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Detail from above the entrance of Tehran's fire temple, 1286š/1917–18. Photo by © Shervin Farridnejad

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Samuel Jordan Center for Persian Studies and Culture
University of California, Irvine
1st Floor Humanities Gateway
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Contents

Articles

1	Alisher Begmatov: Two Sogdian Toponyms in Arabic and Chinese Sources, and their Attestation as Commodity Terms in Sogdian and Uyghur Economical Documents	1
2	Alberto Cantera: Avestan texts in context (2): the <i>Nērang ī ātaxš abrōxtan</i> and the “eternal fire”	7
3	Henry P. Colburn: A Parthian Shot of Potential Arsacid Date	35
4	Omar Coloru: The city of brotherly love. The language of family affection in the Artaxiad dynasty between the Hellenistic and the Parthian world	41
5	Majid Daneshgar: Persianate Aspects of the Malay-Indonesian World: Some Rare Manuscripts in the Leiden University Library	51
6	Charles G. Häberl: <i>priuš</i> and <i>zur</i> : Two Transliteration Artifacts in the Mandaean <i>Great Treasure</i>	79
7	Charles W. King: The Hunnic attack on Persia: Chronology, context, and the accounts of Priscus and Thomas	85
8	Agnes Korn: Notes on a Middle Persian sound change: Greek Ἀνθίτις and features of vowel length	101
9	D. T. Potts: The spurious fifth century date for the cultivation of sugar cane (<i>Saccharum officinarum</i>) in Khuzestan	111
10	Hossein Sheikh: From Mesopotamia to Khotan: Payment clauses in Eastern Middle Iranian languages and their historical backgrounds	118
11	محمد توکلیان: یک امپراطور ناشناخته در نقش برجسته شاپور یکم ساسانی: تنگ چوگان؛ بیشاپور ۳	137

Reviews

12	Hossein Sheikh: Scheunchen, Tobias. Cosmology, law, and elites in late antiquity: Marriage and slavery in Zoroastrianism, Eastern Christianity, and Islam (Arbeitsmaterialien zum Orient 32). Baden-Baden: Ergon Verlag. 2019. 144 pages. ISBN-13: 978-3956504679. 32,00 €.	160
13	Sun Wujun: Review of Ge, Chengyong [葛承雍]. Hu Han Zhongguo yu Wailai Wenming 胡漢中國與外來文明 [Han and Hu: China in Contact with Foreign Civilizations]. Beijing, Sanlian Shudian. 2019. 5 vols. (in Chinese with English abstract)	163



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priuš and zur: Two Transliteration Artifacts in the Mandaean Great Treasure

Charles G. Häberl
(Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey at New Brunswick)

Translation across boundaries of script as well as language creates additional opportunities for error, particularly with regard to transliteration (representing the individual characters or graphemes of one script in another, without regard for the underlying phonology) and transcription (representing the discrete sounds of a language in a new script). The products of these errors sometimes acquire lives of their own in the literature inspired by the original act of translation, thus becoming artifacts of this process. An example of such an artifact is the name “Hadarezer, king of Zobah” (e.g. 1 Chron. 18:3, cf. Hebrew הַדָּעֵזֶר מֶלֶךְ־צֹבָה *Hădad’ēzer mélek-Şôbâ*), whose presence in the family of Bible translations derived from the Authorized Version results from the graphical similarity between the Hebrew letters *d* ד and *r* ר. In this note, I shall examine two *hapax legomena* in the scriptures of another religious tradition, and propose that they are artifacts of this same process.

The *Genzā Rabbā* (“Great Treasure”) is the chief scripture of the Mandaean religious community of Iraq and Iran. Divided into two volumes, a “right-hand” volume and a “left-hand” one, it is an eclectic collection of cosmogonies, legends, prayers, moral instructions, and—in the final chapter of the right-hand volume—a universal history harmonizing biblical, Greco-Roman, and Iranian traditions, entitled “The Book of Kings and the Explanations of This World.”¹ At its core are two lists of kings since the flood

¹- The sole authoritative edition of this work remains that of Petermann (1867), translated by Lidzbarski (1925). Each of the following passages is referenced according to the book and chapter of the right volume (RG) or left volume (LG), and according to the page and line numbers of Petermann’s 1867 edition. Transliterations of Mandaic text are provided in **bold type**; transcriptions are provided in *italics*. Proper nouns, in particular, have been normalized according to the scheme outlined in Häberl 2022.

of Noah to the latter half of the Sasanian era and an annalistic chronicle of events during the reigns of the second list (Häberl 2022.). The names within the first list of kings (“King List A”) and their order correspond to those of the Kayanid, Arsacid, and Sasanid dynasties in the 36th chapter of the Zoroastrian *Bundahišn* (“Primal Creation”) a similarly wide-ranging and authoritative work (q.v. Agostini & Thrope 2020).

Although the *Genzā Rabbā* is composed in Mandaic, an Aramaic language unique to the Mandaean community, the closest parallel to this list is therefore a Middle Persian text composed in the Pahlavi script, and nearly all of the names of the kings contained within it are transparently Iranian in origin. For these reasons, Nöldeke (1875), Gray (1906), Lidzbarski (1925), and most recently Shapira (2010) have naturally appealed to Middle Persian and other Iranian languages in order to explain them, but two proper nouns have thus far eluded explanation. Both of these nouns are additionally introduced with the formula “and after him it belonged to (*hwā l-*),” and precede the name of the following king, which further distinguishes them from all the other names in the series, all of which are simply introduced “and after him was (*hwā*):”

RG 18	Span	Sum	<i>Bundahišn</i> 36	Span	Sum
*Kaymarədan Gaymurat	900	900	Gayōmart	3030	3,030
-	-	-	Mashya and Mashyānag	183.5	3,213.5
-	-	-	Hōshang	40	3,253.5
-	-	-	Tahmōraf	30	3,283.5
*Jamshid *Tahmurat	600	1,500	Ějam	616.5	3,900
“to priuš/preiš”	-	-	-	-	-
*Azidahāg	750	2,250	-	-	-
Interregnum	100	2,350	(Ějam in flight)	100	4,000
Asdahāg *Bēwarāsp	300	2,650	Dahāg	1000	5,000
Paridon Thebiān	450	3,100	Frēdōn	500	5,500
-	-	-	Ērich	(12)	
*Pād-Sām Narimān	500	3,600	Manushchihir	120	5,620
Parsāyā of Turak	60	3,660	Frāsyāb	(12)	
-	-	-	Uzaw ī Tahmāspān	5	5,625
Kaykābas	503	4,163	Kay Kawād	15	5,640
-			Kāyus	150	5,790
Khaykhasraw b. Siyāwishan	60	4,223	Kay Husraw	60	5,850
Ugab b. Burzen	360	4,583	-	-	-
Lohrāsp	365	4,948	Kay Lohrāsp	120	5970
Goshtāsp b. Lohrāsp	14	4,962	Kay Wishtāsp	120	6,090
Ardshir b. Espendyār	112	5,074	Wahmān ī Spendyādān	112	6,202
Khumāy Scheherzade	80	5,154	Humāy Chihrāzād	30	6,232
Ashgān	470	5,624	Dārāy ī Chihrāzādān	12	6,244
Jamshid	1000	6,624	Dārāy ī Dārāyān	14	6,258
Alexander the Roman	14	6,638	Sikandar ī Hrōmāyīg	14	6,272
Ashak b. Ashkān	465	7,103	Arsacids	284	6,556
“to zur”	-	-	-	-	-
Ardabān	14	7,117	-	-	-
Persian Kings	382	7,499	Sasanians	460	7,016

Table 1: Comparison of King List A (RG 18) and *Bundahišn* 36

In addition to these names and their order, the two accounts also share a similar, but not identical, division of time into twelve periods governed by the twelve signs of the Zodiac. In both accounts, these periods begin with Aries and conclude with Pisces, but according to the *Bundahišn* each of these signs governs a single millennium, in contrast to the *Genzā Rabbā*, in which Aries is allotted fully twelve millennia, and the reign of each sign that follows is progressively reduced by a single millennium, for a total of 78,000 years rather than 12,000:

	RG 18	Span	Sum	<i>Bundahišn</i> 36	Span	Sum
Aries	<i>embərā</i>	12,000	12,000	<i>warrag</i> [KNNA]	1,000	1,000
Taurus	<i>tawrā</i>	11,000	23,000	<i>gāw</i> [TWRA]	1,000	2,000
Gemini	<i>šelmi</i>	10,000	33,000	<i>dō-pahikar</i> [dwptkl]	1,000	3,000
Cancer	<i>šartānā</i>	9,000	42,000	<i>karzang</i> [klcng]	1,000	4,000
Leo	<i>aryā</i>	8,000	50,000	<i>šagr</i> [šgl]	1,000	5,000
Virgo	<i>šomboltā</i>	7,000	57,000	<i>hōšaq</i> [hwšk']	1,000	6,000
Libra	<i>qaynā</i>	6,000	63,000	<i>tarāzūg</i> [tl'cwk']	1,000	7,000
Scorpio	<i>argawā</i>	5,000	68,000	<i>gazdum</i> [gcdwm]	1,000	8,000
Sagittarius	<i>hetyā</i>	4,000	72,000	<i>nēmasp</i> [PRG'sp]	1,000	9,000
Capricorn	<i>gadyā</i>	3,000	75,000	<i>wahīg</i> [zzLA]	1,000	10,000
Aquarius	<i>dawlā</i>	2,000	77,000	<i>dōl</i> [dwł]	1,000	11,000
Pisces	<i>nunā</i>	1,000	78,000	<i>māhīg</i> [m'hyk']	1,000	12,000

Table 2: Comparison of Millennial schemes in the *Genzā Rabbā* and *Bundahišn* 36

In Mandaic, the same names are also given to the months of the year, with an important difference: the names of the Mandaean months are offset by two, starting with Aquarius and concluding with Capricorn.² This passage in the *Genzā Rabbā* thus reflects the Zoroastrian menology rather than the Mandaean one. Additionally, the *Bundahišn* explicitly organizes the reigns of these kings within the framework of these millennia,³ and specifically those of Cancer to Capricorn, whereas the *Genzā Rabbā* simply introduces the framework but does not directly correlate it with their reigns in an obvious manner. Given the other parallels between these two texts, might this framework explain the unfamiliar and otherwise unattested names in the *Genzā Rabbā*?

The first crux appears after the reign of the legendary ruler Jamshid (Mandaic *zamdšīta Zam d-Šītā; Middle Persian *Žam i Šēd*).⁴ In the *Bundahišn*, Jamshid reigns 716 years and 6 months until the end of the seventh millennium (that of Libra), although he spends the final century of that millennium in flight after having lost his fortune (*xwarrah*). He is followed by the tyrant Dahāg (Mandaic asdahag Asdahāg,

2- Also shared by the Sogdian calendar, probably reflecting the position of the sun when both were adopted; Stern 2012, 181.

3- E.g. Bh 36.6: "Then the lordship of the millennium came to Scorpio, and Dahāg ruled for a thousand years" (trans. Agostini & Thrope 2020, 192).

4- Asterisks indicate names reconstructed on the basis of variants and textual parallels. In this instance, the attested form is Mandaic *zamdšīta* zardanaiata (variants *zardanaiit* and *zarda naiṭa*), which stands for **zamdšīta*, Av *Yima xšaēta*, MP *Žam i Šēd* [ym x šyt'], after emending the initial *r* to *m*, and the ligatured *ana* *āyō* to the single letter *š*. The letter *d* is the ligatured form of the Mandaic relative pronoun *d* *u*, which fulfils here the same role as the MP *i* [y], indicating that this name was calqued directly upon the Pahlavi form.

Middle Persian *Až ī Dahāg*), who reigns for a thousand years corresponding to the eighth millennium, that of Scorpio. In the *Genzā Rabbā*, the reign of the same ruler is bifurcated before and after that century, initially for 750 years and subsequently for 300 years:

And after him was *Jamshid, King *Tahmurat. He lasted 600 years, and after him it belonged to priuš. [King *Azidahāg lasted 750 years], and after this king, there was no king in the world for 100 years, and after him was Asdahāg *Bēwarāsp, whom King Bahrān slays. He lasted 300 years (Häberl 2022.).

Incidentally, the first occurrence of Jamshid's successor in Mandaic, 𐭩𐭂𐭪𐭥 zihnag (variants B zišag C ziuhnag, and D zihunag) can only be identified with Dahāg if we reconstruct an underlying Pahlavi form, for the present form of the name cannot entirely be explained through reference to the Mandaic script. The Middle Persian form 𐭠𐭇𐭃𐭅𐭍 Až ī Dahāg ['cydh'k], on the other hand, could easily be read as 𐭠𐭇𐭃𐭅𐭍 Azihxag ['cyhh'k], and only then transliterated into Mandaic letters as 𐭩𐭂𐭪𐭥 *azihkag. This same form likely became 𐭩𐭂𐭪𐭥 with the frequent confusion of 𐭩 n for 𐭩 k,⁵ two letters that share a similar form save for their heads, which are frequently lost or imperfectly formed in manuscripts, as with the letter 𐭩 p.

Might a similar transliteration error explain the hapax priuš?⁶ On the basis of the Zoroastrian parallels, the phrase lipriuš 'to priuš'⁷ should correspond to Scorpio, but it resembles neither Mandaic arqba arqəwā nor Middle Persian gazdum [gcdwm]. That being said, as noted above the Mandaean reckoning of the years allotted to these signs differs, so it stands to reason that these reigns fall within different millennia. Although the word priuš/preiš resists analysis as a Mandaic word, it can be analyzed as a transliteration of Pahlavi 𐭩𐭂𐭪𐭥 [pr'yč], standing for nēmasp 𐭩𐭂𐭪𐭥 [PRG'sp] 'Sagittarius,' the sign whose reign follows the millennium of Scorpio in the *Bundahišn*. The only difference between the two Pahlavi forms is a single minim in the final character.⁸ According to the *Genzā Rabbā*, Sagittarius governs 4,000 years, so we should expect the years of Capricorn to follow 4,000 years later, although the bifurcation of Dahāg's reign and the repetition of other figures throughout the king list suggests that some kings and their reigns have been duplicated. I have indicated these potential interpolations with <brackets> as in the entry above.

4,000 years later brings us towards the end of the reign of Ashgān, the founder of the Arsacid dynasty, whose reign of 470 years corresponds to the entire span of that dynasty. In turn, he is once again followed by Jamshid, here identified with Solomon, who reigns for a thousand years before he is succeeded by Alexander the Great:

And after him there was a king *in Rome whom they call Alexander the Roman. He lasted 14 years [and after him was Ashak, son of Ashkān, who lasted 465 years] and after him it belonged to zur.

5- For MP [h] corresponding to Mandaic k x, cf. kaikasrau for MP *Kay Husraw* [kdhwslwb'].

6- Variants ACD lipriuš B lap riš, and M lpreiš; Drower and Macuch (1963, 237a) also witness the M variant in Sh. Abdullah's copy of the *Great Treasure* and in DC 22.

7- Variants in manuscripts ACD lipriuš, B lap riš, and M lpreiš; Drower and Macuch (1963, 237a) also witness lpreiš in two other manuscripts.

8- For the use of Mandaic š to transcribe Middle Persian č, cf. šraga 'lamp' for čirāy [cl'g] id. and našira 'quarry' for naxčīr [nhcyl] id.

As noted in the table above, Ashak, son of Ashkān and his 465 years reproduce the Arsacid era already introduced, and we may infer that both were interpolated into this account, as neither of these names are attested in *Bundahišn* 36. The phrase *alzur* or *lzur* ‘to zur’ may well reflect the Mandaic form 𐭣𐭥 𐭠𐭰 **lzzur* once the vertical stroke for the letter *z*, one of the three with which the name begins, had been eliminated through haplography. Thus emended, this name corresponds to the absolute state of the Pahlavi heterogram 𐭩 𐭩 𐭩 *Wahīg* [ZZLA] ‘kid; Capricorn.’⁹ If **zzur* is therefore an artifact of a Mandaic transliteration of Pahlavi ZZLA ‘Capricorn,’ then this entry simultaneously witnesses not only its coordination with the tenth millennium of the Zoroastrian world era, but also its coordination with the “Year of Alexander’s Death,” the original epoch for that millennium (Lewy 1944, 199, especially fn. 26).

Even so, the difference between the two glossed entries is fully 5,603 years. Within these 5,603 years, Dahāg reigns 300 years, Ashgān reigns 470 years, Solomon-Jamshid reigns 1,000, and Ashak, son of Ashkān reigns 465 years. All of these rulers and their reigns are duplicated, and none correspond to the rulers of the parallel Zoroastrian account with the exception of Dahāg, making them excellent candidates for interpolations. The textual history of the Mandaean account is somewhat obscure, but by comparing it with the Zoroastrian account, and reconstructing *priuš* and *zur* as Mandaic transliterations of the Pahlavi names for Sagittarius and Capricorn, we may hopefully arrive at a better understanding of how these two lists relate to one another. This explanation demands a relatively high level of literacy on the part of those who transmitted these names, since it cannot be explained through oral transmission, but even as such it would not be unique; Shaked (1987, 247–248) cites two analogous examples reflecting a textual dependence upon a source written in the notoriously ambiguous Pahlavi script in his analysis of the Iranian primal man Gayōmart’s reflexes in the later Islamic accounts.

In conclusion, the source from which the Mandaean king list was drawn was originally composed in Middle Persian and in the Pahlavi script, as is already evident from the names of the kings whose reigns are recorded within it, but it was not identical to the later Zoroastrian king list recorded in the same language and script. In the Pahlavi version underlying the Mandaic version, the years of Sagittarius evidently spanned 4,000 years from the death of Jamshid to the death of Alexander, from which event the years of Capricorn proceed. Subsequently, several rulers and their reigns were interpolated into the Mandaic account from different sources, resulting in the duplication of the reigns of Dahāg, Jamshid, and Ashak, and expanding the erstwhile “years of Sagittarius” well beyond their original 4,000. By that time, however, the Pahlavi glosses for the two zodiacal signs were no longer understood as such, and their names have survived purely as artifacts of the transliteration process.

⁹- Mandaic proper nouns regularly appear in the absolute state rather than the emphatic state. The Pahlavi script inconsistently represents / and r; cf. the heterogram *nēm* [PRG] ‘half’ above, which corresponds to Aramaic *plg* id. ZZLA is evidently an Aramaeogram, although its ultimate etymon is obscure.

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Contents

Articles

1	Alisher Begmatov: Two Sogdian Toponyms in Arabic and Chinese Sources, and their Attestation as Commodity Terms in Sogdian and Uyghur Economical Documents	1
2	Alberto Cantera: Avestan texts in context (2): the <i>Nērang ī ātaxš abrōxtan</i> and the “eternal fire”	7
3	Henry P. Colburn: A Parthian Shot of Potential Arsacid Date	35
4	Omar Coloru: The city of brotherly love. The language of family affection in the Artaxiad dynasty between the Hellenistic and the Parthian world	41
5	Majid Daneshgar: Persianate Aspects of the Malay-Indonesian World: Some Rare Manuscripts in the Leiden University Library	51
6	Charles G. Häberl: <i>priuš</i> and <i>zur</i> : Two Transliteration Artifacts in the Mandaean <i>Great Treasure</i>	79
7	Charles W. King: The Hunnic attack on Persia: Chronology, context, and the accounts of Priscus and Thomas	85
8	Agnes Korn: Notes on a Middle Persian sound change: Greek Ἀνθίτις and features of vowel length	101
9	D. T. Potts: The spurious fifth century date for the cultivation of sugar cane (<i>Saccharum officinarum</i>) in Khuzestan	111
10	Hossein Sheikh: From Mesopotamia to Khotan: Payment clauses in Eastern Middle Iranian languages and their historical backgrounds	118
11	محمد توکلیان: یک امپراطور ناشناخته در نقش برجسته شاپور یکم ساسانی: تنگ چوگان؛ بیشاپور ۳	137

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