

TWO PARTHIAN OSTRACA FROM NIPPUR

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(PLATES I–III)

While looking at the Babylonian incantation bowls found at Nippur and kept at the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia during the academic year 1992–93,¹ when I had the privilege of being a fellow of the Annenberg Institute, I came across three ostraca which seem to have escaped notice so far. Professor Wansbrough has been interested in so many aspects of the history of the Near East that I hope that this new find will also please him.

Two of the ostraca in the collection of the University of Pennsylvania are Parthian. The third is written in the Aramaic script but contains apparently a Middle Persian inscription. I hope to publish it shortly.

Parthian ostrakon 1 (pls. I–II)

One of the two Parthian ostraca, B2983 in the Museum collection, is written on a piece of pottery now measuring a maximum of 12 × 7 cm. The potsherd is not preserved in its entirety. It is chipped on the left, at the end of line 1, and the fact that lines 4–6 are missing their endings shows that there was a piece broken diagonally in the lower left side of the pottery piece.

It is written in the chancery style of Parthian, both as far as its script and as far as its language is concerned. It is quite close in its opening style and ductus to the Parthian letter on parchment found at Dura Europos, of which Henning (in Welles *et al.*, 1959: 414 f.) gave a masterly edition, although it lacks an apparatus of notes and commentary. These may have been meant for another publication, which never materialized. Frequent reference will be made to Henning's edition by simply mentioning his name. The script is also close to that of the numerous Nisa ostraca, now in the process of publication in the *Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum*, and of a number of individual ostraca published by Harmatta,² Bivar³ and Livshits.⁴

The present text may raise once again the question of the language of this and similar documents. It is written in the usual mixture of Aramaic and Iranian vocabulary, but the Aramaic declensions are treated quite properly, and there is no strong indication of the presence of ideographic writing. In editing the text, I have indicated, as is customary, that the Aramaic words are supposed to be ideograms by putting them in upper case roman letters, but I must express my doubts as to whether this is indeed justified. In particular, the expression 'l bb' zy l- 'to the gate of' in line 6 of the inside inscription seems totally Aramaic, and does not appear to evoke any Parthian counterpart. If the reading and translation of line 4 were more certain, I could quote also the use of the preposition b- as probably indicating Aramaic rather than Iranian usage.

¹ I should like to acknowledge the help I received from the curator of the Babylonian section, Maude de Schauensee, as well as from her assistant, Leigh Anne Bedal. The photographs printed here are reproduced by permission of the University Museum, University of Pennsylvania. I am also grateful to Dr. N. Sims-Williams for some perceptive remarks.

² Harmatta (1958).

³ cf. Bivar (1970, 1972). A revised reading of the Qumis ostrakon was offered by Livshits (1977: 161, n. 8).

⁴ cf. Livshits (1977, 1984). Also Livshits and Nikitin (1989).



B2983 Nippur: potsherd. Babylonian Expedition I, 18 August 1892.

PLATE II



B2983 Nippur: potsherd. Babylonian Expedition I.



B2729 Nippur: terra Cotta bowl fragment. Excavated 9 April 1989.

I should remark that I have adopted certain elements of MacKenzie's system of transliteration of Middle Persian and Parthian,⁵ but with some deviations. In particular, while writing ideographic *aleph* with a capital A, I see no reason for writing 'ayin, which only occurs in Aramaic words, with O. By consistently transliterating *heth* as X, x, we are free to transliterate *he*, which is used primarily in ideograms, by H.

The ambiguities of the Parthian script do not allow us to reach complete certainty on all points of reading. The following is the reading and translation that I should like, with some hesitation, to propose.

TEXT

On the inside

1. MN tyrydt 'L MRAY brny ŠLM WŠ[RRT]
2. ŠGYA XWŠR(T) LMRAY [[QDM]] xwtwy KTYT
3. wspzn Š(LM) WK'T nwyd XWD'T LK
4. AYK 'ynk 'ynk B prznd TLT RGL(Y)[N]
5. W drng AGRTA BATR AGRTA []
6. [] (ŠLXT 'L BBA) Z[Y] (L) brny x[wtwy]

On the outside

1. mrd tyryn MN A(L)Š W KBR W
2. 'DNX (wy)sp(zn)

TRANSLATION

On the inside

1. From Tiridāt to my master Barān. I send much peace
2. and health to my master in the presence of the lord, a medley
3. of all kinds of peace (greetings). And now: I am relating to you the news,
4. namely, look, look, by the son three times
5. and for a long time, one letter after another ...
6. ... I sent to the gate of the [ord] Barān

On the outside

1. a man, Tīrēn, from the throne (?). (This took place) long ago and
2. much time (ago).

COMMENTARY

On the inside

Line 1. brny: The reading of the name of the recipient of the letter is not entirely certain. Other alternatives are: bbny, bbnw, bdny, bgny, brnz, bdnz, etc. The last letter is however unlikely to be *zayin*, as both occurrences of the word, in line 1 and in line 6, show it to be rather like *yod/waw*. Much less likely is the reading with penultimate *waw*: bdwy, bgwy, or brwy. The name of the addressee could possibly be a compound having as its two elements Bāb-naw. 'New father' may fit the present context, if line 4 is taken to mean 'a son for the third time', but this is hardly convincing.

Lines 1–2. šlm wšrrt šgy' hwšrt lmr'y: This greeting formula is widely attested in Aramaic (cf. Fitzmyer, 1974; Greenfield, 1982). It also occurs in the Parthian letter from Dura Europos. An echo of the same form of greeting is found in an interesting late Middle Persian amulet, to be published by Skjærvø

⁵ cf. MacKenzie (1967, 1971), followed by Skjærvø, in Humbach and Skjærvø (1978-83).

in vol. 6 of the *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*; cf. my comments on that text in the same journal.

Line 2. qdm is written above the line.

ktyt: the same word occurs also in the Dura Europos Parthian letter, as well as in Paikuli, Parthian, line 12 (Skjærvø, in Humbach and Skjærvø, 1978–83, Part 3.1: 40, §29). The occurrence in Paikuli is however unhelpful, as the word appears somewhat isolated and without a meaningful context. Henning took the word in the Dura Europos letter to be Aramaic, which he transcribed with upper case letters, and translated ‘fixedly’. He apparently understood it, as did Gignoux (1972: 55), to be related to the root qtt, attested in Syriac with the sense of ‘to remain fixed, stuck’. As the Aramaic word is nowhere attested in other forms of Aramaic except in Syriac, and as it does not possess the same formulaic usage in Syriac that it has in these two Parthian contexts, this explanation seems rather uncertain. What renders it more questionable is the observation, already made by Skjærvø, that in Parthian, an Aramaic *qof* would not be rendered by a *kaf*. Skjærvø (in Humbach and Skjærvø, 1978–83, Part 3.2: 66), who does not appear to have known of the Dura Europos occurrence, did not offer a translation of the word.

On the basis of its occurrence now in two Parthian documents, always in the same greeting formula, it strikes me as possible to regard the word as Aramaic *keṯīt*, passive participle of KTT. The Aramaic verb has two basic meanings, which point in two seemingly opposite directions: (1) ‘to join closely, to group together’, hence Jewish Aramaic *kittā* ‘band, party’, Syriac *kettā* ‘a lump or ball of earth’, perhaps also Jewish Aramaic *kattā* ‘concretion, alluvial mound’, and the plural form *kaṯkat(t)in* ‘crop’. (2) ‘to crush, pound’, used mostly in *pa’el*. The form *keṯīt* means in Jewish Aramaic ‘delicacies made from pounded wheat’; ‘scab’; ‘a compress of rags, pad’, where the first two meanings probably reflect the sense ‘to crush’, while the last meaning may belong to either of the two basic senses of the verb. The passive participle *keṯīt* could very well possess the meaning ‘a bunch’ or ‘a medley’. It thus could be the Aramaic equivalent of the Parthian *wispzan* ‘of all kinds, numerous’ which follows.

Line 3. wspzn: In the Parthian letter from Dura Europos, Henning read this word wspz(m)ny. The *mem* is, however, not visible on the photograph of the Dura Europos letter, although there is some space which may have been occupied by a letter before the penultimate letter. Its existence in Dura Europos may be open to doubt. It is certainly not found here.

nwyd: this could well be the word attested in New Persian under the forms *navēd*, *nuvēd*, *nibī*, *nubēd* ‘good news’.

xwd’t (Aramaic hwd’t): the fourth letter does not look like a good ‘*ayin*. This reading seems nevertheless preferable to others that have been considered. xngrt might be a possible reading of the visible signs, but would be difficult to explain. The verb *hangār-* ‘to think, reckon’ is attested to my knowledge only in Middle Persian. If it had been intended here, we might have expected a *kaf* to be written. XWD’YW is used in the Parthian version of Paikuli as an ideogram for ‘to inform’ (Humbach and Skjærvø 1978–83, Part 3.1: 38, §26).

Line 4: ’yk: the reading is uncertain. I have considered reading ’nd ‘so much’, but this seems unsatisfactory in the sentence. The reading given here is demanded by the direct speech that is introduced by the verb xwd’t. A detailed survey of its use in Middle Persian and Parthian was made by Skjærvø (Humbach and Skjærvø 1978–83, Part 3.1: 84).

’ynk ’ynk: the reading of these two words is uncertain. Other alternatives are: ’wnd, or ’ wrd. If this is the Parthian word *awand*, ‘so much’, one would

expect it to be written 'wnt (as it is written several times in ŠKZ). It should be noted that 'ynk is only attested in Middle Persian. Dr. Sims-Williams drew my attention to the Sogdian Ancient Letter III: 'PZYt β'δ β'δ δykh prsty'm 'HRZYβc 'yw δykh L' βyr'm "From time to time I send you a letter, but I don't receive one letter from you", or Kharoṣṭhi doc. N° 519: "I have sent a letter five or six times concerning sheep, but have not heard anything".' Dr. Sims-Williams adds, 'Perhaps the repeated 'ynk 'ynk (however it is to be read) is an expression meaning 'from time to time', like Sogd. β'δβ'δ.'

bprznd: the reading of the last letter is uncertain. It could be *dalet/reš* or possibly *yod/waw*.

rgl(y)[n]: cf. Behistun 1, btrty rgl'y, translated by Cowley (1923: 257) 'a second time', with a discussion on pp. 259 f. Greenfield and Porten (1982: 29) doubt the interpretation, but are unable to offer anything better. It should be noted that in the word-list on p. 62 they render rgl'y by 'campaign', which is hardly in place (unless they wish to read dgly').

The sentence has a peculiar construction, which may indicate that the reading is at fault. As I understand it, however, it seems to tell the addressee that the writer sent his letters with his son.

Line 5. wdrg: This should surely be the Western Middle Iranian word *drang* 'of long duration'. It seems hardly likely that it could be the proper name Widrang.

b'tr: This word is attested quite extensively in Aramaic in both spellings, btr and b'tr. Cf. Jean and Hoftijzer (1965) s.v. בַּתֵּר. It is also attested in inscriptional Parthian (Skjærvø, in Humbach and Skjærvø 1978–83, Part 3.1: 78, s.v. AHR).

On the outside

The reading of this portion of the ostrakon is particularly difficult because there are deep grooves on the rough surface of the clay on this side. Besides, the writer was here unusually careless in using his brush. The readings offered are therefore very tentative.

Line 1. I take it that the words mrd tyryn mn a(l)š are the ending of the phrase begun on the inner surface of the ostrakon.

a(l)š is attested as an ideogram for 'throne' only in the Middle Persian inscriptions, not in Parthian, under the form ALŠA. The reading of the second letter is uncertain. It could conceivably be a peculiarly written *pe*. It cannot of course be the conjunction APš, never attested in Parthian and out of place in this context. The word 'pš in Judaeo-Aramaic has the sense of 'wish, desire', but it is only used with possessive suffixes. If the existence of an unsuffixed Aramaic word 'pš can be established, the phrase mn 'pš could mean 'by (his own) will'. As an alternative, this could be a place name.

kbr is here taken to be the Aramaic word for 'long since, long ago'.

Line 2. 'dnx: This Aramaic word is used in Middle Persian inscriptions under the form 'DNA for *zamān* 'time', but has so far not come up in Parthian.

wypzn: If the reading is correct, the meaning of this Iranian expression is not only 'of all kinds', 'of various kinds', but also simply 'many, much'.

Parthian ostrakon 2 (pl. III)

The second Parthian ostrakon in the collection of the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania, B2729, has two lines. It measures 7.2 × 4.5 cm. It does not seem as if anything is missing at the top. I suggest the following reading:

1. tyrwyn 'L

2. gwtrdt

Translation: (1) Tīrwēn to (2) Gōtardāt.

The reading of the letters is uncertain. The ending of the first line is puzzling, but the last letter seems to be l, with the vertical stroke written carelessly beside the round base rather than on top of it. One should, however, take into account the possibility that this is not a word but a numerical figure, as often occurs in ostraca (cf. the Qumis ostracon, with Livshits's improved readings).

The names are not otherwise attested. Tīrwēn can be explained as 'one who sees the deity Tīr(i)'. The well-known personal name Gōtarz, well attested in the Parthian period, probably lies at the base of the second name, with the final consonant omitted, as happens sometimes, at least in later transmissions of the name (cf. Justi, 1895: 118). The suffix *dāt* suggests however that Gōtar(z) is a divine name, but this is so far unattested, to my knowledge.

The abrupt and elliptic style of the address, without MN and without continuation, probably signifies that this is just a draft, an attempt at writing, and not an actual document. It could alternatively be a tag attached to an object, which marked to whom it was destined to be given. I have attempted to read the first word as an Aramaic verb, perhaps a derivative of 'TY, which in *haf^{el}* would mean 'to bring', or of NTN, which means 'to give', but the range of possible readings does not seem to favour such an interpretation: twtyn, t(n)tyn, tytn are within this range of possibilities, but none of them seems satisfactory.

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