

FROM MIDDLE TO NEW PERSIAN:  
WRITTEN MATERIALS FROM NORTHERN IRAN AND KHORASAN

Carlo G. Cereti - Sapienza University of Rome

*The linguistic situation in Iran at the beginning of the Islamic era is described in a famous passage going back to Ibn al-Muqaffa' that has been discussed at length by scholars. Here new evidence based on Middle Persian inscriptions from the northern regions of historical Iran are introduced. These texts show that literacy was comparatively widespread in Late Sasanian and Early Islamic Iran, opening the way for a new understanding of linguistic developments in the years that have been dubbed do qarn-e sokut "two centuries of silence".*

Keywords: Middle Persian; New Persian; Pahlavi; Pārsi; Dari

1. THE LANGUAGES OF EARLY ISLAMIC IRAN

When studying Middle Persian written documents, the focus is generally on the south-western part of the Iranian expanse, where most inscriptions are found. However, a more attentive analysis reveals that the northern areas of the plateau also preserve a rich treasure-house of documents. Here inscriptions found in the northern regions will be studied and compared with what we know about the languages spoken in Iran in early caliphal years.

The linguistic situation in Iran at the start of the Islamic era was studied by G. Lazard in a number of important articles, the main ones being later gathered in the *La formation de la langue persane* printed in 1995. In the article *Pahlavi, Pārsi, Dari. Les langues de l'Iran d'Après Ibn al-Muqaffa'*,<sup>1</sup> the French scholar studies a passage describing the linguistic situation in Iran at the beginning of the Islamic era, which has traditionally been assigned to the pen of the renowned Persian intellectual and translator Ibn al-Muqaffa' (m. 139 H. \ 757 CE). The passage is found with lesser variants in Ibn al-Nadīm's *Fihrist*, in the *Mafātih al-'ulum* written by Ḥ'arazmī and in Yāqūt's *Mu'jam al-buldān*.

Ibn al-Muqaffa' tells us that the *pārsi* (*al-fārsiyya*) language includes a number of variants: *pahlavi* (*al-fahlaviyya*), *dari* (*al-dariyya*), *pārsi* (*al-fārsiyya*), *huzi* (*al-hūziyya*) and *soryāni* (*al-suryāniyya*). Pahlavi is the language spoken in the north-western area of the plateau, a region called *Fahlah* (*Pahla(w)*),<sup>2</sup> including Isfahan, Ray, Hamadan, Māh Nihāvand and Azerbaijan; *dari* is the language spoken in the cities of Madā'in, by the many that are at the court of the (Sasanian) monarch and it is also spoken in Khorasan and in the East, the language of Balkh being its purest variant; *pārsi* is the language of the *mobads*, spoken by the people of Fars; *huzi* is spoken in the private quarters of the court; while *soryāni* is the language spoken by the inhabitants of the Sawad.<sup>3</sup> Let us for the time being leave aside the latter two that may be non-Iranian languages, though this remains to be

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<sup>1</sup> Lazard 1971.

<sup>2</sup> On which see Gyselen 1989, 73.

<sup>3</sup> Lazard 1971, 49-50.

proved,<sup>4</sup> focusing on the three names that quite certainly define languages or dialects belonging to West-Iranian: *pārsi*, *dari* and *pahlavi*.

Some years later, Istaḥri, writing around 932 CE, tells us that the inhabitants of Fars used three languages. They used *fārsi* (*pārsi*) to speak, *pahlavi* being the language in which the works speaking of the Persians of ancient were written and which was still used by the Zoroastrian clergy, and Arabic.<sup>5</sup> Here the difference between *fārsi* and *pahlavi* is quite clear, the former being the spoken language, the latter the written variant, still using the old writing system.

On the contrary, the passage by Ibn al-Muqaffa' is not immediately clear. The opposition between *pārsi* and *dari* is not easy to explain, except if one imagines that the court already used a sort of *koine* including different inflections. The difference between these two languages or variants and *pahlavi* has generally been understood as reflecting the linguistic division between southern and northern West Iranian. In this interpretation the terms *pārsi* and *dari* define variants of Persian, the south western Iranian language that will later evolve into classical Persian including an important number of north western lemmata, while *pahlavi* defines a north-western language.

In Lazard's interpretation, at the time of Ibn al-Muqaffa' the name *pahlavi* points to Parthian and/or to similar north-western dialects spoken in the vast region of the Zagros later known as Jibāl.<sup>6</sup> Only much later but earlier than Ferdowsi's time, will this name be used to define Middle Persian. On the opposite, *pārsi* defines both the dialect of Fars of Ibn al-Muqaffa''s time and the older literary Middle Persian.<sup>7</sup> As already said, the difference between *pārsi* and *dari* is more difficult to define. According to Lazard the latter may be a northern variant of *pārsi*, characterized by the fact that it had developed in an area where earlier north-western languages close to Parthian were spoken.<sup>8</sup>

Following on what written by Perry in his relatively recent description of New Persian,<sup>9</sup> who systematized the work of earlier authors, we now have enough evidence to conjecture an important dialectal diversity in the New Persian spoken in the early Islamic epoch. On the one hand the linguistic variety that will develop in the literary language bound to spread over the entire territory characterized by "Persephony"<sup>10</sup> on the other a southern variant, attested in minor traditions, among which Judaeo-Persian and other documents such as the 11<sup>th</sup> century Persian *tafsir* known as *Qor'an-e Qods*, that was discovered in Mashhad by

<sup>4</sup> See Lazard 1971, 363, though the status of *huzi* is far from certain.

<sup>5</sup> Perry 2009, 47.

<sup>6</sup> The Zagros range and more in general mountain areas of the Iranian highlands witnessed the survival of ancient political, linguistic and cultural traditions well into the Islamic area. On this complex and fascinating phenomenon see Crone 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Perry 2009, 48-49.

<sup>8</sup> Perry 2009, 48-49, with reference to Lazard 1971, 373-380; 1990, 239-242; 1993, 28-30. Lazard has discussed this subject in a number of articles, most recently in 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Perry 2009, 50.

<sup>10</sup> B. Fragner used the name «Die Persephonie» to describe the predominance of the Persian language and its culture in a vast area stretching from Istanbul to Delhi (Fragner 1999).

‘Ali Ravaqi.<sup>11</sup> This text was possibly written in Sistan and shares some linguistic traits with a few of the best Pāzand works though we ignore where the latter may have been written.<sup>12</sup>

In the given framework, be it that suggested by Lazard or the one put forward by Perry, one would expect to find some traces of linguistic variety in the Middle Persian texts, though dialectal variations may be hidden behind historical spellings and heterographies which were characteristic of the most common way of writing Middle Persian.<sup>13</sup> Though this may well be the case, we shall not deal with the Middle Persian books of the Zoroastrians in this paper, nor shall we discuss economic documents such as ostraka, papyri and parchments that basically share the same writing system with the Zoroastrian documents. Rather, in the following pages we shall focus on inscriptions in western Middle Iranian languages found in the northern half of the Sasanian Empire.

However, before turning to the texts themselves, let us dwell a bit longer on the linguistic situation in Iran in the early Islamic centuries. In his contribution to the fourth volume of the *Cambridge History of Iran*, focusing on the Persian language, Lazard states:<sup>14</sup>

«During the first two centuries of Islam, the medium for written expression and literature in Iran was provided by two languages of unequal importance, one of them declining and the other on the ascendant – Middle Persian (called Pahlavī) and Arabic. It is well known that at first the conquerors were necessarily dependent on the former Iranian civil service and that its officials continued to keep the financial registers in Middle Persian until 78/697-8 (or 82/701-2) in the west and until 124/741-2 in *Khurāsān*, the years in which Arabic replaced Middle Persian as the administrative language. Although it is fairly safe to assume that during the same period Middle Persian continued to be the medium by which the intellectual activity of the cultivated Iranian was expressed, its use became increasingly restricted with the progress of Islamic influence and the vigorous development of Arab culture».

One cannot deny the fact that Middle Persian – or maybe Persian written using the Pahlavi alphabet and heterography – was still alive until the 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and even early 11<sup>th</sup> century albeit possibly only in restricted circles. Leaving aside Zoroastrian literature mostly (re)written by Zoroastrian clergy in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century on older models, we have a number of inscriptions, economic documents, letters, coins, etc. dating well into the early years of the spread of Islam. Moreover, one should not forget that Middle Persian and Parthian were used by the Manichaeans in Central Asia up to the eighth century.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Ravaqi 1364-1365.

<sup>12</sup> These texts may well have been written in Sistan or elsewhere by persons originating from this region, where Zoroastrian communities were found still in Islamic times. On the importance of Pāzand for the linguistic history of New Persian see de Jong 2003.

<sup>13</sup> See Henning 1958, 58-72.

<sup>14</sup> Lazard 1975, 602.

<sup>15</sup> Skjærvø 2009, 197. On Manichaean literature written in New Persian see Sundermann 2003, 242-243, where the German scholar writes “Die manichäischen Texte in neupersischer Sprache gehören zu den ältesten

Remarkably, by far the greatest number of Middle Persian inscriptions, both private and official, are found in what was the south-western part of the Sasanian Empire, while a significant number of ostraka and parchments, written in an extremely cursive variant of the Pahlavi script and dating from the late Sasanian or Early Islamic period were found in northern Iran (Qom, Ray, Varamin, Tabarestān).<sup>16</sup> To some exception, the inscriptions from Fars are linguistically more homogenous, while the ones found in the northern areas reveal a more nuanced reality.

While Zoroastrian priests were busy preserving at a great effort their ancient literature in the eastern courts something totally new saw the light, the ancient language and lore took new forms that were soon to reach unprecedented heights: Persian literature dawned around the half of the ninth century at the Saffarid court in Sistan, only to blossom less than a century later in Khorasan. However, the earliest known documents were written in Judeo-Persian in Central Asia, these being the inscriptions discovered at Tang-e Azāo in Afghanistan and the letter fragment found at Dandān Öiliq, not far from Khotan.<sup>17</sup>

This witnesses to a period when different communities lived one by the side of another, each with its own linguistic tradition. In fact, the earliest attestations of New Persian date from the 8<sup>th</sup> century, while the Pahlavi alphabet was still used to write Persian in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century as witnessed by the inscriptions of Lājim and Rādekān that date to the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, when Ferdowsi was completing his *Šāhnāme*. A similar phenomenon is attested in Qal'e-ye Bahman (see below) and in an inscription found in Kāmfiruz in the Marvdasht district, Fars that has not been included in this paper.

## 2. WESTERN MIDDLE IRANIAN INSCRIPTIONS FROM NORTHERN IRAN

Turning now to the focus of the paper, let us see what western Middle Iranian inscriptions from northern Iran are known today. Most interesting of all, these inscriptions belong to different linguistic registers and traditions. On the whole, texts written in the heyday of Sasanian power at the initiative of government officials or members of the élites are written in proper Middle Persian, while graffiti reveal that Parthian was still in use in the countryside. As we shall soon see, some later texts show a new linguistic reality. By far the greatest number of known inscriptions dating to the Sasanian period or to the years immediately thereafter were found in Fars, the cradle of the dynasty, a number that is steadily growing. Recently, new collections of parchments and ostraka from the northern regions of the Empire have come to light and no doubt more will be found, revealing a country more literate than what was once thought. Here follows a list of the inscriptions known to exist in these regions, which will be described moving from west to east. The

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Zeugnissen dieser Sprache. Das ist deswegen schon so, weil der Manichäismus im islamisch gewordenen Iran früh erloschen ist." (Sundermann 2003, 242).

<sup>16</sup> For a recent synthesis see Huyse 2009, 101-105, cf. also Sundermann 1989, 140-141 and Skjærø 2009, 197.

<sup>17</sup> Lazard 1989, 263-264, cf. Henning 1958, 79-80. The ancient Judaeo-Persian texts (10th-11th century AD) that were found mainly in the Cairo Geniza are very interesting from a dialectological point of view (see Paul 2003 and Shaked 2003), the so called Afghanistan Geniza also seems to be very promising. The Persian glosses in Syriac texts dating to the 8th-10th century are also interesting from this point of view (Maggi 2003), while the manuscripts studied by Orsatti (2003) are probably later.

inscriptions from Semirom and the nearby Qal' e-ye Bahman are at the border between Fars and Isfahan provinces and have been included for the sake of completeness.<sup>18</sup>

### 2.1. *Darband*

Thirty two short Middle Persian inscriptions dating to the sixth century were discovered over the years on the walls of the important fortified city of Darband in the Caucasus; the first to pay any attention to them was Prince Dmitrii Cantemir, who headed Tsar Peter I's field chancellery during the emperor's Persian campaign in 1722-1723,<sup>19</sup> this imposing fortification was meant to guard the northern frontiers of the Sasanian Empire. Only one of the inscriptions of Darband is dated and the reading of the date is disputed,<sup>20</sup> should one follow Henning's suggestion to read 37 or 27,<sup>21</sup> considering also the evidence of Islamic authors, one should assign them to the reign of of Husraw I (531-79) or Kawād I (484-531), less probably Husraw II (590-628). The language of the inscriptions is clearly Middle Persian written in an alphabet close to what found in the Pahlavi books, though some letters such as **š** and **k** show forms that are closer to the script of older inscriptions.

### 2.2. *Khumara*

In the valley of river Kuban, to the north of the city of Karačayevsk, on the northern slope of the Caucasus lies the fortress of Khumara where Erdelyi discovered a short Middle Persian inscription, later published by Harmatta<sup>22</sup> and no more to be seen. The Hungarian scholar read **ZNH bh̄l' n krt'** "This was constructed by Bahrān", a formula similar to some of the inscriptions found in Darband. On palaeographical grounds, Harmatta thought this inscription to be older than the ones in Darband, dating it to the reign of Pērōz (457-484) but this needs not be the case and this short text may well be contemporary to the Darband inscriptions.

### 2.3. *Meshkinshahr*

An important Middle Persian inscription dated in the 27<sup>th</sup> year of reign of Šābuhr II (309-379) son of Ohrmazd II (302-309) was discovered in Meshkinshahr in Ardabil province, Iran.<sup>23</sup> Written in Middle Persian in an alphabet that still preserved many of the letter forms characteristic of royal inscriptions, this text presents some stylistic parallels with the inscriptions of Šābuhr Sagānšāh at Persepolis and with that of Mihrnarseh near Firuzabad in Fars.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>18</sup> On Middle Persian private inscriptions see now Nasrollahzādeh 1398. I have seen the book only when this article was in press, so I could not extensively use it.

<sup>19</sup> Gadjev - Kasumova 2006; Gadjev 2016 with earlier bibliography.

<sup>20</sup> See further Gadjev 2016 with earlier bibliography.

<sup>21</sup> Henning 1958, 58.

<sup>22</sup> Harmatta 1996, 82-83.

<sup>23</sup> Frye - Skjærvø 1996.

<sup>24</sup> Frye - Skjærvø 1996, 55.

#### 2.4. *Semirom*

Three funerary inscriptions were found near Semirom in the province of Isfahan. These inscriptions were found in the area of Cešmenāz not far from a gorge known by the name of Tang-e Jelow near to an Islamic graveyard where remains of older, possibly pre-Islamic buildings were also to be found. The first one was published already in Gropp - Nadjmabadi 1970.<sup>25</sup> The other two were discovered much later by Mohsen Jāveri and then made available to the learned public by Syrus Nasrollahzāde and Jāveri.<sup>26</sup> These inscriptions are written in the cursive script common in late Sasanian and early Islamic times and show no specific linguistic peculiarity.

#### 2.5. *Qal'e-ye Bahman*

Not far from this area, but already in the province of Fars, in the district of Abadeh, one can visit the large castle known as Qal'e-ye Bahman. Here A. Hassuri<sup>27</sup> discovered a group of about seven Kufic inscriptions, one of which also had a Pahlavi version commemorating the foundation of a castle (**kl't**) by a *Hāzīm* son of *Mohammad* (**h'cym Y mhmt(d)**). This inscription carries a date that in my opinion should be read 206 or much less likely 2(4)6, rather than 165 as suggested by Hassuri.<sup>28</sup> This is probably the earliest attestation of the word *kalāt* "castle, citadel" apparently corresponding to Ar. *qal'a*, Pers. *qal'e* that knows no certain etymology in the Semitic language.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, the language of these inscriptions may well be compared to that used in the dedications found on the tomb towers in Tabarestān, attesting a language that includes Arabic loanwords and is thus well on its way to New Persian, though here the loanwords are limited to personal names and the dubious *kalāt*, which is however not otherwise attested in Middle Persian.<sup>30</sup>

#### 2.6. *Bandiyān*

Mehdi Rahbar's discovery of the important and disputed Sasanian complex of Bandiyān in North Khorasan, on the border with Turkmenistan<sup>31</sup> also brought to light some Middle Persian inscriptions read by R. Baššāš and Ph. Gignoux.<sup>32</sup> The interpretations offered by the two scholars differ markedly one from the other, since Baššāš believes to have found the name of the Hephtalites (*optalūt*) in the inscriptions while Gignoux reads otherwise. Moreover, according to Baššāš some of the inscriptions make up a coordinated text, while Gignoux thinks that all inscriptions are independent one from the other. In my opinion the French scholar's interpretation is on the whole to be preferred,<sup>33</sup> however, this does not

<sup>25</sup> Gropp - Nadjmabadi 1970, 203-204; Nasrollahzādeh 1393.

<sup>26</sup> Nasrollahzāde - Jāveri 1381, 71-76.

<sup>27</sup> Hassuri 1984, 94-97.

<sup>28</sup> With a discrepancy between transcription (100 50 5) and translation (165), Hassuri read the Pahlavi digits 165 because the Kufic inscription that accompanies it carries this exact date written in Arabic (Hassuri 1984, 96).

<sup>29</sup> For a possible Iranian etymology see Hasandust 1393, 4, 2222.

<sup>30</sup> A similar inscription, written in Pahlavi with one extra line in Arabic, was recently found a bit further South in the district of Kāmfiruz (Asadi - Cereti 2018, 95-97).

<sup>31</sup> Rahbar 1376; 1378; 1998; 2004; 2007.

<sup>32</sup> Baššāš 1997; Gignoux 1998; 2008, 168-171.

<sup>33</sup> See further Cereti 2019 suggesting possible new interpretations of these texts.

need to concern us here. More importantly, both agree that on account of the alphabet used, similar to that of the royal inscriptions, though more cursive<sup>34</sup> and of the content of the inscriptions themselves, these may be assigned to the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE. Rahbar<sup>35</sup> goes one step further. Following Baššāš, he considers the monument to have been erected to celebrate the victory of Wahrām V over the Hephtalites, possibly in 425. According to the same author, Bandiyān was pillaged and destroyed by the eastern Huns in 484 and therefore the monument had a relatively short life span, less than sixty years. From a linguistic and paleographic point of view the inscriptions belong fully to the Middle Persian tradition.

### 2.7. *Kāl-e Jangāl*

The inscriptions from Kāl-e Jangāl near Birjand in Southern Khorasan, written in Parthian, were first made known by J. Rezāi and S. Kiyā (1320). Inscription n. 1 was then studied by W.B. Henning.<sup>36</sup> who dated it to the Sasanian Period since the first line includes the toponym *Gar-Ardaxšīr* (**gry' rthštr**) that contains the name of the first Sasanian king. More specifically, Henning suggested that these inscriptions should be dated to the early years of the Sasanian Empire<sup>37</sup> in the first half of the third century CE.<sup>38</sup> Many years later V. A. Livshits and A.B. Nikitin,<sup>39</sup> published inscriptions 2-8; in their opinion these texts are all later than n. 1, two of them being written in cursive script (2-3) and one "in a later, though not cursive script".<sup>40</sup> Consequently, we can infer that the Parthian language was still used in the area for a considerable amount of years in Sasanian times.<sup>41</sup>

### 2.8. *Lāḥ Mazār*

The Parthian graffiti of Lāḥ Mazār on an isolated boulder not far from the village of Kuc, 29 kilometers from Birjand, were discovered in 1992 by a team of the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization led by Rajab 'Ali Labbāf-e Ḥānīki. The vast majority of the text are Parthian, though Rasul Baššāš suggests that a few short Middle Persian inscriptions may also be found. Kufic writings can also be observed on the Lāḥ Mazār rock. The inscriptions were first published by Labbāf-e Ḥānīki and Baššāš in 1994, the volume is complete with drawings of the inscriptions but accompanying photos are of a very low quality. According to the two Iranian scholars these texts should date to the late fifth or early sixth century, possibly to the reign of Kawād I whose coins were found on site. The reading of a few of the inscriptions were radically revised by Livshits in 2002, who showed them to have been written by three lads working in the area. Nonetheless, he confirmed the late 5<sup>th</sup> or early 6<sup>th</sup> century date suggested by Labbāf-e Ḥānīki and Baššāš though denying any possible

<sup>34</sup> Comparable to the script of the Middle Persian inscriptions from Dura Europos, though more conservative.

<sup>35</sup> Rahbar 2004, 19.

<sup>36</sup> Henning 1953, 132-136; 1958, 42.

<sup>37</sup> Henning 1953, 135.

<sup>38</sup> Henning 1958, 42; Weber 2010, II, 588.

<sup>39</sup> Livshits - Nikitin 1991, 117-119.

<sup>40</sup> Livshits-Nikitin 1991, 119.

<sup>41</sup> Two Parthian inscriptions dating to the early third century were found at Dura Europos together with other Parthian documents and a number of early Middle Persian texts dating to the Persian occupation of the city in 252-3 AD (Henning 1958, 41-42 and 46-47).

connection between the contents of the inscription and the name *drist-dēnān* “(having) the right faith”, which would link them up to the Mazdakite movement.<sup>42</sup>

### 2.9. *Lājim and Rādekān*

Two important bilingual Middle Persian Arabic inscriptions are found still today on the tomb towers of Lājim and Rādekān respectively in Mazandaran and Golestan. These mausoleums were built upon the order of members of the princely Bavandid family (*Āl-e Bāvand*) at the beginning of the eleventh century. Though the script used in the two inscriptions is somehow closer to the one used in Pahlavi books, both are meant to be official documents and the towers on which they are written were most probably used as tomb-towers by members of noble families of Tabarestān that still valued their pre-Islamic tradition high. The style of writing used, especially in Rādekān, is unique having been deeply influenced by the Kufi tradition that was developing in those years. The language is substantially a form of New Persian still written using the Pahlavi alphabet, though this is more evident in Rādekān than in Lājim. In the latter inscription the only non-Iranian words are found in the name of the dedicatee, *Abulvari(s) Šahryār bin Abbās bin Šahryār*, while the former presents the name of the prince: *Abu Jaʿfar Moḥammad b. Vandarīn Bāvand* and his honorific title **mwly ʾmlwmwmnyn** corresponding to Ar. *mawlā amīri l-muʾminīna*.<sup>43</sup> Also interesting is the use of the numeral **tylyst** (*tīrīst*, three hundred) attested by Manichaean Middle Persian **tyryst**, **tyryst** and **tylyst**<sup>44</sup> as well as in New Persian, though rarely<sup>45</sup> showing that this text is written in a regional variant of New Persian.<sup>46</sup>

### 2.10. *The Holy Cross from Herat*

Further East, but still in the area covered by the present article, we find the Cross from Herat carrying a Middle Persian inscription<sup>47</sup> written in an alphabet that is very close to the one used for the Pahlavi Psalter discovered in Central Asia.<sup>48</sup> The inscription carries a date tentatively read 507 or 517 by Ph. Gignoux that according to the French author<sup>49</sup> should be understood as being counted according to the Bactrian era as attested in the Tochi inscriptions, which following Sims-Williams begins in 233 CE<sup>50</sup> thus dating the cross to 740/750 CE. Except for some loanwords from Syriac<sup>51</sup> and a possible but doubtful persianism,<sup>52</sup> this inscription seems to be written in a good standard Middle Persian, though

<sup>42</sup> Livshits 2011.

<sup>43</sup> On Arabo-Sasanian coins we find the Middle Persian translation **ʾmyl wlwyšnykʾn** (*amīr (ī) wurrōyišnīgān*), cf. Rezāʾi Bāgbidi 1384, 26-33.

<sup>44</sup> In the forms **tylyst** /tīlēst/, **tyryst**, **tyryst** /tīrēst/, see Durkin-Meisterernst, 332, cf. Andreas - Henning 1932, 33.

<sup>45</sup> Lazard 1961, 23; for further bibliographical references see Hasandust 1393, vol. II, 930.

<sup>46</sup> Cereti 2015; Cereti 2018.

<sup>47</sup> Gignoux 2001.

<sup>48</sup> Andreas-Barr 1933.

<sup>49</sup> Gignoux 2001, 292-293.

<sup>50</sup> Sims-Williams 1999, 246.

<sup>51</sup> Such as **knwšy** < syr. **knwšy** “assembly, church” and personal names, cf. Gignoux 2001, 295-296.

<sup>52</sup> The phonetic spelling **ʾprydgł** instead than the older form **ʾplytkł**, which according to Gignoux may suggest NP *ʾfaridegār* “God, creator”.



using the more conservative alphabet adopted by the Central Asian Christian community. Other documents belonging to the Christian community have survived in India but the inscriptions of the Iranian diaspora in Asia such as the bilingual from Hsian, the two short inscriptions found in the Upper Indus and the texts from India will not be discussed in this paper.<sup>53</sup>

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

Leaving aside *huzi* (*al-hūziya*) and *soryāni* (*al-suryāniya*) that may not be Iranian languages at all, the three different variants that according to Ibn al-Muqaffa' belong to the *pārsi* (*al-fārsiyya*) language are: *pahlavi* (*al-fahlaviya*), *dari* (*al-dariya*), *pārsi* (*al-fārsiyya*). The inscriptions that have been presented here all belong to the northern areas of inner Iran, spanning a region that goes from the Caucasus to Khorasan. Four groups of inscriptions, those found in Darband, Khumara, Meshkinshahr and Bandiyān, all due to the will of members of the Sasanian élite or to officers of the Sasanian Empire, probably militaries, working for the king, date to the middle or late Sasanian period and are written in a correct Middle Persian that could well correspond to the *pārsi* language that according to Ibn al-Muqaffa' was spoken by the people of Fars and still used by the Zoroastrian *mobads*. The Parthian texts dating from the Sasanian period found at Kāl-e Jangāl and Lāḥ Mazār, both in today's South Khorasan province may well witness the Pahlavi language spoken in the north-western area of the plateau, in *Fahlah* (*Pahlaw*), an area including Isfahan, Ray, Hamadan, Māh Nihāvand and Azerbaijan. Finally, inscriptions such as those found in the Alborz mountains, Lājim and Rādekān, as well as in the Zagros, Qal'e-ye Bahman, show a language well on its way to New Persian, that may be the one called *dari* by the great Persian intellectual and translator. A language spoken in the cities of Madā'in, by the many that were at the court of the sovereign and that was also spoken in Khorasan and in the East, where it was soon to develop into classical Persian.

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<sup>53</sup> On which see Harmatta 1971; Sims-Williams 1992, 27; Cereti 2009; Cereti - Olivieri - Vazhuthanapally 2002.

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