
Another pre-Sasanian Middle Persian inscription



NICHOLAS SIMS-WILLIAMS

Abstract

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

Keywords: Middle Persian; inscription; Pahlavi script; Persis; Waxšahr; š'thw 'bowl'

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

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

¹P. O. Skjærvø, ‘The joy of the cup: A pre-Sasanian Middle Persian inscription on a silver bowl’, *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, XI (1997 [published 2000]), pp. 93–104. See below, on the sixth to eighth page of this article.

²For this name and its reading see below, seventh to eighth page of this article and Fig. 4. For help in tracking down a coin on which the name is clearly written I am grateful to Vesta Curtis, Chris Hopkins and Alexandra Magub.



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

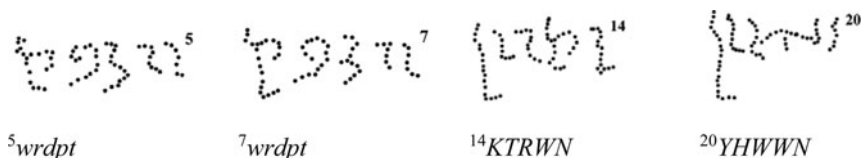
Skjærvø and Shaul Shaked, both of whom know Middle Persian much better than I, for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this edition.

The language of Persis 2 is certainly Middle Persian, as is clear in particular from the two verbal logograms in *-WN*, but the orthography is somewhat archaic, most notably in the case of the spelling *YHWWN* for later *YHWWN*, as are the shapes of the letters. It is noteworthy that *aleph* has two distinct forms, one like that in the earlier part of Persis 1, the other like that in the added final sentence which names the prince as the owner of the bowl.³ Here too the older form occurs in the early part of the inscription and the later form towards the end, but in this case there is nothing to suggest that the last part of the inscription is a later addition.

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

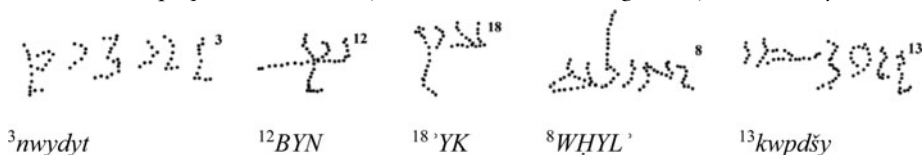
³Skjærvø, ‘The joy of the cup’, p. 95.

r is flatter at the top (like an upside-down “2”). The two letters can be seen side by side in *wrdpt* and *KTRWN*, whose *-rw-* may be contrasted with the *-ww-* of *YHWWN*:⁴

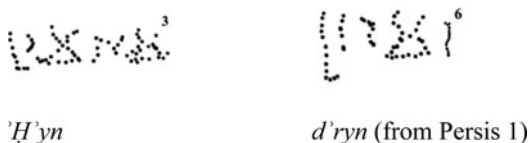


The distinction between *w* and *r* is less obvious in Persis 1, where the writing is altogether sloppier, but here too the few examples of *w* are closer to the “reversed S” form, while most examples of *r* look like the “upside-down 2”. I admit, however, that even the new inscription includes some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

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



Both forms of *γ* are also found in Persis 1, for example, the curved form in *'H'yn* and a much straighter form in *d'ryn*:



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

Inscription “Persis 2”: a tentative reading and translation (Fig. 2)

¹ZNH ²š' tḥw ³nwydyt ⁴mtrdt ⁵wrdpt ⁶ssn ⁷wrdpt ⁸WHYL' ⁹k'yzrw (k'zyrw?) ¹⁰Wswprskn (Wswpwmkn? wswpwskn?) ¹¹MNW ¹²BYN ¹³kwpdšy ¹⁴KTRWN ¹⁵'L ¹⁶'wswy ('wsry?) ¹⁷gwy ¹⁸'YK ¹⁹y'nd'yn (z'nd'yn?) ²⁰YHWWN

“This bowl was presented by Mihrdād the *wardbed*, Sāsān the *wardbed* and the army of ..., which is stationed in Kōf..., at ... *village. May it *grant *blessing!”

Commentary

The word read here as *š'tḥw* must be the same as the sequence in Persis 1 which Skjærvø read as *š't ḥn* “may I be (> give) happiness” and compared with a supposed *š't ḥny* in a Parthian

⁴The words of the inscriptions are numbered to facilitate reference to the facsimiles and tracings.

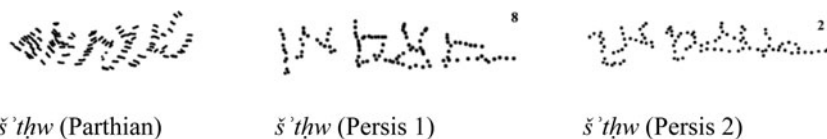


Fig. 2. Inscription “Persis 2”. Montage (not exactly to scale) © Nicholas Sims-Williams.

inscription on silver. It is now clear that all three contexts contain the same word and that this is a term which designates the type of vessel on which it is inscribed; only the reading of the last letter is subject to doubt. Assuming that all three examples are identically spelt, it seems to me that this letter must be *-w*. Philippe Gignoux, the first editor of the Parthian inscription, gave only *š'th[.]* in his text, but rightly stated that the last letter “ressemble à un *w*”.⁵ In the new inscription too, the reading *-w* is virtually certain. The only problematic example is that in Persis 1, where the letter in question consists of a simple vertical line. Skjærvø read this as *-n*, which is certainly possible from a palaeographical point of view, although all other examples of final *-n* in this inscription have a “foot” which is missing here. However, a reading with *-n* would be incompatible with the other two examples, and it does not seem to me impossible that the letter in question is a final *-w*, of which the inscription contains no other example. The implied simplification of the shape of *w* would be comparable to that of the initial *d-* in the words *d'rynkn* and *d'ryn*, which, as

⁵Philippe Gignoux, ‘Coupes inscrites de la collection Mohsen Foroughi’, in *Monumentum H. S. Nyberg*, I (Acta Iranica, IV, Tehran–Liège, 1975), p. 276. In my view Gignoux was right to suppose that the inscription begins with this word and ends with the word which he reads *g'wš'nikn* (see his Fig. 31 on Pl. XXXVI, which shows that there is a substantial gap after the latter). Skjærvø (‘The joy of the cup’, p. 103 n. 2) took *š't hny* (as he read it) to be the last words of the text.

Skjærvø states “is open to some doubt” from a palaeographical point of view, though in the light of the names of the rulers of Persis known from the coinage it “can hardly be anything else”.⁶ Moreover, a *w* consisting of a simple vertical line is well attested in the contemporary coin-legends of the rulers of Persis (see below, on sixth and seventh page of this article with Fig. 4, on the writing of the name *whwḥštr*).



The etymology of *š'thw* “bowl” is a secondary consideration, but it is worth considering the possibility that it is identical with Sogdian *š'tyxw*, *š'twx* “happy”, lit. “having a contented mind”. A similar formation is attested in Middle Persian via the abstract noun *urwāhm-ox-īh* “happiness” (Denkard 3.133.11), to which Skjærvø kindly draws my attention. For the concept of a “happy cup”, i.e. a “cup which gives happiness”, one may perhaps compare Middle and New Persian *šāduruwān* in the sense “basin, pond, fountain”, which appears to be a compound meaning “having a contented soul”.⁷

nwydyt: secondary past stem of the verb attested in Zoroastrian Pahlavi as *nwyd-* “to announce, introduce, present”.

mtrdt “Mihrdād” and *ssn* “Sāsān” are well-attested Middle Persian names. The orthography without *aleph* for *ā* is somewhat archaic.

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

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

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

⁷Apparently a different word from *šāduruwān* in the sense “veil, curtain, carpet” etc., which may contain a variant form of *čādur* “sheet, veil”, see C. A. Ciancaglini, *Iranian loanwords in Syriac* (Wiesbaden, 2008), pp. 258–259.

name, presumably that of the general commanding the army,⁸ in which case the following word might be his patronymic, family name or title.⁹

kwpdšy appears to be another geographical name, of which the first part is presumably *kōf* “mountain”. It is tempting to compare New Persian *Kūfīč*, *Qufš*, *Kūč* < **kaufāciya-*, the name of a mountainous region in Kerman and the people living there,¹⁰ though *-dšy* can hardly represent the outcome of the suffix *-ciya-*.

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

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

y’nd’yn (*z’nd’yn?*) seems to be yet another unknown word, probably a compound. If the phrase *’YK y’nd’yn YHWWN* expresses a wish, as seems likely, it is possible that *y’n-* is the Middle Persian equivalent of Avestan *yāna-*, Sogdian *y’n* “favour, boon, grace”.¹³ If so, a comparison with Christian Sogdian *y’n-θb’rqy* “grace, favour, blessing”, lit. “the giving of a favour”, suggests that the second part of the compound might be a nominal form of *dādan*, *dah-/day-* “to give”, perhaps in origin a present participle middle (= Avestan *daθāna-*), though one would expect **-dyn* or **-dy’n* rather than *-d’yn*. It is tempting to read *-d’t*, i.e. the past stem *dād*, but this would amount to an emendation, since *-yn* is quite clearly written as two letters.

YHWWN = *būdan*, *baw-* “to be, become”. The writing with *H* rather than with *Ḥ* as in Zoroastrian and Inscriptional Middle Persian is an archaism, cf. Aramaic *hw*, *hw’*.

Appendix: Inscription “Persis 1” (Fig. 3)

¹rṥštr ²MLK’ ³Ḥ’yn ⁴d’rynk ⁵BRH ⁶d’ryn ⁷MLK’ ⁸š’tḥw ⁹ZNH ¹⁰YNGDWN ¹¹zl ¹²KSP
¹³s-20-20-10 ¹⁴wḥwḥštr ¹⁵BRBYT’ ¹⁶NPŠH

⁸Such a name does not seem to be attested, but could hypothetically be explained as containing **k’y*, a Parthian-style spelling of the title *kay* (written *kdy* on Sasanian coins)—for *aleph* representing [ā] in Parthian monosyllables see W. B. Henning, “Mitteliranisch”, in *Handbuch der Orientalistik*, I/IV/1, (ed.) B. Spuler (Leiden-Cologne, 1958), p. 62—and **zrw* from **zarnu-* “gold”.

⁹**wās’pusagān* as a genuine Middle Persian equivalent of the usual but ultimately non-Persian *wāspuhragān* “courtier, etc.” (D. N. MacKenzie, *A concise Pahlavi dictionary*, London, 1971, p. 88), in origin “princely”?

¹⁰On the origin and forms of this name see C. E. Bosworth, ‘The Kūfīchīs or Qufš in Persian History’, *Iran*, XIV (1976), p. 9. The Middle Persian form “Kōfēč” cited by W. Brandenstein and M. Mayrhofer, *Handbuch des Altpererschen* (Wiesbaden, 1964), p. 130, is a reconstruction, not an attested form.

¹¹See for example D. D. Kapadia, *Glossary of Pahlavi Vendidad* (Bombay, 1953), p. 399.

¹²See I. Gershevitch, Review of G. G. Cameron, *Persepolis Treasury Tablets, Asia Major*, II/1 (1951), p. 138; J. Cheung, *Studies in the historical development of the Ossetic vocalism* (Wiesbaden, 2002), p. 214. Other possibilities to be considered include a logogram derived from Aramaic *gw* “inside” or the old name of the capital of Isfahan, Greek Γάβρα, Arabic Jay, written *gdy* and *g’b* respectively in the Middle Persian and Parthian versions of the ŠKZ inscription (see Henning, ‘Gabae’, *Asia Major*, II/1, 1951, p. 144).

¹³In Zoroastrian Pahlavi *y’n* can be “life”, New Persian *jān*, but here one would expect either the logogram *HY’* or at least a more conservative spelling preserving the Old Iranian initial **wy-*.

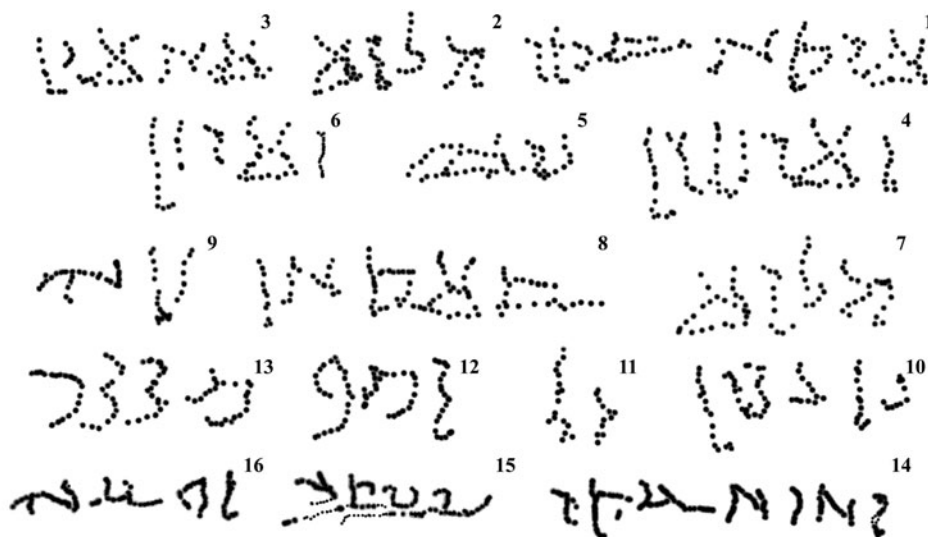


Fig. 3. Inscription “Persis 1”. Tracing (not exactly to scale) © Nicholas Sims-Williams.



Fig. 4. Coin of Waxšahr. Harlan J. Berk, Ltd., 122nd Buy or Bid Sale, 6 September 2001, lot 272. Photograph used by permission.

“Of the brothers of King Ardaxšahr (II), descendant(s) of Dārāyān (I), son(s) of King Dārāyān (II). This bowl of hammered gold (and) silver (weighs) 50 staters. (Added in a different style:) Property of Prince Waxšahr.”

Skjærvø reads the name of the prince as *whyhštr* and transcribes it as *Wahīxšahr*. My preference for the reading *whwhštr* is not so much based on the shape of the third letter in this inscription, which is rather indeterminate, as on the form attested on the coins, which on

many good specimens is indistinguishable from the initial *w-* (see Fig. 4).¹⁴ Otherwise, my reading of this inscription differs from Skjærvø's only in one letter—*š'thw* rather than *š't lwn*, as discussed above—, but the fact that this word can now be seen to be a designation of the object on which it is inscribed necessitates a change in the understanding of the syntax. The other problematic word is *'H'yn*, rightly so read by Skjærvø, though his interpretation of the form as *brādā-y-in* “our brother” is hard to accept. For this meaning, to judge by Manichaean Middle Persian *pd'n*, i.e. **pidā-n* “our father”,¹⁵ one might rather expect **brādā-n*. It seems to me more likely that *'H'yn* represents the oblique plural *brādārīn*, a form attested in the Pahlavi Psalter, where it is written *'HYtlyn*.¹⁶ Admittedly, the spelling is still somewhat awkward, since the basic logogram appears elsewhere in Middle Persian as *'HY* (representing Aramaic *'hy* “my brother”), or in one early Sasanian inscription as *'H*,¹⁷ but in itself a logogram *'H'* (emphatic state) is no more strange than *MLK'*.¹⁸ Since Ardashahr II and Waxšahr are both named on their coins as sons of Dārāyān, it seems that they were indeed brothers. The formulation of the inscription is certainly unusual, but can be understood as indicating that the bowl was one of a series made for the brothers of King Ardashahr, of which this particular specimen came to be assigned to Prince Waxšahr.

NICHOLAS SIMS-WILLIAMS
School of Oriental and African Studies
ns5@soas.ac.uk

¹⁴See also M. Alam, *Nomina propria iranica in nummis* (Iranisches Personennamenbuch, IV, Vienna, 1986), pp. 174–175. The personal name *wḥwḥštr* < **wahu-xšaθra-* could be taken as alluding to one of the Gathas (Yasna 51), which begins with the words *voḥu xšaθrām* and is named as *voḥu.xšaθrā-* (± *hāiti-*) (Chr. Bartholomae, *Altiranisches Wörterbuch*, Strassburg, 1904, col. 1432).

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

¹⁶See P.O. Skjærvø, ‘Case in Inscriptional Middle Persian, Inscriptional Parthian and the Pahlavi Psalter [Part 2]’, *Studia Iranica*, XII/2 (1983), p. 164. The unexpected ending *-īn* is perhaps borrowed from *frazandīn* “children” (see W.B. Henning, ‘The inscription of Firuzabad’, *Asia Major*, IV/1, 1954, p. 101) or *xwārīn* “sisters”.

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

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