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**THE DARK SIDE OF THE MOON: ORIGIN AND LEGACY
OF THE SECULAR SASANIAN MIDDLE PERSIAN
LITERATURE BETWEEN PAHLAVI AND DARI**

In recent times I have started again to reflect¹ on the historical role of the Sasanian Empire in the process of cultural dissemination of Western sources. This subject mostly concerns the problem of the period in which Pahlavi translations of Greek books were arranged, if datable already in the 3rd century under the kingdom of Ardašīr I and Šābuhr I, or if only later, in particular around the reign of Xusraw Anōšag-ruwān². Although this matter is *per se* important³, I will not enter it here in detail, because I have dealt with this important problem in a more accurate way in another parallel contribution⁴ and I will limit my

¹ I must thank some friends and colleagues who very kindly gave me their advice on some problems I have discussed here: Domenico Agostini (Tel Aviv University), Jeffrey Kotyk (University of British Columbia, Vancouver), Maria Macuch (Freie Universität Berlin), Gianfilippo Terribili (Rome “la Sapienza”), Dieter Weber (University of Hamburg), Arash Zeini (Freie Universität Berlin).

² See the monographic study by GARIBOLDI 2006.

³ A very interesting discussion of this subject has been started by Cottrell; see in particular COTTRELL 2015, and COTTRELL – ROSS 2019. She rightly notes that the uncritical assumption that already in the 3rd century CE Greek studies were translated into Pahlavi must be revised. I agree with this caveat, but I do not see sufficient arguments to deny the impact of Western sciences around the end of the second century CE, between the collapse of the Parthian and the beginning of the Sasanian kingdom. As I will explain in this article, while the full translation of large Greek works is questionable, it is quite plausible the hypothesis that important texts were epitomized, summarized, commented, or just partly translated, in particular when the matters were objects of teaching or for practical reference is quite plausible. See also PANAINO 2021. Of course, the situation in the 6th century was much more improved, but there is no reason to exclude *in toto* this process of intercultural activity. Cf. also RAFFAELLI 2017: 173–174, n. 10, and PANAINO 2021.

⁴ See again PANAINO 2021.

remarks just to the fact that if an earlier date is not implausible⁵, it cannot be proved without at least some caveats. More precisely, this prudent observation does not mean that Greek sources were not known, read and studied during the first years of the Sasanian Empire⁶. Actually, this area of the world had been strongly involved in the inculturation of eastern Hellenism and then of the Seleucid kingdom, whose legacy was partly inherited by the Parthian reign. Furthermore, Greek was one of the three official languages of the Sasanian chancellery, which was responsible of the promulgation of royal inscriptions (at least during 3rd century). Various sources insist on calendrical reforms starting during the reign of the Ardašīr⁷, and it is evident that Mani himself was acquainted with some astrological ideas of western origin⁸. In the case of astronomy and

⁵ I must recall that there is a debate about the historical weight to be attributed to the famous passage contained in the 4th book of the *Dēnkard* (*DKM* 412,3 – 415,3), whose origin is placed around the kingdom of Xusraw I, and which insists on the fact that the Sasanians, already, under the kingdoms of Ardašīr I and Šābuhr I, would have started producing a collection of scientific sources (of various disciplines) from Greece and India; a new impulse to this movement would have been given by Xusraw I. This statement is supported by other Pahlavi references contained in passages such as *Dēnkard* 3, ch. 420 (*DKM* 405,11–407), or *DKM* 428, 16; see BAILEY 1971: 155–156, 218–219, 230; ZAEHNER 1972: 7–9, 31–34; SHAKI 1981: 114–125; CANTERA 2004: 106–113; CERETI 1992–93: 232–43; IDEM, 1994–95: 107–129; DE MENASCE 1972: 379–380, 420; SCHILLING 2008, *passim*. Another Islamic source preserved by Ibn al Nadīm states that according to a book by Abū Sahl al-Faḍl ibn Nawbaxt, a Jewish Persian astrologer, Māšā'allā, would have given a description of the ancient ramification of astral sciences in agreement with the account contained in the *Dēnkard*. See GUTAS 1995: 36–40; SALIBA 2007: 12–13; VAN BLADEL 2012. A critical point of view in COTTRELL 2015 and COTTRELL – ROSS 2019.

⁶ Dr. Terribili kindly calls my attention to a less quoted New Persian source such as namely the *Arāste-ye Dādār ben Dādihūkht* (see SHEFFIELD 2015: 534) where a Zoroastrian wise man, Dādār, accepts the challenge given by some wise men sent by a Roman Cesar. He defends the truthfulness of the Mazdean religion in front of Šābuhr I discussing matters concerning cosmology, physics, anthropology and eschatology. The story obviously ends with Dādār's victory and the admission of their defeat by the Western wise men. This later textual tradition follows the same pattern of the intellectual confrontation, which is also part of the *Wizārišn ī čātrang ud nihišn ī nēw-ardaxšīr* (see PANAINO 1999). Terribili fittingly refers also to the parallel framework reconstructed by BEDUHN, GARDNER and DILLEY (2015) with regard to the Sasanian court at the time of Mani. This is a theme, which finds a lot of other examples, such as in the reception of the case of the Athenian philosophers after the closing of the Academy, in the dialogues between Xusraw I and Paul of Persian, as well as in other cases that continued into the Abbasid period (see SAEHNER 2019).

⁷ See PANAINO 2002, with additional bibliography.

⁸ See PANAINO 1997: 249–295.

astrology, calendrical and computational matters, we must consider that the interest was great, and it is implausible that Sasanian Iran was not involved in a reasonable acquisition of competences and knowledge as we can presume it previously was in the case of the Parthian aristocracy⁹. The main problem is the quantity of texts really translated *in extenso* and physically written in a Persian version, a step whose extension we cannot exactly determine. Presumably, a few of texts were entirely “translated”, but only in the sense that their contents were completely read and became part of Persian competences, although this passage does not imply that the Greek *Vorlage* should have been in its entirety translated into a written Pahlavi version. Probably, some texts, well known in their contents, were simply summarized, accompanied by notes, explanations, glosses, exercises, and commentaries in Middle Persian. This solution must be presumed in the case of scientific texts, which were reasonably an object of teaching and continuous learning, and the occurrences of intellectual debates should have enforced the creation of an oral rhetorical academic language. In the case of numerical tables, it is also plausible that the Greek notation was just copied, without further complications¹⁰.

⁹ In this respect the presence (or absence) of a written Parthian tradition of texts, not only of an administrative nature, but also of literary, secular or religious interest, is simply *terra incognita*. Nothing is directly attested, but we have the right to wonder whether a Hellenized kingdom, which tried in many ways to imitate and compete with Seleucids and other Greek monarchs knew forms of true literacy, and also whether Greek translations were produced in local *scriptoria*. It is impossible that an official epistolographic tradition was not at work in the correspondence with other kingdoms, or that communications within the reign were only oral. Certainly, orality has a prominent position, especially in the framework of the minstrel performances, but this does not exclude the circulation of other cultural manifestations or for the limited diffusion of other cultural interests, in particular under the models and the influence of the Western tradition.

¹⁰ COTTRELL (2015: 374) has suggested that the Persians might have used only the numerical tables of the *Almagest*, without translating the whole text. This solution is quite possible, but we cannot infer other negative implications. What is certain is that the Persians were able to read and understand the Greek text, and it is equally presumable that they had preferred to consult the original Greek version of the numerical tables, in particular when they were full of long and complex numbers. The transposition of the Greek figures into Pahlavi practically presented some technical problems and complexities, which make this simpler option sound. That is why I did not exclude the option that the Persian astronomers had easily adopted the Greek tables directly. On the other hand, this solution does not imply that they were unable to understand the Greek way of working or the Greek theory on which the mathematical parameters of the *Almagest* were established, but it would confirm their acquaintance with the Hellenistic intellectual world. The use of the tables needed explanations, and probably some

In other words, I suggest that already in the 3rd century the Sasanian court promoted *scriptoria* and élite centers of education for some members of the administrative apparatus, and that some persons interested in these matters, at least at a higher social level, could offer a supportive patronage to minor groups of “intellectuals”, well-versed in esoteric sciences and related matters. Certainly, the persons who possessed the necessary education in order to have access to the technicalities of Greek astronomy, astrology and mathematics were of limited number, but Sasanian Iran has been shown to have been a complex kingdom, with a complex internal organization; it was not a simple barbarian country. Although this was an area of oral culture, literacy was not persecuted or banished. In the reconstruction of this socio-cultural picture, we cannot forget the presence of prisoners of high social levels, such as engineers, mathematicians, etc., who were captured during the many military campaigns of the 3rd century, or citizens of the Roman cities on the border, conquered and pillaged by the Persians. This is a necessary premise to consider.

In the present study, dedicated to the memory of one of the greatest Iranologists of all times, Professor Vasilij Ivanovič Abaev, I would like to touch upon another series of historical and linguistic problems, normally ignored until now, and strictly related to the matters I have introduced earlier:

- 1) Which was the cultural context that prompted such interest in Western astral culture (and strictly related matters)?
- 2) To whom among the public were these activities directed? That is to say, who paid for their “salaries”?
- 3) Which language did they use in their translations and commentaries?

These three simple questions will result in an enormous number of implications, replete with consequences, which here only in part could be resolved and discussed. In any case, I think that this subject is worth discussing in the memory of Prof. Abaev, because it shows the complex interconnection chapters were necessarily translated and commented upon, in particular if their use was as objects of teaching. Thus, it is plausible that at least some of Persian astronomers had a precise knowledge of Greek cosmology and the related kinematic models. Thus, the hypothesis that they had prepared at a certain point of the Sasanian history a complete or at least a large translation of the *Almagest* remains, although suggested with caution, a reasonable alternative. Cf. PANAINO 2019b; a larger discussion about the Pahlavi title of the *Almagest* in Panaino 2021. See already KUNITZSCH 1974: 119–123; KUNITZSCH 1975: 276; TOOMER 1984: 2. Actually, we must consider that the employment of foreign experts, an habit attested already in the Achaemenid Empire, was widely diffused, and that rich courts, such as those of the Arsacids and Sasanians, had the economic sources to offer good opportunities to specialists in search of fortune.

of history and linguistics, a kind of approach that he followed along his extraordinary career.

First of all, we must suppose that a Western Iranian expert of astral matters (astronomy and astrology), fully able to read Greek, should have been persons strongly exposed to an international, multi-cultural environment. This kind of framework was probably available in Western Iran already under the Parthian domination, and we can suppose that esoteric Greek matters, as well as more scientific notions, were already an object of some cultural interest from earlier times. The towns on the borders between the Eastern Roman provinces and the Parthian kingdom, the same places in which the Gnostic culture found fertile ground for the earlier development of the Manichaean religion, were a real melting pot, which displayed a number of multicultural features. We cannot forget that Alexandria of Egypt in the 2nd c. CE became the most important center for the dissemination of ancient astrology and astronomy¹¹, and that before the seminal impact produced by Ptolemy (100–170 ca), whose prestige was later received, the work of a famous younger contemporary astrologer of Antiochia, Vettius Valens (120–170 ca), enjoyed an enormous success. Thus, it is not by chance that various Arabic sources insist on the fact that his work was well known already in the 3rd century in Iran and that it should have been translated into Pahlavi¹².

These esoteric disciplines possessed a seductive force, providing the prospect of a new “scientific” instrument for prognostication, which would have attracted various political élites, who did not turn away from acquiring a “new arrow” in their quiver. For this simple reason, we may presume that already in the Parthian period, the basic elements of classical astral divination entered into the élite culture of Iran, and step by step found their way throughout the highest and lowest strata of that society. Of course, as well explained by Cumont¹³ in the case of Alexandria of Egypt, every social class had a different level of access to these matters in a form proportional to their economic status and social interests.

¹¹ The complex relations between Zoroaster and astrology, very important within the framework of the pseudo-epigraphic Western esoteric tradition, should have produced inevitable resonances also in the East, in particular in the Hermetic literature (see van BLADEL 2009). The astrological speculation about the name of Zoroaster (especially in the Pseudo-Clemens and Proclus) inevitably involves a number of intercultural relations, which cannot be treated here, but it deserves a deeper discussion. See STAUSBERG 2007: 187–192.

¹² See already NALLINO 1922: 333–335 (= 1948: 293–293). About Wālīs (i.e. Valens), see also SEZGIN 1979: 38–41; PINGREE 1989: 230–233, 235. See the discussion on these matters with a long excursus on the transmission of the *Almagest*, in Panaino 2021, with the necessary bibliographical apparatus.

¹³ See CUMONT 1937.

In their turn, also the queries posed to the astrologers would have also ranged, as a matter of course, from great political subjects to simple love affairs or other mundane preoccupations. This pervasive power explains also why Zoroastrianism accepted and adapted this new speculative “celestial grammar”, trying to embed it within some compatible theological lines. For instance, the demonization of the planets was a way to reproduce in a new and updated form, a kind of dualistic duel against the evil forces within a heavenly dimension. This astral battle substituted an older pattern in which the fixed stars and shooting stars were fighting each other. Now the fixed stars (as good divinities) had to combat against the planetary demons. This process was not without contradictions (most striking, for instance, was that four of the planetary demons were named after the most important Mazdean gods), and actually we find that some texts, while accordingly demonizing the planets, eventually declare that some of them, such as Jupiter (Ohrmazd) and Venus (Anāhīd), are astrologically “positive”; Other two of them, Saturn (Kēwān) and Mars (Wahrām), are negative, while Mercury (Tīr) is neutral¹⁴, and its role can change according to the different astral configurations. This distinction, whose background was very old, presents some fitting correspondences to classical astrological models. This and other facts demonstrate that the Mazdean Persian clergy at a certain point was compelled to deal with astrological matters, and it explains why Zoroastrian Pahlavi texts still preserved some astrological and astronomical subjects within their most important theological and cosmological materials¹⁵. On the contrary, astrology was not at all part of the earliest Zoroastrian background, and even the Babylonian astral divination was very far from the traditional, substantially primitive, Mazdean approach to the heavens¹⁶. A sort of persistent royal and aristocratic interest for apotelesmatic matters seems to be confirmed even by Agathias, who not only recalls the high number of translations of Greek scientific and philosophical texts into Persian at the time of king Xusraw I (II, 28, 1–2)¹⁷, but even states that already Pābag, the father of Ardašīr, was conversant with astrological subjects (II, 27, 1)¹⁸. This statement certainly confirms that the Byzantines of Justinian times assumed that the diffusion of the astrological knowledge in the highest

¹⁴ On this matter, see now the update discussion in PANAINO 2019a: 32–46, 52–63.

¹⁵ See, for instance, the 2nd and the 5th chapters of the *Bundahišn*, or other few scattered astral sections surviving in the Pahlavi literature. See HENNING 1942; MACKENZIE 1964; RAFFAELLI 2001.

¹⁶ See PANAINO 2019a, 2019b and 2020.

¹⁷ See the text by Keydell, here quoted as AGATHIAE MYRINAEI 1967: 77; cf. the translation by FRENDO IN AGATHIAS 1975: 62.

¹⁸ See the translation by FRENDO IN AGATHIAS 1975: 61. Cf. also AGOSTINI 2016: 13–15, *passim*.

strata of the Persian kingdom was well established already in the first half of the 3rd century CE¹⁹.

Then, we can deduce that a restricted group of persons, reasonably belonging to the scribal milieu, were interested in astral and scientific matters. Some of them could have been of priestly origin, but we have no reason to compellingly state that all of them were born into a clerical clan. We would also prudently imagine that foreign “scholars” were invited from abroad, as well-treated experts. Others among them eventually were involved in this process, perhaps forced to do so as prisoners of war, or even as acquired slaves. In any case, we can suggest various ways through which the Parthians before, and the early Sasanians later on, were in the position to enter into direct contact with these disciplines and their experts. This situation probably paved the way for the creation of local working astronomical/astrological groups, closer to professional schools, as in the case of the imperial court in Ctesiphon, or just as little aristocratic circles in the provincial or minor courts, such as in Edessa and Hārrān. Thus, their sponsors would have been members of the royal family (who also produced good calendars and proper chronologies, possibly with accurate predictions), high ranking aristocrats, and probably priests belonging to some Mazdean temples that had sufficient income and solid power to pay direct attention to these matters, perhaps with a particular concern for the millenarian cycles and their impact on world history and the final defeat of Ahreman.

Thus, at the moment, at least two questions seem answered: the cultural environment in which these competences were cultivated was a scribal one, but not strictly or exclusively clerical, with a few persons conversant in foreign languages (in particular Greek, Syriac and presumably Sanskrit), sponsored by the king and the highest ranks of the society. Other astrologists certainly were at the service of rich (but less important) people, but their competence was presumably inferior and, in any case, there is no reason to assume that all these diviners were in a condition to master Greek sources or sophisticated Ptolemaic models. The knowledge of Greek implies that the specialists involved in this process of cultural transmission might have been also engaged in diplomatic missions, in the control of Greek epistles and documents, that is to say, as sort of assistants offering their expertise during truces or peace agreements, etc. I would therefore suggest that the astrological circles, or at least some of their members, were offering an additional service as a secondary office involved in the interests

¹⁹ We should consider that in the background, there was the contemporary association between Zoroaster and astrology, which was widespread in the West, and this played a certain role in the intercultural dialogues. We must recall that the *Suda* (α 4257) under the entry “astrology” states that Zoroaster the Babylonian himself was the one who discovered and made known the genethliological art. Cf. VASUNIA 2007: 73.

of the diplomatic and bureaucratic apparatus, with which they had eventually to cooperate, at least on some special occasions. This suspicion stems from the fact that, for instance, the development of a kind of astrology usually considered “military” (*yātrā-*), which was an innovation of Indian origin, implies a group of persons, whose employers had deep political and strategic interests. Normal people would not have required this kind of knowledge. Thus, the existence of a military astrology implies that some of these experts followed the army and were presumably engaged in the general staff of the army. The same observation could be done for the practice of casting horoscopes for the years of the enthronements of the kings²⁰ or to develop a sort of historical “continuous astrology”²¹, which distinguished the apotelesmatic tradition of Persia, impressing a seminal impact upon the future Islamic tradition. As I noted before, the clergy, or better stated, a specialized section of it, was equally interested in these developments and took an active interest in the increasing progress in these disciplines²². This does not preclude that some priests might have cultivated such a thrilling field, as it also so happened in the Christian framework, but I would not insist on a firm restriction of this knowledge only to a clerical environment. This fact thus explains the concern also for astrological and astronomical subjects in the *Bundahišn*, etc., but also offers a key to interpreting the existence of various contradictions between the Zoroastrian traditional doctrines and the new astrological theories or the more evolved Ptolemaic cosmological models.

Practically, we are focusing on the role of a main group of scientific scholars (and professional translators), substantially laical, in some cases not even Mazdean (when this process involved members of other religions and of evident foreign origin)²³, although the presence of scribes closer to the Mazdean Church cannot be excluded. We can also imagine that the Mazdean Church had its own centers for the study of the stars and their meaning, but we have no

²⁰ See PINGREE 1962: 495–501; IDEM, 1968: 82–93; Cf. also TAQIZADEH 1943: 8–9, n. 3, and 32; PANAINO 2016: 126, n. 57.

²¹ For this terminology, see PINGREE 1968: 82–83. Cf. PANAINO 2016: 129–130, n. 58.

²² Dr. Terribili rightly calls my attention to a passage left by al-Bīrūnī in his *Chronology* (SACHAU 1879: 36), in which Mutawakkil summons a *mowbed* in order to know the calendrical rules followed by the Persian kings and their intercalations. The passage of *Dk* III, 419 (BOYCE *apud* DE MENASCE 1973: 374–379) is directly connected with the same subjects, and, according to Terribili, it could be fittingly framed within a cultural context in which the interests of the *pēšōbāy* were very important. They were active collaborators in Abbasid power. In any case, the note of al-Bīrūnī seems to confirm that some Zoroastrian men were still considered as well-informed persons, who still maintained ancient wisdom, so that they might be consulted even by the Caliph himself, when necessary.

²³ See PANAINO 2017 (with extensive bibliography on the subject).

sufficient data to say more on this matter. I must note that the vocation for an international culture and a multilingual openness was not among the basic skills compellingly promoted by the Mazdean *paideia* in the case of priestly education²⁴. If we would like to imagine a sort of Zoroastrian *trivium* and *quadrivium* for the training of the young priests, even for those expected to become community leaders and high theologians, learning Greek, Syriac or Sanskrit was not a common expectation, and if this happened, it would have been unusual and exceptional. An interest for the other cultures (and languages) was equally limited, but such a trend was reasonably permitted within the framework of scholarly *scriptoria*, where mathematics, astronomy, astrology (in its different forms), calendrical synchronisms, medicine, and philosophy, were considered worthy of consideration and of study. This kind of cultural investment, useful not only for the bureaucracy and the international diplomacy, but also for the management of the calendar, the observation of the astral phenomena, and the comprehension of the enemies and of their ideas about nature and society, had a restricted, but current importance in the court framework, where, for instance, iatro-mathematics had its probable success in close connection with medical arts. If we cannot compare this kind of circle with the intellectual complexity of the Athenian Academy (whose refugees in any case tried to find a new home under the protection of Xusraw I), certainly they were a place of acquisition of multiples scientific and esoteric competences, in which the linguistic domain should have been a sensible component. I repeat that this was not a mass movement or an openly accessible institution, but something restricted, under the control of the highest ranks of the empire, which in its dealing with the West never behaved as a provincial, barbarian or primitive antagonist, and that for this reason was strongly respected by its rivals. We can recall that the Sasanian king of kings was the only foreign royal authority to be considered worthy of the title of Βασιλεύς²⁵.

After having tried to assess only in part the general framework in which the cultural centers underpinning the acquisition of foreign culture grew up and to define the social identity of their sponsors, we should make the effort to understand the kind of Middle Persian, which was adopted in the case of the redaction of laical, profane, i.e. not strictly sacrificial, ritual or exegetical²⁶, texts. We know thanks to the pioneering studies started by Lazard²⁷ that, while in the

²⁴ See TAFAZZOLI 2000.

²⁵ CHRYSOS 1978: 59; Cf. also CANEPA 2009.

²⁶ Actually, the Mazdean Church developed a special exegetical praxis, based on its own technical language, as well shown by SKJÆRVØ (2010) and VEVAINA (2010). See also TERRIBILI (2017).

²⁷ See LAZARD 1995. Cf. also FILIPPONE 2011: 225–227, *passim*.

3rd century, Parthian was still living in its autochthonous form, around the 4th c. CE, its influence, despite an inevitable decline as a separate language, became so important to give birth to a variety of Middle Persian, which was usually named Dari. We could say that the progressive “evaporation” of Parthian produced an impressive dissemination of an increasing dialectologically “Northern” influence in many geographic areas where Middle Persian was spoken²⁸; this kind of “Persian” inevitably changed with some advantages in its pervasive role. Thus, as it perished, Parthian produced many later fruits surviving beyond its formal disappearance. The new language actually was, as we can implicitly deduce from its name, the “court jargon”, with a mixture of southern and northern elements²⁹, and inevitably assumed a certain prestige despite the fact that it was mostly spoken. This way, while Parthian was disappearing, its lexicon with some northern patterns survived through a new linguistic variety, which extended its influence throughout Central Asia and Afghanistan. In the south of the Iranian territories, in Fārs and, for instance in Sīstān³⁰, on the contrary, the south-western linguistic variety maintained its prominent role, as it is confirmed by the direct witness of the Judaeo-Persian texts, which closely resemble the language of the Pahlavi Books³¹. This geo-linguistic distribution matches also with another fact, usually not emphasized. If the Middle Persian normally spoken (and, in some cases, also written) in Ctesiphon, after a period of distinguished bilingualism Persian/Parthian in the 3rd century, became the foundational basis for the so-called Dari, we should inevitably infer that the king and his nobles preferred to currently adopt this linguistic variety, despite the fact that bureaucracy working for the court apparently preferred to keep alive a clerical tradition still using Pahlavi. But did the scholars, who were responsible for the translation of foreign

²⁸ It is most plausible that the noble clans, which maintained and increased their power under the Sasanian dynasty, had no reason to abandon *ex abrupto* their heritage with language, customs, traditions, etc., but the creation of a new jargon was the fruit of dialectical phenomena, with the input of prestigious external models, which gave birth to a new synthesis.

²⁹ Among the earliest examples of these linguistic varieties we can mention the Manichaean manuscripts from Turfan, showing a mixture of Middle Persian and Parthian characters, already detected and discussed by TEDESCO 1921: 186–187, *passim*.

³⁰ Important traces of this southern linguistic variety are still recognizable in the *tafsir* known as *Qoran-e Qods*, on which see again FILIPPONE 2011: 179–235. Cf. also CERETI 2019: 96–97. Still fundamental is the discussion in LAZARD 1995: 18–19, 49–50, 74, 142. The fact that Sīstān was a center of preservation of the Southern variety is very important for the history of the Zoroastrian priestly families, who contributed to the preservation of the religious Mazdean heritage in the reproduction and transmission of manuscripts. On the subject, see a GNOLI 1989: 151–164.

³¹ See LAZARD 1995: 27–98, *passim*.

texts, do the same? In other words, although we can admit that for a cultivated person to switch from one linguistic variety to the other³² should not have been dramatic, and that certainly the southern clergy was not excluded from direct access to the new competences entering the Sasanian Empire and the court discussions, the Pahlavi of the Books took its direction, with its scribes, its written rules and preferences, and probably also its main subjects, while a variety of Dari assumed a new role as probably the main language in which Greek, Syriac, and Sanskrit texts might be *normally* translated and adapted. My suspicion is that a language closer to the oral dimension might be more flexible in the face of completely new concepts, different doctrines and practical subjects connected with astronomy, mathematics, astrology, medicine, etc. In addition, if some of the translators were of foreign origin, it is probable that they had easier access to the spoken language than to the archaic tradition of the Mazdean Church of the Fārs. Thus, when the sponsor was the king and the high aristocracy, why would a manual of astrology, a treaty of Plato or Aristotle, or any other western secular text, be translated only into a variety of Middle Persian extraneous to the living evolution of the court language, maintaining a close relationship to the Pahlavi tradition? We could presume that a main center of intellectual dissemination had been the court of Ctesiphon, or other royal ateliers where *scriptoria* with multilingual scholars were available. It is difficult to imagine that a Mazdean high priest, *motu proprio*, would promote the translation of Aristotle's³³ *Organon* or his *Physics* or again some of the Platonic dialogues; in this respect, the curiosity toward the otherness had different origins, and probably also the language suited to these curiosities was more flexible.

This observation is even more convincing when we consider that, after the 4th century, the Christian Church of Persia started to assume a foundational role in the dissemination process of Western culture in Iran. The main center of this Church was Seleucia-Ctesiphon, so that it was not very far from the palace of the court, and we may suppose that in a later phase persons such as Paul of

³² Dr. Terribili calls again my attention to the fact that with regard to the existence of Middle Persian linguistic varieties, two chapters of *Dk* III (181; 225) present us with a sort of *code switching* making reference to an “idiom/expressions of the kingdom” (*pad ēwāz ī šahr; šahr ēwāzīg*), a sort of definition, which perhaps could be intended as referring to a “secular/current language” in explicit opposition to the Middle Persian variety adopted in this theological book. In the second example, the reference is associated with the definitions of categories such as “sophists” and “materialists” (*dahrīg*). The mention of the latter group is highly significant, because, if the term there adopted has an Arabic origin (cf. *dahriyya*), its presence should be connected with a linguistic tradition contemporary with respect to the composition of the *Dēnkard*, and not strictly to an earlier practice.

³³ See now HERMANS 2018.

Persia³⁴ translated philosophical texts for Xusraw I in a higher court variety of Middle Persian in between Pahlavi and Dari. I do not see the reasons underpinning the assumption that these translations were necessarily written in the so-called Pahlavi of the books without disentanglements due to the lexicon, the subject and the need of clarity. If the “Pahlavi Psalter” uncovered in Bulayīq and few other documents show that the Persian Christians adopted a variety of Middle Persian (with an archaic scripture closer to that of the Pahlavi Books), this fact probably reflects an earlier approach to the court, with an attempt of imitation of the Mazdean scribal tradition (see below). In this respect, the Christian Church³⁵ did not enact the same originality and aggressive force of the Manichaean propaganda. Actually, when Mani himself was put into the condition to write for Šābuhr I (and we are still in the 3rd century), the kind of language he adopted was closer to the future Dari, as already Henning suggested³⁶, as an additional evidence of the fact that this one was the language current in the royal palace. This datum also invites us to consider that the acute decision to adopt a current variety of the Palmyrene scripture³⁷ with the contemporary rejection of the heterographic system — a choice strategically advantageous for a religion, which facilitated the direct access of the people to the written revelation — could not have been the fruit of an autonomous or genuine invention created by Mani. This innovation could have developed a habit which already existed independently of Mani, probably outside of the priestly scribal environment. In any case, we can advance the hypothesis that the court language from which Dari took its origin, when usually written, could present a reduced number of heterograms, and that their use in the framework of scientific translations was limited. In the case of the Christian Church, in particular in the times of Xusraw I, when the court language had strongly evolved in a new linguistic variety, it is

³⁴ The fact that some Christian sources state that Paul the Persian eventually converted to Zoroastrianism, when he failed to be elected *katholikós*, if true, would just confirm that he possessed a strong Iranian background, which allowed him to enter the Mazdean milieu, and that probably he well understood Pahlavi literature. But this evidence does not show that the language he usually spoke with the king, and that he used in order to translate the Platonic and Aristotelian sources, was completely different from the one spoken by the king and his court. About Paul the Persian, see GUTAS 1983; TEIXIDOR 2003; BRUNS 2009; KING 2019: 163–208; more detailed references in PANAINO 2021.

³⁵ See HENNING 1958: 76–78.

³⁶ See HENNING 1958: 97; cf. also GNOLI 1989: 163–164. One could prudently note that this assumption was partly due to the archaizing face assumed by Pahlavi Books with respect to the Manichaean scriptures, but in my opinion, Henning was focussing on the status of the language as it appeared in a more lived dimension.

³⁷ See HENNING 1958: 72–73.

difficult to believe that Christian scholars were working exclusively in Pahlavi, but it is presumable that they would have adopted the various dialects and varieties of the Persian empire. This flexible attitude can be seen in the decision, confirmed from Central Asian evidences, that the Christian Church preferred a Syriac scripture for Christian Sogdian texts, and had not preserved the Pahlavi background. Furthermore, we must suspect that the Christians had no reasons in their evangelization to use Pahlavi, at least in the geographic areas where the spoken Persian was closer to the Dari variety. Otherwise, the translation of the *Gospels* or the other most important Christian texts would have been in a language that might result, if not incomprehensible³⁸, a little bit strange for the people whom they wanted to convert, and this kind of communication strategy would appear very peculiar.

These remarks open a different perspective on the intercultural role played by the Western Iranian languages: with the decreasing role of a genuine Parthian, the new *linguistic league* emerging with the Dari did not renounce to the earlier secular Northern tradition, but embedded it into a more aggressive and expansive variety of Middle Persian, which probably was in that even more comprehensible mixed form, particularly on the Western borders, in Armenia and in the Caucasian lands, where the Parthian presence enjoyed an enduring tradition. Then, it is not unreasonable to presume that the main astronomical, astrological, medical or philosophical works were translated with preference into a sort of Middle Persian closer to Dari (taken as a sociolinguistic variety of a technical exegetic and scribal praxis), although we can admit that the content of these translations was easily accessible to scribes usually writing and reading Pahlavi. I cannot imagine the Fārs as a main center promoting translations of secular works from other languages, and even the Arabic sources insist on the royal promotion of these interests, without mentioning any role strictly played by the Mazdean Church, despite the religious merits of this activity in rescuing the Avestan ancestral heritage “scattered” by Alexander the Great³⁹. This fact would also explain why

³⁸ Certainly, over the course of time, one of the main problems seems to be connected with the strong difference occurring between the written well codified system and the spoken living language. The first one did not represent a serious problem, because of the heterograms, which as standardized masks might be read with different pronunciations (and even in different Iranian languages), but mainly by the presence of many archaizing forms or by the diffusion of pseudo-historical writings, without to say of the many cases of apparent homography.

³⁹ The myth of the ancestral Avestan knowledge, dispersed and scattered by Alexander the Great, and later recomposed by the Sasanian kings, represents the fruit of an ideological imperial operation, as noted by GUTAS 1995: 25; PANAINO 1999: 87-91. Jeffrey Kotyk (personal communication) calls my attention to the following comparison with the Chinese tradition, writing what follows: “There is an interesting parallel in China. The Chinese court supported the

the rich material of secular sources in Middle Persian (not in Pahlavi as a precise religious technical style) was lost. Actually, its preservation was not the main target of the theological “Renaissance” of the Zoroastrian Church in the 9th century CE. Only a few prominent sections of cosmological relevance for the Zoroastrian doctrine were saved, preserved and carefully transmitted, while a large corpus of secular texts was not saved, and not just because this kind of intellectual library was not equally relevant to the religious authorities, but — most probably — because the main manuscripts concerning these matters were not even in their immediate possession⁴⁰, if not with few exceptions. More plausibly, many secular texts, preserved in the royal *scriptoria*, used for commentaries, lessons, studies, etc., did not usually belong to the cultural patrimony of the priestly scholars. They were completely lost during the occupation of Ctesiphon and of the main royal and aristocratic strongholds and properties over the course of the first years of the Islamic occupation, and only parts of them were saved by individual scholars, who preserved the remnants of this tradition in their personal libraries. Actually, some Persian astrologers, who have been credited as translators from Pahlavi (better from a Middle Persian closer to Dari) of astronomical and astrological texts, were members of families traditionally involved in the profession of astrologers (for instance that of the Nawbaxts)⁴¹. Their competence was respected even by the new powers. Some in

translation of foreign astronomical and astrological texts during the eighth and ninth centuries, but the Daoist clergy were not involved in this, although later Daoists incorporated foreign horoscopic doctrines and concepts (including deified planets and zodiac signs) into their literature. In short, the clergy initially had no interest in astrology, but they followed the popular and aristocratic interest in the subject and adapted their religious texts to accommodate widespread belief in astrology. Interestingly, foreign astrology was translated in a very technical manner into Chinese. The translators avoided producing ornate literary prose. Some examples, which were probably not produced at court, even show colloquial elements probably reflective of oral teachings. See KOTYK 2018: 17–24. For discussion of astrological medicine (Indian, Iranian and Islamicate) in China and its impact on religious traditions, see KOTYK 2019”.

⁴⁰ We could even cast some doubts, as I did in another study (PANAINO 2012), on the fact that the extant copies of full collections of the whole *Avesta* in 21 *Nasks* were probably very few, and possessed only in very special priestly libraries, probably connected with the most prominent theological schools and highest temples of the empire.

⁴¹ SEZGIN 1979:114; ANTHONY 2013. Very kindly, in a personal communication, Jeffrey Kotyk notes on this matter: “It is noteworthy that the transmission of horoscopy into Chinese around the year 800 CE seems to have originated from Iranian, rather than Indian, sources, especially in light of the Dorothean and other Hellenistic features we can observe (the doctrines of triplicity rulers, lots and aspect, for example). It remains unclear from which language the material was translated, but by the process of elimination, it was likely a form of Persian with

the caliphal administration were employed as useful servants. The Arabic translations then determined the final death sentence for these scientific sources in Dari, although their versions at least saved part of this earlier legacy. An interesting example of such a Middle Persian underground linguistic presence in this kind of literature can be found in the same tradition of the texts concerning the astrological *Nativities* (usually entitled *Kitāb al-mawālīd*). One of these sources specifically attributed to the Zoroastrian heritage was that of Abū-Sahl ibn-Nawbaxt, but the attested title of this work was that of *Kitāb an-nahmuṭān*. This designation looks like very mysterious, but, thanks to van Bladel⁴², we can easily explain it as the fruit of a plausible misreading of an earlier Pahlavi word. Actually, this peculiar *an-nahmuṭān* should correspond to Middle Persian *tōhmagān*⁴³ “genethliologies” (i.e. *al-mawālīd*), and its final shape would have been the result of a series of mistakes in the interpretation of few ambiguous Aramaic letters of the original Pahlavi script. This translation, based on the specialized astrological value of Gr. γενεθλιαλογία, is not at all common in Pahlavi, but it should be the fruit of a suitable semantic redetermination of a genuine Persian term. Unfortunately, in this case, we cannot distinguish whether the material was southern Middle Persian or Dari, but if the origin was strictly Mazdean we should suspect a stronger influence of the Pahlavi model.

But despite the fact that we must consider a complex situation, more flexible and linguistically in continuous motion, other examples show the plausibility of a Northern increasing wave. A pertinent case should have probably been the one of the *Xwadāy Nāmag*⁴⁴, or at least of some redactions of it, which presumably was composed in a Middle Persian variety closer to what we would like to define as Dari, i.e. in a court language, whose preservation was not in the

some associated texts likely translated from Sogdian, based upon the Sogdian loanwords in Chinese transcription. It seems that members of the Persian diaspora after the collapse of the Sasanian dynasty, even as late as circa 800, were practicing horoscopy using Iranian languages. One prominent figure responsible for transmitting horoscopy into China, Li Miqian, was said to hail from “Western India”. This brings to mind the theory proposed by Agostini and Stark that a Sasanian court in exile and Persian diaspora settled in the Hindu Kush region. See KOTYK 2018: 30–51, and KOTYK 2017; AGOSTINI and STARK 2016.

⁴² See the discussion of this problem by van BLADEL 2012: 41–42, n. 1. Cf. GUTAS 1998: 38–40.

⁴³ More precisely, van BLADEL (2012: 41, n. 1) assumes that “the word should be read *tohmagān*, written originally in the Arabic script as *thmk`n*. The distortion in the transmission of the text involves just two easy changes: the initial *tā`* has lost one diacritical dot, giving *nūn*, and the early ‘Abbāsīd-period *kāf* (for MP /g/, also written *k* in the “Pahlavi” script) was mistaken by a later copyist for *īā`*.” On the use of the term *tōhmag* “substance” within the philosophical framework, see SHAKI 1970: 289; HERMANS 2018: 82.

⁴⁴ See now HÄMEEN-ANTTILA 2018.

main interests of the few Mazdeans scholars trying to preserve the memory and the continuity of the earlier religious heritage⁴⁵.

Other Pahlavi books such as the *Kārnamag ī Ardašīr ī Pābagān*⁴⁶ or the *Wizārišn ī čatrang*⁴⁷ preserved priestly adaptations of a courteous tradition, and their language was not free from Northern elements, although the most striking case is the one of the *Draxt ī Asūrīg*, “The Assyrian Tree”, whose language shows a prominent northern character, as already remarked by Bartholomae⁴⁸, and which could even be defined as a quasi-Parthian work written according to the Pahlavi orthography⁴⁹. A similar example is that of the *Ayādgār ī Zarērān*, whose Parthian *Sprachgut* is so impressive that Pagliaro⁵⁰ started to doubt that this character could be uniquely explained as due to a simple transposition of a northern text into Pahlavi with the survival of some scattered rests of the earlier *Vorlage*. On the contrary, among different hypotheses, he did not exclude the possibility that the memorial of Zarēr was composed during a period in which the reflexes of the Parthian power might have exercised a certain enduring impact on the southern variety⁵¹. This is more or less a way in which, within a more advanced framework, we could reframe the seminal reconstruction proposed by Lazard about the history of the transition from the varieties of Middle Persian to the New Persian⁵². All this material will concur

⁴⁵ Dr. Terribili (in a personal communication) would suggest a parallelism between the Mazdean textual and cultural organization of the Islamic period with that in “Rabbinic Judaism” and later “Rabbinic courts” of eastern Europe. The few remnant texts were those useful for practical needs or suited to the consolidation of the authority of the *mowbeds* and *dasturs* circles or even of some prominent priestly families. Thus, we should imagine a new system of (re)-production and re-elaboration of the texts adopted in order to offer instructions and compelling judgments about the organization of the community or again for questions of a theological nature emerging from the intellectual debate over the new contemporary situation.

⁴⁶ See GRENET 2003.

⁴⁷ For the composition of this work, see PANAINO 1999.

⁴⁸ See BARTHOLOMAE 1922: 23–28; BOLOGNESI 1953. UNVALA (1923), on the contrary, did not recognize the Northern origin of this work. On this work, see also BENVENISTE 1930.

⁴⁹ DURKIN-MEISTERERNST 2014: 14.

⁵⁰ PAGLIARO 1925: 3–5 [other numeration 532–534].

⁵¹ See PAGLIARO 1925: 4–5 [other numeration 533–534]. Unfortunately, it is not clear if Pagliaro was thinking that the text had been composed during the Parthian kingdom under the strong influence of the Northern dialect, or if a later writing (during the Sasanian period) of this narration was strongly influenced by the Northern variant, as a kind of Dari.

⁵² We must consider that already HENNING (1958: 92, n. 1) assumed that New Persian was not a south-western Iranian language strongly influenced by north-western elements, but a mixed

to offer the pillars for the origin of a designation such as the one of *pārsi-e dari*⁵³, i.e. the Dari form of Persian.

In any case, the preservation of all these texts is twice a miracle, because they were not necessarily part of a strictly religious tradition. More probably, these books were saved because they were popular also in priestly circles, and sufficiently easy to transcribe and transmit as an example of a lost prestigious past. These compositions were surely part of a larger literary production circulating also in Dari, and whose public was that of the courts, starting with the one of Ctesiphon, but their preservation was due to the only extant line of direct transmission, which passed via the authority of the sacerdotal scribes, who, of course, privileged their own (southern) Pahlavi version. Perhaps the situation was much more intricate.

Actually, we must observe that a Persian scholar such as Kānlarī⁵⁴ assumed that Dari would have been an official and administrative language already adopted at the Sasanian court. For this reason, it would have assumed a leading function in eastern Iran thanks to the authoritative promotion given to it by officials of the Sasanian Empire. In this way, it became part of the chancery and the administrative language of Khorasan, as later Moqaddasī (p. 335)⁵⁵ would precisely report with reference to the town of Bukhara. But on this matter, Lazard⁵⁶ himself was very prudent, stating as follows: “There is no doubt, however, that the official and administrative language of the Sasanians was not *dari* but Middle Persian (so-called Pahlavi). Ebn al-Moqaffa’s account clearly indicates that *dari* was a spoken language, and it is obviously as a spoken language that it spread to the east. The founders of Persian literature, who were poets, rather than prose writers, naturally resorted to the language that they spoke. Moqaddasī’s statement was made at a time when *dari* had already been in literary use for nearly a century.”

I think that this conclusion is too sharp and that it is partly contradicted by some evidences as those emerging from sources such as the *Draxt ī Asūrīg*, or even earlier by the redaction of works as the *Šābuhragān*, whose language, although Middle Persian is not the same of the Pahlavi Zoroastrian texts. If we strictly follow the statements given by Ebn al-Moqaffa’ and those repeated by al-Xwārizmī in his *Mafātiḥ al-‘ulūm* (just following the

language (*Mischsprache*), whose origin must be placed with the framework of the dynamics of communication developed with the Sasanian Empire. See also LENTZ 1926.

⁵³ See LAZARD 1995: 84.

⁵⁴ KĀNLARĪ 1986: 280–281 (see also the English translation based on the previous edition of KĀNLARĪ 1979).

⁵⁵ See LAZARD 1994: 35 (online edition 2011).

⁵⁶ See again LAZARD 1994: 35 (online edition 2011).

transcription of the Arabic originals and the literal translation proposed by Lazard himself)⁵⁷, Dari was the language of the towns of Madā'in in which the people living at court usually spoke, and which was currently adopted in an area extending to Balkh. But both authors state that even Pārsi was the language in which the *mowbad* used to express themselves, and it was the speech of the Fārs. There is no direct reference to the written tradition, and to an open opposition between a written Pārsi against an exclusively oral Dari. The unique point on which we could find a warning is given by Ebn al-Moqaffa', when he notes that Pārsi was also used by wise men and the persons who could be connected to them. But is this remark sufficient to assume that the esoteric and astronomical circles, as well as the people interested in Western philosophy, plus the foreign translators working for the Persian *scriptoria* were compelled to write only in Pahlavi? But if we would like to accept this extreme point of view, it remains the fact that no speaker could so precisely command the different registers of his living language from any interference or intromission of other linguistic diastratic or diatopic levels (see below). If so, languages should not change! For this reason, I would assume that while standard Pahlavi endured in the Sasanian bureaucracy and administration, where the control of the confessional tradition played an important role, as it was in the patent case of the law system, where the Mazdean Church maintained a strong power, the case of secular, intellectual matters escaping this kind of confessional censorship, was different, and that a literature closer to the spoken living reality had room for a progressive expansion, in particular when the treated subjects were of main interest to a non-priestly audience⁵⁸. In other words, I do not suggest that at the beginning wise men

⁵⁷ LAZARD 1995: 49–50.

⁵⁸ Astrologers and astronomers probably had their own forms of conservative practices, in the current modality for the erection of the horoscopes, in the preparation of prognostics, etc., which partly should have imitated Western patterns, including loanwords, technicalities, abbreviations, symbols, etc., which had their own history, and that had nothing to do with the priestly Mazdean tradition. In this case, we should imagine an opposite trend implying influences from the secular scribal habits into the priestly *scriptoria*, or at least a mixture of influences. It is certain that written Pahlavi represented an impending prestigious model, but we ignore whether the Parthian background had already a solid tradition able to exercise a considerable influence. However, when in the 4th century the decay of Parthian was evident, and the process of transformation of Middle Persian in the areas where Dari became the current oral variety, a progressive interference even in the written dimension should have appeared in one way or another. The subject is complicated from the fact that in some cases the evident conservative attitude in the writing practice even with its historical orthographies could be counter-balanced by a striking trend toward a living pronunciation, very far from the written appearance, so that even in official conservative documents we cannot be absolutely sure that the actual pronunciation

working as translators did produce a conscious openly contrastive linguistic model against the clerical patterns, but that this difference emerged time after time for different reasons. The decay of Parthian as formal linguistic way of expression propelled its merging into the Middle Persian, at least in Northern areas where it was the official language, while in the environment in which no religious scruples were particular relevant, the adoption of foreign models, loanwords and concepts, involved also a higher openness to accept and normalize early Parthian words and expression, which in any case were current in the everyday language, at court as in the bazar, although with the due sociolinguistic differences. Before to switch to another connected subject, I would like to remark that already Kānlarī noted⁵⁹ that according to some Muslim historians, and in particular Hamze Isfahāni after the authority of Abū Ja‘far Motavakkeli, “the Persian script is diverse and is of seven kinds”, adding that again al-Nadīm mentioned the *Ras-Sahriya* scrip, which would have been current for Logic and Philosophy. It is difficult to reach solid conclusions on these data, but it is important to mention these sources, also because the subject should be studied in further investigations in a systematic way.

In this case we have at disposal a very fitting example, which confirms the process of adaptation of a text, presumably in Pahlavi, into contemporary Dari. This particular case must be actually presumed thanks to an Arabic source normally ignored outside of the scholarly specialists interested in the transmission of exact sciences in the Islamic world. Around the middle of the 8th c., during the reign of Abū Muslīm, Sa‘īd Xurāsānxurreh wrote that a Persian astrologer such as Māhānkard, around the year 637⁶⁰, had translated *The Book on the Nativities of Zoroaster* from the “religious script” (*dīn-dabīreh*) into Persian Dari (*al-lughat al-fārisīya al-darīya*). This translation would have been performed for the sake of his Marzbān, i.e. a margrave⁶¹, in the period “when the rule of the Persians fell to the Arabs”. Despite the fact that some scholars have interpreted the reference to Dari as doubtless referring to what we would now call “New” or “Modern” Persian, this conclusion is worthless, because based on the simplistic idea that Middle Persian (and Pahlavi) died and immediately after New Persian emerged as Athena from Jupiter’s head. But, actually, what kind of Persian was spoken in the second half of the 7th century CE? We know that this was an intermediate phase in which the language (better the main languages) were

was the one expected in a genuine southern Middle Persian, and not in a more evolved mixed Middle Persian variety of Dari.

⁵⁹ See KHANLARI [= KĀNLARĪ] 1978: 222–224.

⁶⁰ See GUTAS 1998: 37–38; for the text, see AFNAN 1964: 77–78; cf. also PINGREE 1975: 7; KUNITZSCH 1993: 241–249; PANAINO 2009: 89.

⁶¹ See GIGNOUX 1984.

progressively, although slowly, changing. But we have to consider a second problem: The *dīn-dabīrī*, above quoted, and frequently interpreted as a denomination of the Avestan script, could be more easily explained as a fitting designation of classical (Zoroastrian) Pahlavi⁶². From the historical point of view, we well know that there was no reason to compose a true astrological text about the “nativities” in Avestan. The Avestan literature completely ignores classical astrology and does not even possess the sufficient lexicon in order to translate the minimal content of astrological sources. The assumption that we have to consider a translation from Avestan to Pahlavi is thus impossible.

In any case, this source states that in the early 7th century, peoples adapted texts of Zoroastrian derivation (written in a language connected with the *dēn*, which in my opinion could be only Pahlavi and not Avestan) directly into Dari! Thus, we could deduce that this process was explicitly realized only in that later time, but we must consider the fact that the earlier secular literature in Middle Persian, usually translated from foreign languages by scribes, who were not necessarily Mazdean, or even not Persian or Parthian, could have been offered into a linguistic variety that was not exactly the one of the Mazdean Church nor that of the official administration. Given the complex nature (sometimes extremely intricate and esoteric), the strange origins, the matters, and the restricted audience who were the suited public (and probable sponsor) of all these sophisticated texts, I doubt that they would have been strictly independent from the scribal models of the Church. Their language satisfied a different scope, which was not directed against the tradition, but that had another concern. The needs of a scholarly, scientific language, full of technicalities, probably implied a new kind of prose, closer to the original sources, and this situation inevitably paved the way for the intrusion of living expressions, taken from the everyday jargon and from the linguistic patrimony of other (not noble) professions, usually performed by persons not strictly educated according to the most strict of priestly models.

I must also underline the fact that Avestan manuscripts were never used in principle during the rituals, at least until the priestly class did not radically decay in its performative oral competences, and that the function for which the Avestan

⁶² See WALBRIDGE 2001: 88. Cf. VAN BLADEL 2009: 34, n. 47. Another possibility, suggested as a second option by Maria Macuch (personal communication), would be that of Pāzand, but in this case the interpretation of the incomprehensible Arabic title of *an-nahmuṭān* as Middle Persian *tōhmagān* (as suggested by van BLADEL 2012: 41–42; see below) would be ruined. The association with the language of the Avesta remains ambiguous. In fact, even Ibn al-Nadīm insisted that this script was the one in which the Avesta was written, as remarked by KHANLARI [= KĀNLARI] 1978: 222–224, but the problem is that the Avestan liturgy was not written at all, and that the edition of the 21 *Nasks* was in Avestan and Pahlavi.

alphabet was created had nothing to do with the need to read Avestan texts during the liturgies⁶³, but just for preserving an oral tradition, accompanying it with a canon of reference, to which the Pahlavi commentary, the *Zand* or *Zend*, offered an interpretative, academic support. Thus, there was no reason *a priori* to assume that Avestan was considered as the scripture of the *Dēn* mentioned in the text of *Māhānkard*, because it was only Pahlavi that was the current language used in order to offer theological or ritual comments to the liturgical oral texts. Thus, the present source states that around the early 7th century CE, a Pahlavi astrological book containing a text involving also Zoroaster, was translated into Dari. I have hesitated for a while to adopt without caution the idea of a proper translation, because in that period the two linguistic varieties of Persian should have been still mutually comprehensible, but it is possible that, given the technical matter of the text, *Māhānkard* had simply to adapt the lexicon and the style of the text to the jargon currently used by the Marzbān and his little court. This source then informs us that it was possible to refresh a text from Pahlavi into (written!) Dari and, of course, contrariwise.

All these considerations compel us to revise a certain approach to the history of the final process of translation from Middle Persian into Arabic. In some cases, the work was not exactly from Pahlavi to Arabic, but from a form of Middle Persian Dari into Arabic. Although, as I have already noted, the presence of heterograms cannot represent a serious obstacle for an author who well understood a Semitic language, Dari was usually spoken by many court astrologers under the Caliphate, and the percentage of heterograms (if any) in these scientific texts is unclear. If the model was that of the Manichaean Middle Persian, they were simply absent⁶⁴. The concentration of this scientific (astronomical, astrological, philosophical, historical, medical, etc.) material in a laical and now Islamic framework, full of new converted scholars (or of non-Mazdean scholars such as Māšā'allāh, who was a Persian Jew) ruined all interest in the active preservation of the genuine heritage of Middle Persian. In this respect we cannot hold the Mazdean Church as mainly responsible for this loss, because this dramatic result was the bitter fruit of the times. Despite the fact that the (Middle) Persian language was still living, although in a complex phase of progressive transformation, which did not completely mark a radical separation

⁶³ On this aspect of the Mazdean tradition, see PANAINO 2018: 79–106.

⁶⁴ For instance, the fact that Abū Ma'šār was of Balkh, in the east (Xurāsān), and that he certainly spoke Dari, gave him direct access to the secular language of the Sasanian court, which was similar (with the exception of local speech particularities). In his case, there is no reason to doubt that he was in trouble even with a Pahlavi text, because being fully conversant with Arabic, the heterograms should have not been a serious problem for him. On the other hand, it is also possible that the redaction of scientific texts, did not insist on the large use of them.

between New Persian and Middle Persian until the 11th century, the overwhelming prestige of Arabic, its use at the court, the political embarrassment of a linguistic tradition too strongly linked with the Sasanian past, favored the progressive ruin of the pre-Islamic textual heritage, in particular outside of clerical circles. These documents, once translated into Arabic, fell out of interest, and there was no reason to preserve them, even for the Church, which perhaps was not even in direct possession of these secular sources and that, on the contrary, faced many other problems.

The picture we are reconstructing is based on some inevitable inferences, which try to offer a plausible reconstruction of the synchronic distribution of the Middle Persian linguistic and literary domain, in which Pahlavi and Dari covered not only different regional areas, but also answered to different needs emerging from particular cultural and socio-political contexts. Although all these centers were not necessarily in direct antagonism to one another, certainly they represented various interests and orientations inevitably worthy of consideration.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that the progressive oral influence of the Middle Persian variety, which became Dari with its increasing prestige⁶⁵, especially when it was spoken at court, did not swiftly erase the clerical tradition and its language, a fact that explains why other (more prudent) religious communities, such as the Christians, did not frontally break with the tradition (as, on the contrary, the Manichaeans did), but progressed in an inexorable way.

The “*variazione diastratica*” (according to the formulation advanced by Coseriu)⁶⁶ within a linguistic competition, in which Dari was probably felt in the beginning as popular and inferior, step by step should have changed into a sort of bilingual difference, in particular when this language assumed a special status at court, which expanded towards Central Asia. The measure to which the scientific circles – working on foreign sources and translating them into Middle Persian – were strict followers of a Zoroastrian Pahlavi style, or started to accept in their technical jargon not only a higher amount of loanwords, but also a good number of Northern expressions (some perhaps even inherited from the Parthian tradition) in order to produce a secular literature closer to the taste and the expectations of their direct sponsors, is a matter of discussion never touched before, at least in this way. The present contribution aims to focalize this problem, and suggests that, if Kānlarī was perhaps too sharp in his formulation, the situation

⁶⁵ The fact that Dari was a language mostly spoken does not imply that its sociolinguistic level was only vulgar or popular, and that it was a priori unsuitable for serious matters. When in Europe the national languages emerged as literary means of communication, their patent utility became mostly relevant in secular matters, sciences and philosophy or politics, while theological and juridical subjects were among the last to be substituted.

⁶⁶ The concept was anticipated by FLYDAL (1952), but formalized by COSERIU 1973.

presents some aspects that allow us to reconsider, at least in part, his suggestion. Dari was probably not official, but its presence could not be relegated to an exclusively oral dimension, even in a period in which literacy was limited, assumes a contradictory weight. Thus, if the chancery scribes duly respected orthographic and terminological conventions (as still happens even today in the language of the administration, that still keeps alive archaic formulas completely dead in the living language, so that not only our students, but even our administrators, do not understand at all their true meaning⁶⁷, thus leading to some ridiculous mistakes), we can easily imagine that while one dimension was that of the formal situation, another was that of the true living reality. In this respect, we can remark that the language of the Pahlavi Papyri preserved a high level of formality and of closeness to the scribal and priestly traditions⁶⁸, but we cannot sharply deduce that they are a conclusive witness for all the court productions or its official or semi-official correspondences⁶⁹.

Certainly, the possibility to play with different sociolinguistic, lexical, and narrative levels gave a deeper richness to Middle Persian, and probably enriched its oral poetry and narrative (with a refreshed stimulus even for the *gōsān* tradition)⁷⁰, thus regenerating the living force of the everyday language of the

⁶⁷ This happens frequently in the administrative texts, where expression belonging to the archaic language of the notaries and of the bureaucracy survives. For instance, in the official issuing of documents of many Italian State institutions (even universities), where the word *li*, which should appear in the dating formulas, is mostly written *lì* (with a stress). Practically, the function of the old plural masculine determinative article *li* (from Latin *illi*) normally appearing instead of a complete syntagmatic sequence such as *li giorni* (i.e. “the days”), has been completely forgotten, and is confused with a reference to the place where the document has been issued, i.e. *lì*, as *adverbium loci*, “there” (from Latin *illic*). Despite the formal protests of many scholars, some universities still endure in writing the wrong *lì*. The power of ignorance!

⁶⁸ I must thank for his advice Arash Zeini with whom I have discussed the socio-linguistic aspects of the language of the so-called Pahlavi Papyri. See now Zeini 2018 (with a detailed bibliography on the past studies); cf. also the foundational studies by Weber 1992; 2003 (with additional references on the history of the studies). I must also thank Dieter Weber, who confirmed that in his knowledge there are no evident Northern elements in the documents he studied.

⁶⁹ The legal nature of the Tabarestān documents has probably played an enormous role on the style and lexicon of these texts, whose language is a standard Pahlavi. This fact shows that the administration, even after the collapse of the Sasanian Empire, retained older and formal linguistic and formulaic patterns also in the framework of provincial courts, despite the fact that the living language was Dari. See WEBER (2016a; 2016; 2019); MACUCH (2019). I must thank Maria Macuch for her kind advice on this linguistic material.

⁷⁰ See BOYCE 1957. In her article of 2002, furthermore Boyce wrote “It seems unlikely that any Parthian minstrel poems were set down in writing in early Sasanian times, and all that were

Sasanian court and its leading society. This context would have probably favored the inclusion of new words and expressions belonging to a different cultural and ethno-linguistic framework, as it was with the Northern one, which endured in maintaining a strong link with the progress of world history. This inclusive process contributed to the final re-birth of such an extraordinary phoenix that was New Persian.

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recorded thereafter had necessarily to be rendered into Middle Persian, for it can be deduced (BOYCE, 1979, p. 116) that at some point in the 4th century C.E. the Sasanians decreed that of the Iranian languages current within their empire only their own Middle Persian might be written, with the use everywhere of spoken Middle Persian being probably strongly encouraged. The training of Parthian scribes to write in their own distinctive script must therefore have ceased, and by the time of the Arab conquest in the 7th century knowledge of this script is likely to have been lost, with a block having been put on the development of Parthian as a written language. So when eventually the Parthian *gōsān* texts to be considered here were recorded, it could only be in Middle Persian.” I would like to discuss some of the statements here advanced. Actually, a radical ban of written Parthian seems to me improbable, and this bold statement too radical without direct historical supports. Thus, if a sort of progressive reduction in the use of Parthian was actually current since the 4th century, this result should be seen as an effect of an increasing interference of the prestige assumed by Middle Persian, which was in the condition to become embedded in part of the Northern Iranian lexicon. In the end, a new socio-linguistic, dialectological and diatopical variety (with probably many inner sub-varieties) emerged, and this fact could be an additional explanation for the impulse given to the formation of Dari. On the other hand, the evidences for this official decree are not compelling, and this statement is based on an inference we can assume with prudence strictly for the official scribal material, but not for private or secular texts in provincial districts. Another fact to be considered is the still determinant importance of orality, which must be considered in particular in the case of poetical, narrative texts such as the ones performed by minstrels, who probably utilized music in their narrations. This was a kind of literature whose circulation was mostly oral, despite any ban or Imperial order, if any of that kind.

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