



ABARSĀM

ABARSĀM (APURSĀM in Middle Persian), a dignitary and high-ranking officeholder of the court of the Sasanian king Ardašīr I (A.D. 226-42). According to Ṭabarī (I, pp. 816, 818; cf. Ebn al-Aṭīr, I, p. 247), Abarsām became Ardašīr's chief minister (*vuzurgframadār*; see Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser*, p. 9, n. 2, on the reading of the title) when the king conquered Eṣṭakr; he was responsible for defeating the king of Ahvāz, whom Ardavān, the last Parthian king of kings, had sent against Ardašīr.

The historicity of Abarsām finds confirmation in the great inscription of Šāpūr I and Naqš-e Rostam, where Šāpūr mentions those dignitaries of the court of his father, Ardašīr I, in whose memory Šāpūr had established a pious foundation. Abarsām's name occurs as *'pwrs'n ZY 'rtxštr frr* in the Middle Persian version, line 29 (and as *'pwrs'm 'rtxštr-fry* in the Parthian version, line 24). He is fifteenth on the list of those who lived under Ardašīr, followed by fifteen others. Of the fourteen who precede him, four are princes who were kings of provinces, three queens (Ardašīr's grandmother, mother, and wife), the two highest officials of the empire, namely the *bitaxš* (viceroys?) and the *hazārupat* (prime minister), and five outstanding members of the great noble families (including two Kārins). The fifteen dignitaries whose names follow that of Abarsām include the commander of the army (*spāhpat*) and the chief scribe (*darīrupat*). Thus it is clear that Abarsām held an exalted position in Ardašīr's administration, and as far as can be gathered from the inscription, he yielded precedence only to the kings of provinces and the senior members of the major noble families, the *bitxš*, and the *hazārupat*. The titles



vuzurgframadār and *harjabad* (Mid. Pers. [*h*]argupat) which Ṭabarī ascribes to Abarsām do not occur in the inscription and must be a reflection of administrative titles that developed later. He could not have been the grand vizier of Ardašīr, a position occupied under both Ardašīr and Šāpūr by Pāpak, according to Šāpūr's inscription (Mid. Pers., lines 29, 31; Parth., lines 23, 25). Christensen's deductions (see "Abarsam et Tansar," *Acta Orientalia* 10, 1932, pp. 43-55), which rely on the titles given by Ṭabarī, can therefore no longer be maintained.

The exact position or title of Abarsām remains unclear. Artaxšatr-farr, which follows his name in the inscription, may be his place of origin or his seat of rule or power. The fact that, in late Sasanian tradition, as reflected in Ṭabarī, he appears as the grand vizier of Ardašīr testifies to his fame and importance. He must have been an early supporter of Ardašīr and probably an influential adviser to him.

Abarsām's name is also mentioned by Ṭabarī (I, pp. 823-24) and Dīnavarī (p. 45) in connection with a legend according to which Ardašīr discovers that a girl he had married was from the race of the Arsacids. He asked his chief minister, Abarsām, to have the young woman executed, but Abarsām, finding that she is pregnant, lets her live and cuts off his own manhood, which he deposits with the king in a sealed box as evidence of his chastity should occasion require it. He brings up the child, the later Šāpūr I, in secret and reveals him to the king at an opportune moment. The *Kārnāmag* (ed. Antia, pp. 41f.; cf. *Šāhnāma* [Tehran] VII, pp. 1963f.) relates the same story but has the "chief priest" in Abarsām's role, as do Dīnavarī (pp. 45f.) and the *Nehāyat al-erab* (tr. E. G. Browne, *JRAS* 1900, pp. 218-19). The story obviously aims at providing a royal descent for Šāpūr, but its association with Abarsām may indicate that he held the position of chamberlain or superintendent of the royal household or court minister.

The *Nehāyat al-erab* (p. 219) and Dīnavarī (pp. 46f.) further recount the anachronistic story that an apostle of Christ explained the gospel and the Christian religion to Abarsām. Abarsām informed Ardašīr, who listened to him sympathetically. Dīnavarī even says that Ardašīr and his minister (called Yazdān, however, on page 85 by Dīnavarī) accepted Christianity, only to face the wrath of the Persians, who forced them to abandon it. Obviously, no credence can be attributed to the story.

In the *Fārsnāma* of Ebn-al-Balkī (p. 60), a name resembling that of Tansar is



mentioned as the chief minister and confidant of Ardašīr. This raised the possibility, discussed at length by Christensen, *op. cit.*, that Abarsām was identical with Tansar (q.v.), but Šāpūr's inscription does not know Tansar as such, and therefore the conjecture is no longer valid.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

For Šāpūr's great inscription and a discussion of the members of Ardašīr's court see M. Sprengling, *Third Century Iran: Sapor and Kartir*, Chicago, 1953, pl. 5:24, 8:29 and pp. 9, 11, 18, 31, 32.

For Middle Persian, Arabic, and Persian texts see the body of the article, and Christensen, *op. cit.*

See also Justi, *Namenbuch*, p. 1, (where the Armenian form *Aprsam* is mentioned); Christensen, *Iran Sass.*, pp. 107, 114; Nöldeke, *op. cit.*, pp. 9, n.2; 21, n. 4; 27, n. 2.