

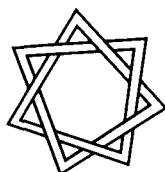
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PARTHIANS JOKING*

To the memory of Ahmad Tafazzoli

In April of 1992 Iranian scholars — archaeologists, students of local lore and linguists working in the Department of cultural heritage of the province (*ostan*) of Khorasan investigated rock inscriptions and petroglyphs in the gorges known as Lākh-Mazār, not far from the settlement of Kūch (29 km to the south-east of Bīrjand). The results of their work have been published in two articles in Persian in the report entitled “A Series of Scholarly Works. Rock Images of Lākh-Mazār” [1]. The outstanding Iranian scholar, late professor Ahmad Tafazzoli kindly supplied me with a copy of this publication; some inscriptions seemed to me a bit amusing.

Through the gorges of Lākh-Mazār runs the road from Khorasan to Kerman. Travellers have left on the rocks numerous inscriptions — Arabic (Kufic and later, 35 inscriptions in all, some of them with dates of the lunar Hijra calendar — 847/1443—44, 891/1486, 902/1496—97, 972/1564—65, 985/1577—78, 1115/1703—04) [2], New Persian (8 inscriptions), all of them very brief, containing personal names and Qur’ānic formulas (only in Arabic) [3], and Parthian, more lengthy [4], which are probably the latest Parthian texts found within the Iranian territory [5].

The authors of the report date the Lākh-Mazār Parthian inscriptions to the fifth century. This date, in their opinion, is confirmed by the finds of the coins of king Kavad I (488—531) in the gorges and by the presence of an engraved image representing a man’s head in a crown in which Khānīkī sees the portrait of this king [6].

In the “Report” the Parthian inscriptions are reproduced on 6 photographs and 5 plates of tracings [7]; it is rather difficult to use and read them, because many characters are doubtless distorted. It can be noticed, however, that in the tracings among other inscriptions one can distinguish variants (“drafts”) of the same Parthian texts, which are very carefully (even calligraphically, if we can apply the term here) executed on other rocks by the same hand with a clear difference between *r* and *d* (the last one with a diacritic below the character) and a distinct form of *h*.

Rasūl Bashshāsh, who published the transliteration, transcription and translation into Persian of the six most clearly distinguishable Parthian inscriptions of Lākh-Mazār, made a conclusion that they were ritual, telling about religious ceremonies in honour of the Zoroastrian deities

of Truth and Righteousness. The word *drwdšt* ‘firm, righteous’, which is present in some of the inscriptions, Bashshāsh associated with the Middle Persian name of the religious sect of *drist-dēnān*, lit. ‘(with) the right faith’, connected with the Mazdakite movement. Bashshāsh [8] in this connection cites the well-known passage from the Byzantine historian John Malala [9] about the arrival in Rome in the reign of Diocletian of Bundos the Manichean, whose teaching contradicted the doctrine of Mani, and who then moved to Iran where his teaching, according to Malala, became known under the name of (*tōn*) *Laristhenōn* — the rendering of the Middle Persian *drist-dēnān* [10].

The second subject, which, in the opinion of Bashshāsh, is considered in the Parthian inscriptions of Lākh-Mazār, is the improvement of the Zoroastrian ritual of *nōk-nawār* (variants: *nāyewar*, *nāwar*) connected with the coming of age (15 years) when a boy received his sacred belt (*kustī-bandī*), and the performance of the rites through which faithful Zoroastrians attain the priestly rank of *hērbed* [11].

The reading of the Parthian inscriptions from Lākh-Mazār led me to the conclusion that they have nothing to do with Zoroastrian ritual practices as well as with the Mazdakite *drist-dēnān* sect. The Lākh-Mazār inscriptions present an example of humorous texts, which rarely occur in Iranian epigraphics. Their humour, one has to admit, is rather primitive, but let us be lenient towards the fifth-century Parthian jokes. The authors of these inscriptions were six Parthian lads working as guides on the mountain road running through the gorges. Their names were Mihrbān (*Mtrybn*, lit. ‘possessing the brilliance of Mithra’), Wišādewēnēn (*Wyštywynyn*, ‘with open gaze’) [12], Ardaxšīr (*rthštr*, ‘having the favour of [the deity of] Righteousness and Power’) [13], Girdāzād (*Grt’z’t*, ‘having the free [celestial] orb’), Paryōž-naw (*Prgwz-nw* ‘new victor’) and Wahrām (*Wrhr’m*, ‘[created by] Veretragn’). Their “visiting card” is the inscription in which their names are enumerated [14]. These lads were not remarkable for their modesty, which is testified by their statement [15]: (1) *mtrybn* (2) *wyštywynyn W mtrybn* (3) *MNW n’yt drwdšt* (4) *drysyd sr HWYt | Mihrbān Wišādewēnēn ud Mihrbān kē nāyēd dru(w)dīšt ud drisīd sar ahēd* | (“[Says] Mihrbān: if Wišādewēnēn and Mihrbān take anyone across [the

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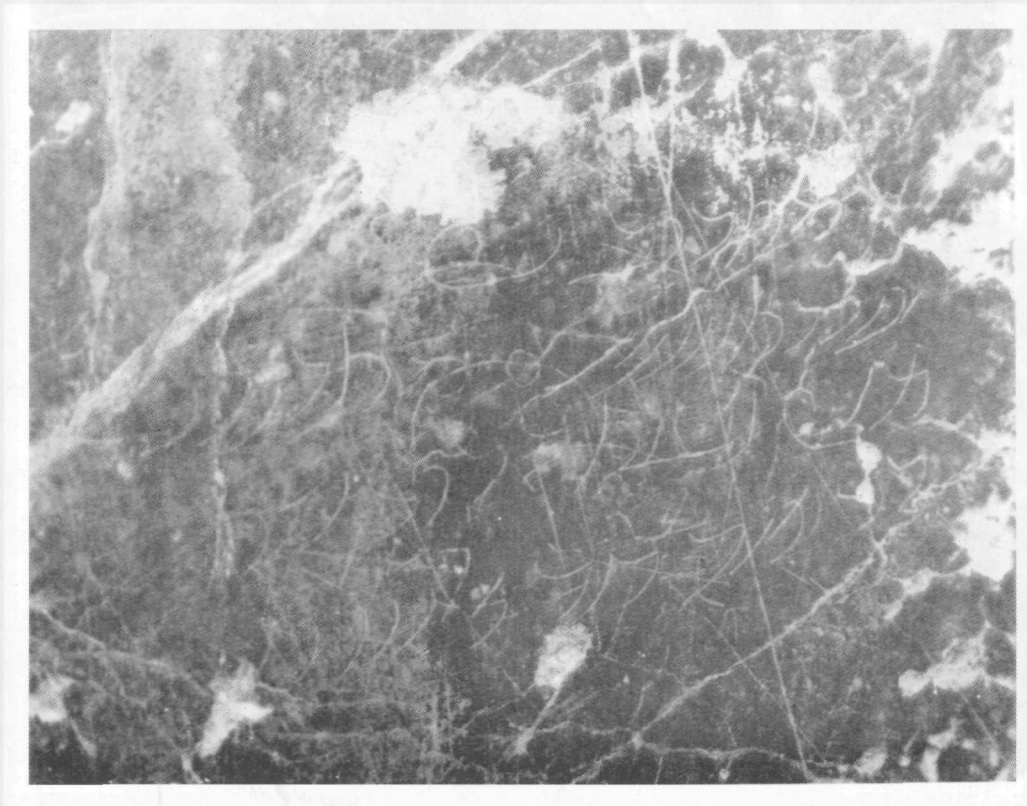


Fig. 2

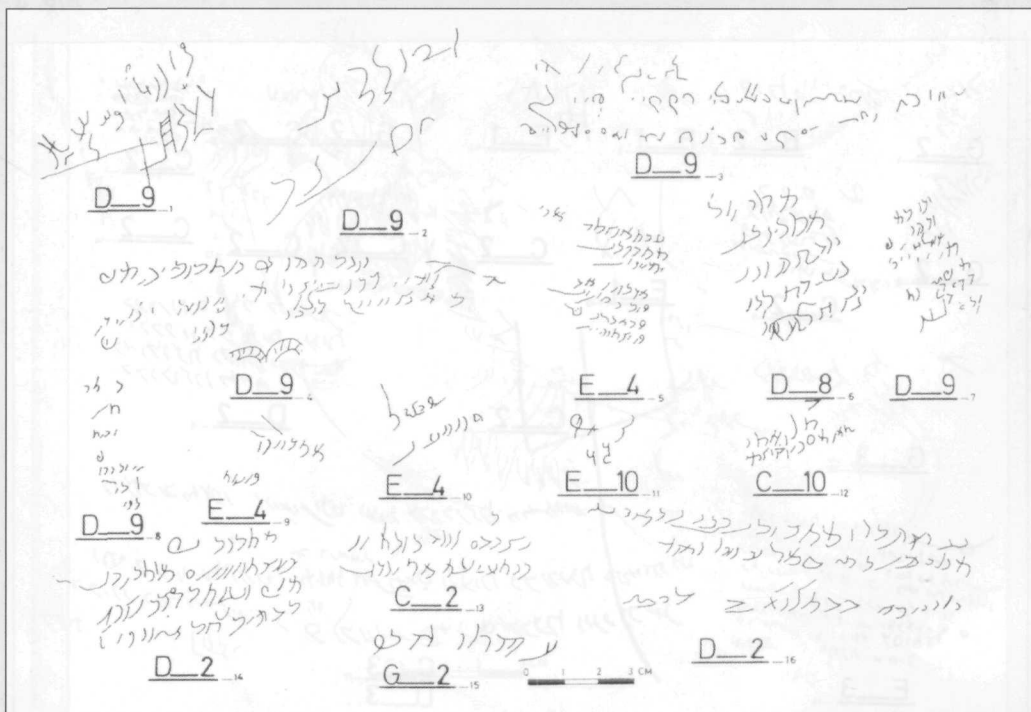


Fig. 3



Fig. 4

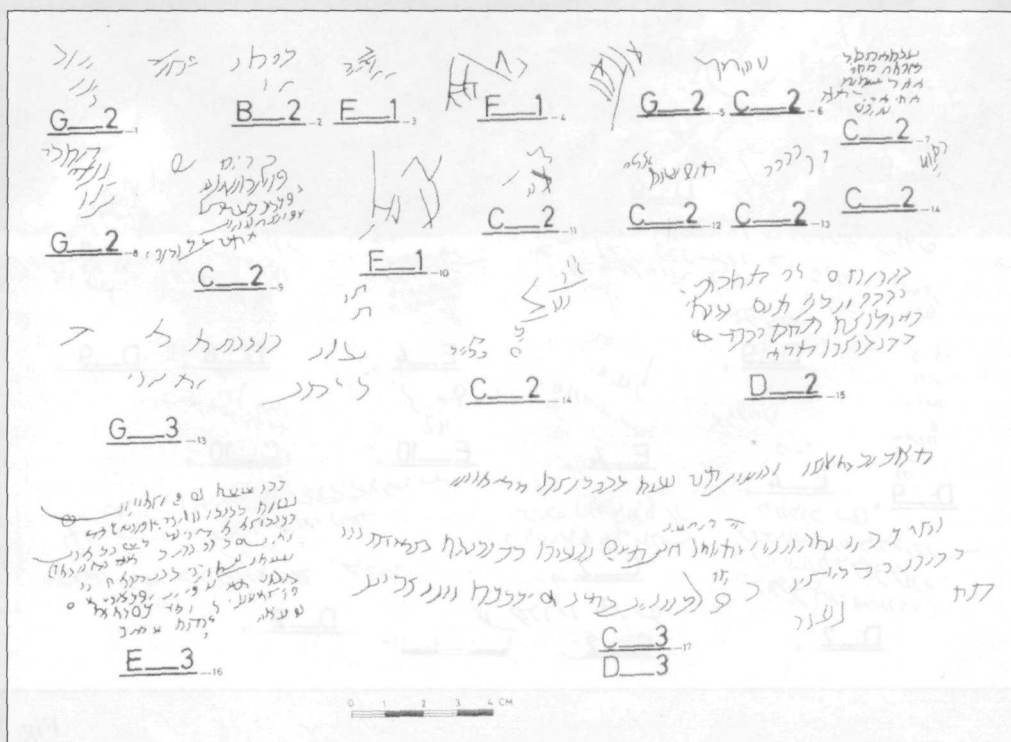


Fig. 5



Fig. 6

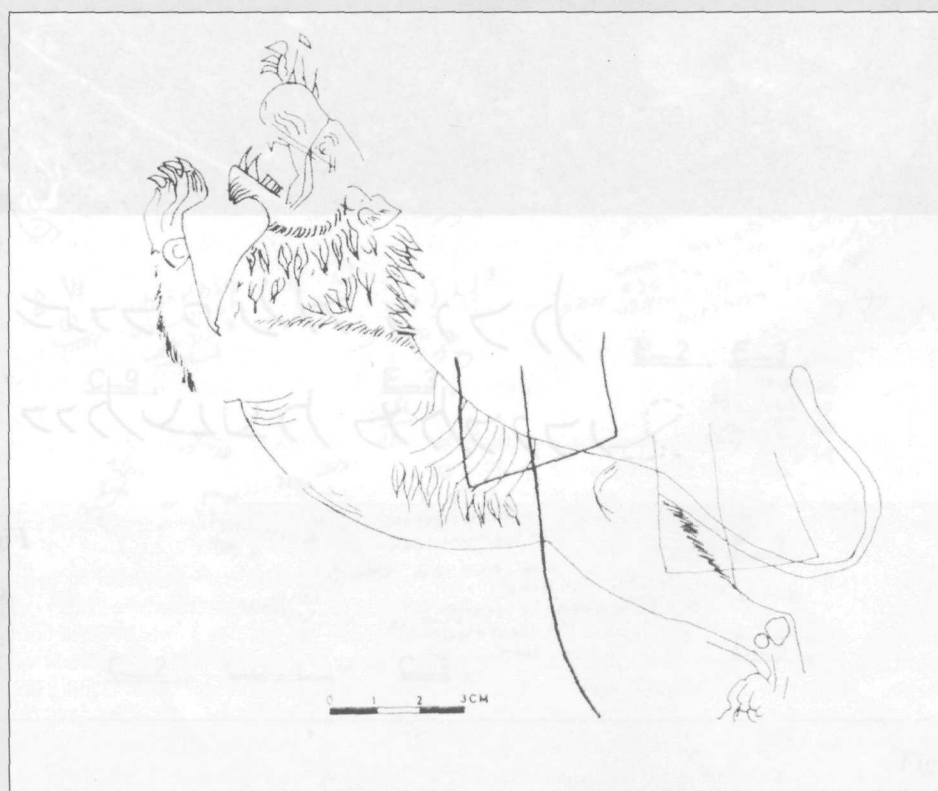


Fig. 7



שנהגה לראשונה
במלחמה בארבעה

Fig. 8



Fig. 9

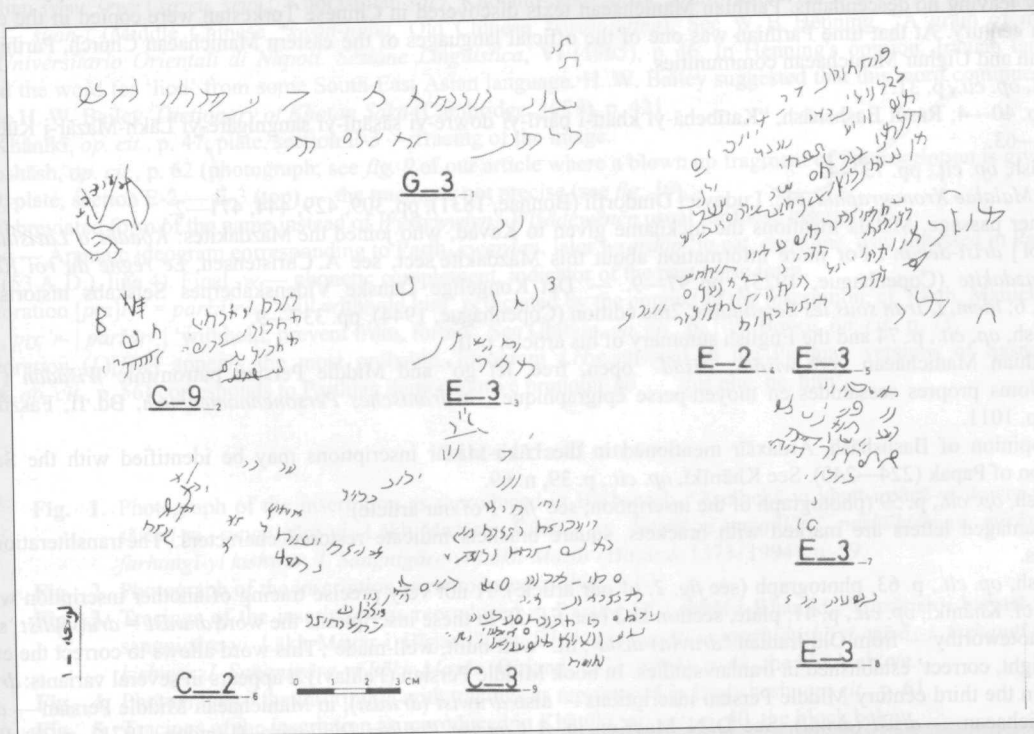


Fig. 10

mountain], he stays in good order (lit. ‘correct, right’) and his head sound (?)”) [16].

That they were proud of their profession is revealed in another one-line inscription [17]: *mtrybn W wyštywynyn MNW n'yt drwdšt thsyt | Mihrbān ud Wišādewēnēn kē nāyēd dru(w)dišt tuxsēd* | (“Mihrbān and Wišādewēnēn [if they] take anyone through, will strive to take him in good order”) [18].

Those lads were probably taking pleasure making jokes and laughing at each other. For some reason they did not like Ardaxšīr's donkey, of which they twice informed the world — in a crudely scratched inscription and in another one, clearly carved upon a rock with a firm hand [19]: (1) *'rthštr* (2) *hwtwy pty* (3) *HMR 'yysyt* (4) *pty HMR MH* (5) *'nywš | Ardaxšīr xwadāw pad xar āyisēd pad xar ēē aneyōš* | (“Lord Ardaxšīr comes upon a donkey, the donkey which is out of his mind (lit. ‘which is mad’)”) [20].

The guides did not lack certain artistic abilities. Two of them carved on the rocks several images of lions [21]. Upon one of them they wrote [22]: (1) *šgrw ZNH kyrt* (2) *grt'z't (W) mtrybn | im šagru kird Girdāzād ud Mihrbān* | (“This lion has been made by Girdāzād and Mihrbān”) [23].

Once three of the lads decided to improve their rock gallery by adding some images of bears [24]. Upon one of them they wrote [25]: (1) *hṛsk ZNH kyrt* (2) *wyštyw(y)n W 'rthšt[r]* (3) *W MNW p(t)y ZNH hṛsk* (4) *HMR 'KLw W š't [HMR?]* 'KLw (5) *wyštyw(y)n (L)[Hw prz]ryt | im xirsak kird Wišādewēn Mihrbān ud Ardaxšī[r] ud kē pad im xirsak mad wxard ud šād [mad?] wxard Wišādewēn* [26] *h[ō parzā]rēd* | (“This bear Wišādewēn, Mihrbān and Ardaxšīr have made. And [if] anyone have drunk [27] wine upon this bear and drank [wine?] with joy, then Wišādewēn will [withho]ld [28] [him] [29] [from further libations]”).

Such are the texts of the Parthian inscriptions on the rocks in the gorges of Lākh-Mazār, as far as it is possible to read them from photographs and tracings published in the report made by Iranian scholars. Unfortunately, these tracings do not allow to produce a reliable reading of a number of these inscriptions. Those, however, which can be read and interpreted, demonstrate the creative activities of the fifth century Parthian guides, whose simple jokes have been recorded on the rocks of Lākh-Mazār.

Notes

1. Rajab-‘Alī Labbāf-i Khānīkī, Rasūl Bashshāsh, *Silsile-yi maqālāt-i pazhūhishī-yi mīrās-i farhangī-yi kishwar. 1. Sangnigāre-yi Lākh-Mazār* (Bīrjand, 1373/1994).

2. Rajab-‘Alī Labbāf-i Khānīkī, “Guzārish-i barrasī-yi sangnigāre-yi Lākh-Mazār-i Bīrjand”, in *Silsile-yi maqālāt*, pp. 22—3.

3. *Ibid.*

4. It is difficult to establish the exact number of Parthian inscriptions. Khānīkī (*ibid.*) mentions that there are more than 80 Parthian and Middle Persian inscriptions; however I could not find a single Middle Persian one among the photographs or tracings reproduced in the publication (pp. 40—3). There are photographs of six Parthian inscriptions and tracings of about forty. The tracings, however, are not precise and in most cases it is difficult to distinguish the borders between different Parthian inscriptions.

5. The Parthian language once widespread in Eastern Iran (Parthia, Margiana, Gyrcania) and Central Asia disappeared probably in the sixth century leaving no descendants. Parthian Manichaean texts discovered in Chinese Turkestan were copied in the eighth—first half of the tenth century. At that time Parthian was one of the official languages of the eastern Manichaean Church, Parthian texts were copied in Sogdian and Uighur Manichaean communities.

6. Khānīkī, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 40—4; Rasūl Bashshāsh, “Katūbehā-yi khatt-i pārtī-yi dowre-yi sāsānī-yi sangnigāre-yi Lākh-Mazār-i Kūch”, *Silsile-yi maqālāt*, pp. 58—63.

8. Bashshāsh, *op. cit.*, pp. 73—4.

9. *Ioannis Malalae Xronographia*, rec. Ludovici Dindorfii (Bonnae, 1831), pp. 309, 429, 444, 471—2.

10. In another passage, Malala mentions the nickname given to Kavad, who joined the Mazdakites: *Kōadēs o Laristhenos* ‘Kavad [from the sect of] *drist-dēnān*’. For more information about this Mazdakite sect, see A. Christensen, *Le règne du roi Kawād I et le communisme mazdakite* (Copenhagen, 1925), pp. 97—9. — Det Kongelige Danske Videnskaberne Selskabs historisk-filologiske Meddelelser, IX, 6; *idem*, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides*, 2me édition (Copenhagen, 1944), pp. 337—9.

11. Bashshāsh, *op. cit.*, p. 74 and the English summary of his article, p. II.

12. Cf. Parthian Manichaean verb *wiśāh-*, *wiśād-* ‘open, free, let go’ and Middle Persian patronymic *Wišādān* (*Wš't'n*), see Ph. Gignoux, “Noms propres sassanides en moyen-persé épigraphique”, in *Iranisches Personennamenbuch*, Bd. II, Faszikel 2 (Wien, 1986), p. 184, No. 1011.

13. In the opinion of Bashshāsh, Ardaxšīr mentioned in the Lākh-Mazār inscriptions may be identified with the Sasanian king Ardaxšīr I, the son of Papak (224—240). See Khānīkī, *op. cit.*, p. 39, n. 69.

14. Bashshāsh, *op. cit.*, p. 59 (photograph of the inscription; see *fig. 1* of our article).

15. Partly damaged letters are marked with brackets, square brackets indicate restored characters. The transliteration marks the division into lines.

16. Bashshāsh, *op. cit.*, p. 63, photograph (see *fig. 2*, of our article). A not very precise tracing of another inscription with the same text (a “draft”?), cf. Khānīkī, *op. cit.*, p. 41, plate, section D-2 (see *fig. 3*). In these inscriptions the word *drwdšt* = *dru(w)dišt* ‘strong, right, correct’ is most noteworthy — from Old Iranian **druv(a)-dišta-*, lit. ‘well-built, well-made’. This word allows to correct the etymology of Persian *durust* ‘right, correct’ established in Iranian studies. In book Middle Persian (Pahlavi) it appears in several variants: *drust*, *druwist*, (*drwst*, *drwyst*), in the third century Middle Persian inscriptions — also *druwist* (*drwdst*), in Manichaean Middle Persian — *drist* (*dryst*), in Parthian Manichaean — *društ* (*drwšt*). See D. N. MacKenzie, *A Concise Pahlavi Dictionary* (London, 1971), p. 28; Ph. Gignoux, *Glossaire des Inscriptions Pehlevies et Parthes* (London, 1972) p. 22. — Corpus inscriptionum iranicarum. Supplementary series, vol. I; H. S. Nyberg, *A Manual of Pahlavi*, vol. II (Wiesbaden, 1974), p. 67; M. Boyce, “A word-list of Manichaean Middle Persian and Parthian”, *Acta Iranica*, 9a (1977), p. 35. From the nineteenth century this word was traced back to Old Iranian **druvišta-*, superlative form of **druv(a)-* ‘healthy, strong’, see Nyberg, *op. cit.*, p. 67. Parthian *drwdšt* | *dru(w)dišt* in the Lākh-Mazār inscriptions allow to reconsider this interpretation: Persian *durust* and the Middle Persian and Parthian forms cited above derive from Old Iranian **druv(a)-dišta-* — from *druv(a)-* ‘healthy, strong’ and **dišta-* — perfect participle from the root **di-* ‘to build, to make’. The word **druv(a)-dišta-* is

judging by the context of the inscription, has a similar meaning — ‘healthy, prosperous’. Its etymology is not clear to me. Bashshāsh (*op. cit.*, p. 63) reads *dry[s]d* instead of *drysyd*, *prhwyt* | *farxwēd* | instead of *sr HWYt*.

17. Bashshāsh, *op. cit.*, p. 61 (photograph; see *fig. 4* of our article); Khānīkī, *op. cit.*, p. 40, plate, section C-2 — D-2, the tracing is not precise (see *fig. 5* of our article).

18. The translation “...then they will take great care [to take him through]” is less likely. Bashshāsh (*op. cit.*, p. 61) suggested to read the final part of the inscription in the following way: *t/hx[syt drwdt...]*, however, there is no text after *thsy* neither on the photograph nor in the tracing. It is the first time, as far as I can judge, that the present stem *tuxs-* ‘be laborious, strive, work’, appears in Parthian. In the published Manichaean Parthian texts this stem has the form *tuxš-*, the same is in the Middle- and New Persian (see MacKenzie, *op. cit.*, p. 84; Boyce, *op. cit.*, p. 88; A. Ghilain, *Essai sur la langue parthe* (Louvain, 1939), p. 48), Old Persian *ham-taxš-* ‘be diligent, strive’, Avest. *θwaxšah-* ‘zeal’, Old Indian *tvákṣas-* ‘energy’. See W. Brandenstein and M. Mayrhofer, *Handbuch des Altpersischen* (Wiesbaden, 1964), p. 144; M. Mayrhofer, “Über Kontaminationen der indoiranischen Sippen von ai. *takṣ-*, *twakṣ-*, **tvarš-*”, *Indo-Iranica. Mélanges présentés à Georg Morgenstierne à l’occasion de son soixante-dixième anniversaire* (Wiesbaden, 1964), pp. 142–8.

19. Bashshāsh, *op. cit.*, p. 58 (photograph; see *fig. 6* of our article); Khānīkī, *op. cit.*, p. 40, plate, section C-2 — the tracing is not precise (see *fig. 5* of our article).

20. Bashshāsh for *HMR* takes the meaning ‘wine’; ‘wine’ in Aramaic is *ḥamar*, ‘donkey, ass’ — *ḥemār*, in writing these words are homographs. The verbal form *’ysyt* | *āyisēd* is noteworthy for the presence in it of the Praes. stem *āyis-*, from Old Iranian **ā-isa-* (cf. Sogdian *’ys* | *āys*, *ēs*), which, as demonstrated by Parthian Manichaean texts, in the dialect, which had formed the basis of the written Parthian, as early as the third century contracted into *ās-* (see Ghilain, *op. cit.*, p. 49, n. 10, p. 103; Boyce, *op. cit.*, p. 15). Cf. also the skilful explanation of the structure of the place-name Khorasan in the poem *Wis-u Rāmīn* by Fakhr al-Dīn Gūrgānī drawn by H. Humbach and Gh. Davary when analysing Parthian *ās-*: *Khushā jāyā bar(r)-u būm-i Khurāsān* | *Dar ō bāsh-u jahān-rā mēkhur āsān* | *Zabān-i pahlawī har k-ō shināsād* | *Khurāsān ān buwad ki-z-ōy khūr āsād* | *Khūr āsād pahlawī bāshād khūr āyad* | *’Irāq-u Pārs-rā khūr z-ō barāyad* | *Khurāsān-rā buwad ma’ni khūr-āyān* | *Kujā az ōy khūr āyad sōy-i Ērān* (“O, how good is the land of Khorasan! / Live (lit. ‘be’) there and happily (‘easily’) enjoy peace. / He, who understands Pahlavi (= Parthian) language, / [he knows] that Khorasan [is the land] from which the sun comes. Pahlavi *khūr āsād* [means the same as Persian] *khūr āyad*. / To Iraq and Pars the sun comes from there. / The meaning of the word Khorasan — the coming sun, / the place whence from the sun comes to Iran”). See H. Humbach and Gh. Davary, “Der Name Khorasan”, *Anjoman-e farhang-e Iran-e bastan, Bulletin. Anquetil Duperron Bicennary Memorial Volume*, XI/2 (Tehran, 1973), pp. 8–9.

Noteworthy is also the word *nywš* | *aneōš* | ‘mad’, its first part being privative prefix *ane-* (or *ani-* ?) for the first time attested in Parthian instead of the usual *an-* and *anā-* (cf. Parthian Manichaean *an-abyād* ‘not-remembered, forgotten’, *anā-sag* ‘innumerable, countless’). See Boyce, *op. cit.*, pp. 11–2.

21. Khānīkī (*op. cit.*, pp. 17–8, 47 — tracing of the images) marks drawings of lions representing the appearance of these animals and their rage with much precision (cf. *fig. 7* of our article).

22. Bashshāsh, *op. cit.*, p. 60 (photograph; see *fig. 8* of our article); Khānīkī, *op. cit.*, p. 40, plate, section C-2 — not a very precise tracing of the inscription (cf. *fig. 5* of our article).

23. *šgrw* | *šagru* | ‘lion’ — an earlier form with final *-u*, than Parthian Manichaean *šagr*, Middle Persian *šagr* (> New Persian *šēr*). Cf. also Sogdian *šyru*, *šryw* | *šaryru*, *šryy* |, Khorasmian *sary*, Khotano-Saka *sarau*. From Iranian *saryē* the word was apparently borrowed by Chinese — *suan-i* (Middle Chinese **swān-gngiei*, Old Chinese **swān-gngieg*). See W. B. Henning, “A grain of mustard”, *Annali dell’Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli. Sezione Linguistica*, VI (1965), p. 46. In Henning’s opinion, Iranian languages in their turn borrowed the word for ‘lion’ from some South-East Asian language. H. W. Bailey suggested that this word continues an Old Iranian prototype. See H. W. Bailey, *Dictionary of Khotan Saka* (Cambridge, 1979), p. 421.

24. Cf. Khānīkī, *op. cit.*, p. 47, plate, section E-3 — tracing of the image.

25. Bashshāsh, *op. cit.*, p. 62 (photograph; see *fig. 9* of our article where a blown up fragment of the inscription is given); cf. Khānīkī, *op. cit.*, p. 40, plate, section E-2 — E-3 (top) — the tracing is not precise (see *fig. 10*).

26. An abbreviated form of the name instead of *Wyštywynyn* | *Wišādewēnēn* usual for these inscriptions.

27. *’KLw* — Aramaic ideogram corresponding to Parth. *xwardan*, later *wxardan* ‘to eat, consume, use’ (attested in Parthian document *Avroman III* (53 A. D.), line 4). Final *-w* — phonetic complement, indicator of the past tense form.

28. Restoration *[prz]ryt = parzārēd* ‘will withhold him’ is dictated by the context of the inscription, cf. Parth. Manich. *prc’r* | *parzār* | ‘prohibition’, *prc’r-* | *parzār-* | ‘withhold, prevent from, forbid’. See Ghilain, *op. cit.*, p. 105; Boyce, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

29. Restoration *(L)[Hw]* appears the most probable. Ideogram *LHw* attested in the Parthian versions of Sasanian inscriptions (see Gignoux, *op. cit.*, p. 56) corresponds to Parthian demonstrative pronoun *hō* — ‘this one, he, him’.

Illustrations

Fig. 1. Photograph of the inscription as reproduced in Bashshash, “Kaībehā-yi khatt-i pārtī-yi dowrc-yi sāsānī-yi sangnigāre-yi Lākh-Mazār-i Kūch”, in *Silsile-yi maqālāt-i pazhūhishī-yi mīrās-i farhangī-yi kishwar. I. Sangnigāre-yi Lākh-Mazār* (Bīrjand, 1373/1994), p. 59.

Fig. 2. Photograph of the inscription as reproduced in *ibid.*, p. 63.

Fig. 3. Tracings of the inscription as reproduced in Rajab-‘Alī Labbāf-i Khānīkī, “Guzārish-i barrasī-yi sangnigāre-yi Lākh-Mazār-i Bīrjand”, in *Silsile-yi maqālāt-i pazhūhishī-yi mīrās-i farhangī-yi kishwar. I. Sangnigāre-yi Lākh-Mazār* (Bīrjand, 1373/1994), p. 41, the block above.

Fig. 4. Photograph of the inscription with tracings as reproduced in Bashshash, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

Fig. 5. Tracings of the inscription as reproduced in Khānīkī, *op. cit.*, p. 40, the block below.

Fig. 6. Photograph of the inscription as reproduced in Bashshash, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

Fig. 7. The drawing of the lion jumping, Khānīkī, *op. cit.*, p. 47, tracing.

Fig. 8. Photograph of the inscription as reproduced in Bashshash, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

Fig. 9. Photograph of the inscription as reproduced in Bashshash, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

Fig. 10. Tracings of the inscription as reproduced in Khānīkī, *op. cit.*, p. 40, the block above.