKA ZY hwlwmzd[k]n AMT
 4 LY nrshy hlwzdy ZY
 5 gwptʿn ZNE dzy ZY pʿhw
 6 dhwh x wdy pʿkndy [A]Pm
 7 PWN ŠM ZY yzdʿn GDE ZY
 8 MLKAn MLKA PWN IIIIII ŠNT
 9 PWN plcʿmy krty KON
 10 štldʿly LBA ʿzʿty GBRA
 11 MNW LCDr ZNE Pʿsy BRA YATWN
 12 ZNE dzy psndʿt ADYN
 13 [n]rshy hl[w]zdy . . .
 14 Q[D]M lwbʿn ʿplyny
 (to the right)
 15 ʿyw OBYDWN
 16 MNW LA psndʿt
 17 ADYN dzy ʿyw
 18 OBYDWNʿy MNW MN
 19 [ZN]E ŠPYR
 20 HWE
 (lower left corner)
 21 traces of letters

¹⁻³Month of Mihr in the year 27 of Šābuhr, King of Kings, son of Hormazd,—
³⁻⁹when I, Narseh . . . of the Gōbeds—
 this castle that *Farrox-D. laid the foundations of—I completed in the name of the gods for(?) the glory of the King of Kings, in seven years.

⁹⁻¹⁵Now, the prince, grandee, (or) freeman who may come along this road (and) whom this castle may please, then let him say a blessing for the soul of Narseh- . . . !

¹⁶⁻²⁰{You} whom it may not please, then you make a castle that is better than this!

hwlwmzd[k]n: The spelling with the extra -w also in the inscription of Kerdīr at Sar Mašhad, KSM 6, *ʿwhwrmzdy*, with which Gignoux (1972, 18 fn. 19) compares the Bactrian spelling Ωρο-μοϕδο (and similar).

The complete name of the author of the inscription has not been established. The traces in the two places it occurs seem to be not incompatible with **hlwzdy*. Less satisfactory are the readings **hlwndy* and **hlhd̄y*; **hwlwmzdy* seems excluded.

The author’s family name seems to be Gōbedān, as no other reading seems possible, and no

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

The occurrence of a family of Gōbeds in northern Azerbaijan supports Humbach’s reading of *Gōbedestān* in the *Bundahišn*, where it, together with Ērānwēz, the mythical homeland of the Iranians, is located in Azerbaijan: “Ērānwēz (is) in the area of Ādurbādagān, the land of Gōbedestān, on the road from Turkeštān to Čīnestān” (*Bundahišn*, chap. 29.12–13).⁶

The verbs *fragandan*⁷ and *frazāmēnīdan* (for our *pad frazām kerd*) are used in the *Šahres-*

tānīhā ī Ērānšahr in the sense of “completing” something started by somebody else, and in par. 2 it is used with *fragand*: “the city of Samarkand was founded by Kāyus, son of Kawād; Siyāwaxš, son of Kāyus, completed it [Samar-kand šahrestān Kāyus ī Kawādān bun fragand Siyāwaxš ī Kāyusān bē frazāmēnīd]”,⁸ cf. *ibid.*, par. 40: “the city of Weh-ardašēr, which three rulers worked on, was completed by Ar-dašēr, son of Pābag [šahrestān ī Weh-ardašēr ī pad 3 xwadā kerd Ardašēr ī Pābagān bē frazāmēnīd].”

The syntactic connection of *xwarrah ī šāhān šāh* with the preceding *nām ī yazdān* is not quite clear to me. It can be coordinated with *pad nām ī yazdān*: “in the name of the gods (and by) the glory of the King of Kings,” or, as translated above, be an indirect object.

On the *xwarrah* as one of the attributes of royalty, see Humbach and Skjærvø (1983, pt. 3.2, 31). For the combination of “in the name of the gods (and by) the glory of the King of Kings,” note that, in the Paikuli inscription, after the messengers have exhorted Narseh to take back the attributes of kingship: *xwarrah*, kingship (*šahr*), the throne (*xwēš gāh*), and the ancestral divine honors (*padixšar ī niyāgān az yazdān padirift*), Narseh then leaves for Ērānšahr “in the name of Ohrmazd and all the [other] gods and Anāhid the Lady.”⁹

tar . . . bē: the exact meaning of this expression is not clear to me, but it must be similar to *pad ēn rāh* “on this road” seen in ŠPs I and MnF (see below).

āfrīn kardan: This expression usually takes a direct or indirect object (with or without *ō*),¹⁰ but there are a couple of instances with *abar* in Manichean Middle Persian: M 172 I v2–3 (Salemman 1908, 19; Boyce 1975, 146 text c) “hale and blessing upon the children of wholesomeness (*drūd ud āfrīn abar fraزندān ī drūdi!*”); M 11 R2–3 (Waldschmidt and Lentz 1933, 556–57; Boyce 1975, 146 text cn) “blessing upon this table of the pardoned ones (*āfrīn abar ēn xwān īg uzixtān!*”

OBYDWN^γ *kunā*: the ending ^γy = *-ā* in OBYDWN^γ is otherwise known only from YDOYTN^γ *dānā*, 2d singular subjunctive, “you will know.”¹¹ In Manichean Parthian texts the form in *-ā* is also used in the function of imperative; in Middle Persian, however, forms with final *-ā* are restricted to a few hymns only.¹²

There is no support for Nyberg’s reading of ^γy as *-ē*.

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

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

HWE: either (prospective) subjunctive *hād* “will be” or (conditional) optative *hē* “would be.”¹⁴

The sentiments expressed in this inscription have counterparts in both earlier and later inscriptions, both Old and Middle Persian.

The most remarkable correspondence with the Old Persian inscriptions is to be found in Darius’ inscription at Susa (DSe), in which he tells us: “At Susa I saw a castle (*dīdā*). It was poorly made [*du[š]kartā*], the one that had been made before. From there [= for that reason?] I then made another castle. Thus says Darius the king: May Ahuramazdā protect me together with the (other) gods and my house and that which is written in this inscription” (Kent 1953, 142; Stève 1987, 62).

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

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

“At that time when Šāpūr Sagān šāh . . . went on this road (*pad ēn rāh . . . šud*) via Staxr to Sagestān he came here to Sadedstūn. . . . And he blessed [*u-š . . . āfrīn kerd*] (his) father and grandfathers. . . .” (ŠPs I, Back 1978, 492–94).

“This bridge Mihr-narseh . . . ordered to be built. Whoever comes along this road [*kē pad ēn rāh āyēd/āyād*], let him say a blessing for Mihr-narseh and his children (*mihrnarseh u-š fraزندīn āfrīn ēw gowēd!*” (MnF; Henning 1954, 434).

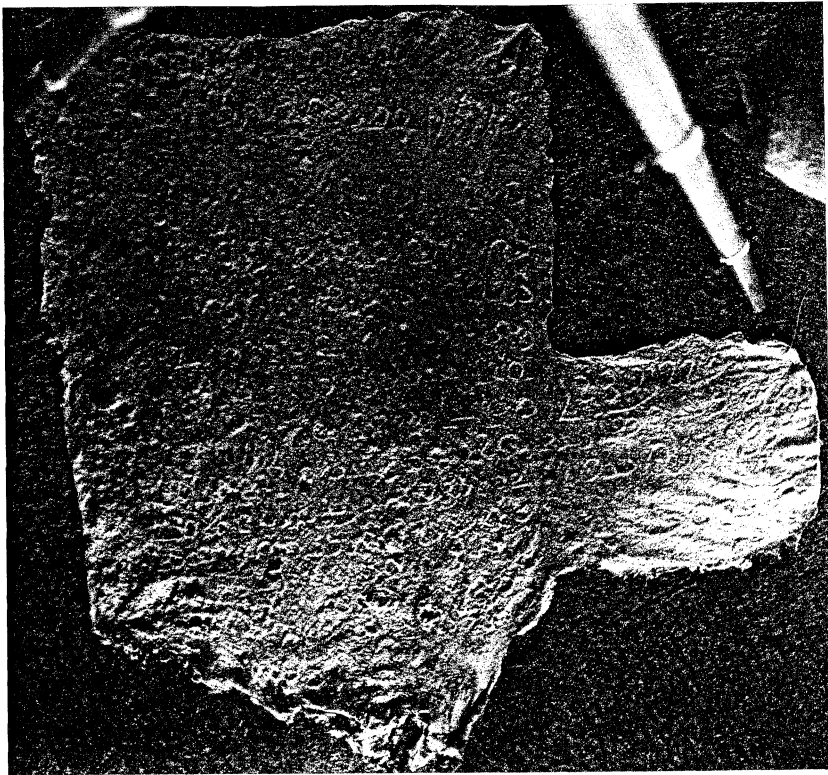


Fig. 2. Later squeeze of entire inscription.

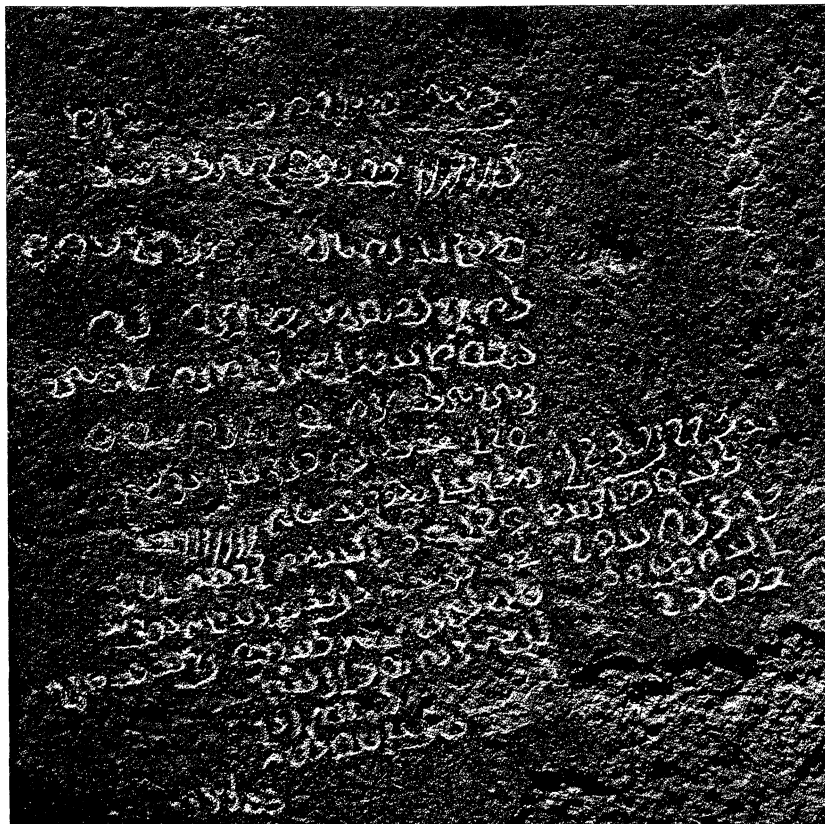


Fig. 1. Photo of retouched stone.

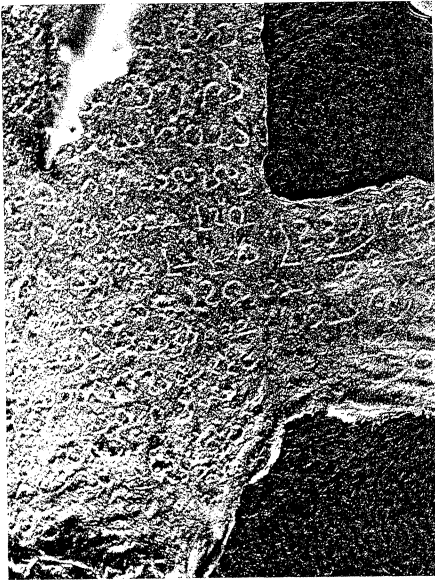


Fig. 5. Middle right.

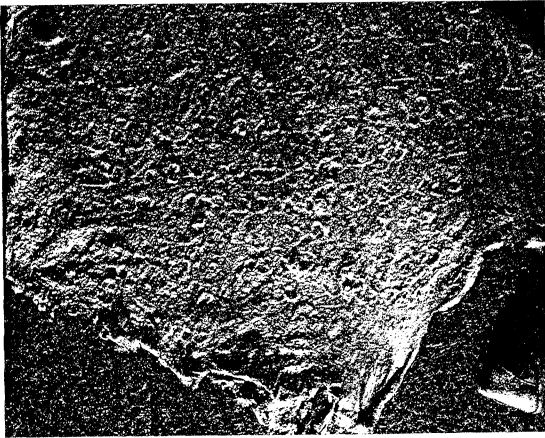


Fig. 6. Bottom.

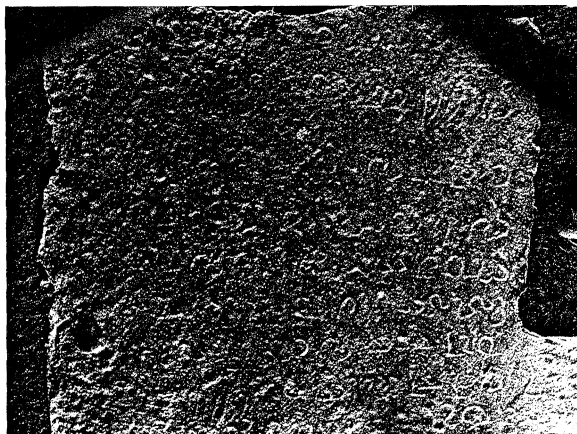


Fig. 3. Top.

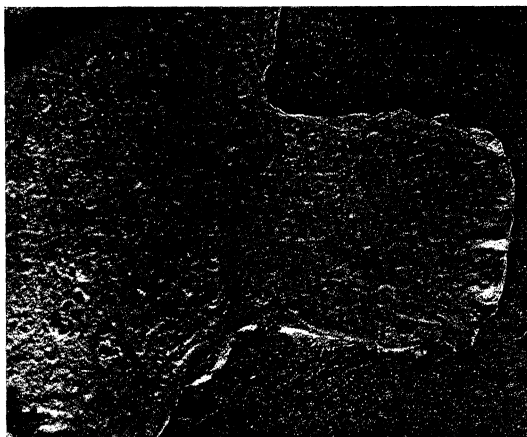


Fig. 4. Middle right.

Notes

1. It was not included by M. Back in his corpus of Sasanian inscriptions, see Back 1978, 5.
2. Nyberg 1970.
3. On the site and monuments see Sa'idi 1354/1976.
4. Yāqūt, ed. F. Wüstenenfeld, vol. 4 (Leipzig, 1869), p. 918; Qazvini, ed. G. LeStrange (London, 1915), p. 82. The modern works are: J. Maškūr, *Nazar-i be tārix-e Āzarbāyjān* (Tehran, 1349/1971), and S. A. Kasravi Tabrizi, *Šahriyārān-e gomnām* (Tehran, 1308/1930), vol. 2, p. 118.
5. Nyberg 1970, 144-53.
6. Humbach 1985, 331-33, with different translation.
7. As pointed out by Gropp, the verb is found in the Pahlavi Psalter, where it renders Syriac *banā*.
8. Cited by Andreas (and Barr) (1933).
9. Humbach and Skjærvø 1983, pt. 3.1, 34-35.
10. Skjærvø 1983, 51.
11. Skjærvø 1989, 343.
12. See Brunner 1977, 204-5; Henning 1933, 236 (*Selected Papers*, vol. 1, 143).
13. See Skjærvø 1989, 341, for the forms of the "hortative."
14. Skjærvø 1989, 343-46.

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