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Middle Persian Papyri, Ostraca and Parchments: An Introduction

ARASH ZEINI

Freie Universität Berlin

Little is known of Sasanian (224–651 CE) political and religious history that has been gleaned from Iranian texts dating to that era. The epigraphic evidence is limited to a small number of royal inscriptions belonging to the early Sasanian kings, a handful of inscriptions commissioned by the third century Mazdean priest Kartir and a number of private inscriptions. Other contemporary Iranian sources include the numismatic evidence and most likely the Middle Persian texts of the Manichaeans. The Zoroastrian Middle Persian texts, although commonly believed to contain Sasanian material, mostly received their redactions in the 9th/10th centuries, remaining ahistorical even in the face of seemingly historical events.¹ In absence of contemporary Iranian historical writings, scholars of Sasanian history rely on non-Iranian sources, contemporary or not, such as Syriac and Jewish texts, and Armenian or early Islamic historiographies. However, apart from the inscriptions and the late Zoroastrian corpus, a sizeable number of Middle Persian (Pahlavi) documents, mostly economic and administrative in nature, have also survived. While these elude a precise dating, research indicates that they belong to the late Sasanian and early Islamic era.

The Middle Persian documents are variously preserved on parchment, papyrus and textiles. The earliest of these date from the Sasanian occupation of Egypt and are thus more securely located in time (618–629 CE). The majority of these documents hail from different stages of finds at the Fayyūm oasis in Egypt. While most are written on papyrus, at least two are on parchment and two on fabric (Sachau 1878:114). A large number of the documents of the Vienna collection of Pahlavi papyri, dating back to the late 19th century and held at the Papyrussammlung of the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, are from the Fayyūm oasis. Today, the Vienna

1. See, for instance, the accounts in *Dēnkard* 4 of the transmission of the *Avesta*. For my approach to these texts as a type of historiography, see Zeini (Forthcoming 2018).

collection is dispersed in Vienna, Berlin and St. Petersburg.² An Iranian group of Pahlavi documents form part of what has come to be known as the *Pahlavi Archive*. These are believed to date from the late 7th to mid 8th centuries (Weber 2008c). The *Pahlavi Archive* encompasses nearly 300 documents (Azarpay 2003a; Azarpay, Martin, Schwartz & Weber 2003), the majority of which are kept in Bancroft Library (see Azarpay 2003b), Berkeley, California, and in the Institut für Iranistik of the Freie Universität Berlin. The latter batch are often referred to as the ‘Berliner Pahlavi-Dokumente’. A smaller number of *Archive* documents are kept in California Museum of Ancient Art, Los Angeles, and in private collections. Although work on the *Pahlavi Archive* remains ongoing, thanks to the efforts of Dieter Weber and Philippe Gignoux a substantial number have been edited or discussed (see Gignoux 2010a; Weber 2006, 2008a).³

Scholars have known of the Pahlavi documents since the late 19th century.⁴ Sachau (1878) was the first to publish on the Pahlavi papyri, which had been found in Fayyūm (Egypt). In his brief note, he offers observations on the palaeography of the 87 documents that were available to him at “Königliches Museum” in Berlin. Although a number of scholars continued to publish on the Pahlavi documents, it was Hansen (1938) who carried out the first systematic examination of Middle Persian documents preserved in museums in Berlin. The corpus subsequently failed to attract wider academic interest, partly due to the immense philological problems reading the texts engendered. Until de Menasce (1957) importantly published facsimiles of a number of papyri from Egypt, some of which he had edited and discussed earlier (see de Menasce 1953).

More than a decade after de Menasce, Weber (1969) started his forays into Pahlavi papyrology and in 1984 published a survey of the young discipline, which he was by then actively shaping (see Weber 1984). Weber (1992) later edited the papyri published by de Menasce (1957), extending them by fragments from the Heidelberg collection and others kept elsewhere. In this volume he also discussed the compositional structure of the Pahlavi letter fragments (p. 233–235) and included editions of parchments and ostraca.⁵ This publication triggered a detailed review by Huysse (1995), offering at the same time the second survey on the state of the discipline.

2. Weber (2007) provides more detail on the Vienna collection and its faith.

3. On the *Pahlavi Archive* in general and its historical significance in particular, see Gignoux (2008, 2010b), respectively.

4. A comprehensive bibliography on Middle Persian papyrology is beyond the scope of this introduction. An annotated bibliography is under preparation by the present author.

5. On the compositional structure of the letters, see also Weber (2008d:804–809) and Gignoux (2008).

Weber (2003) then published the papyri, parchment and textile fragments of the Berlin collection. The above mentioned ‘Berliner Pahlavi-Dokumente’, which belong to the *Pahlavi Archive*, were also edited and discussed by Weber (2008a).⁶

Philippe Gignoux has been another defining voice in research on Pahlavi documents. Gignoux (2004, 2010b) has, for instance, outlined the importance of these documents to a better understanding of the economy and jurisprudence of late Sasanian, early Islamic Iran, an era once described by Zarrinkoub (1957) as ‘two centuries of silence’.⁷ Among Gignoux’s long list of publications, his recent work on the so-called *Archive of Tabaristān* stands out (see Gignoux 2012, 2014).

In recent years, Zeini (2015) has discussed the spelling of *namāz* in the Pahlavi documents and provided an edition and commentary on a papyrus fragment from Vienna (see Zeini 2016).

The fragmentary nature of the extant material on the one hand, the challenging writing style of the scribes on the other, do not leave the researcher with any option but a rigorous philological examination in order to construct context and meaning (see, for instance, Weber 2008b). Yet, due to the documents’ relevance for the study of economic history and administrative activities of that era, a multidisciplinary approach has been at the heart of the study of the Middle Persian documents. As such, these documents stand together with the Sogdian Ancient Letters and the Bactrian documents in attracting interest from philologists as well as historians.

It is often assumed that the Middle Persian literature, despite its younger age, preserves Sasanian ideas and thought. While this assumption may be true, religious literature and theological speculation inevitably reflect the perspective of a narrow sliver of a society, in this case the Zoroastrian priesthood, which was eager to preserve its religious heritage in the midst of a changing society. By contrast, the Middle Persian documents—administrative and economic documents, as well as private communications—bear direct witness to the broader realities of their own time. Intimately preoccupied with issues of daily life, they open a window onto Iranian society otherwise unknown from the Middle Persian literature.

Dr. Arash Zeini
Freie Universität Berlin
Institut für Iranistik

6. These documents are currently being re-edited by Weber.

7. Zarrinkoub laments the lack of historical records written in Persian during the first centuries following the Islamic conquest of Iran. Although his book is rife with nationalism and anti-Arab sentiments, it remains popular amongst Iranians. The significance of the Pahlavi documents for these centuries was highlighted by Touraj Daryaee in lectures in the UK.

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