



ĀSŌRISTĀN

ĀSŌRISTĀN, name of the Sasanian province of Babylonia. It is known from Šāpūr I's inscription on the Ka'ba-ye Zardošt in the Greek form ASSYRIAN (ed. A. Maricq, *Syria* 35, 1958, pp. 304-05, repr. in *Classica et Orientalia*, Paris, 1965, pp. 46-47, cf. also pp. 78, 91; M. Back, *Die Sassanidischen Staatsinschriften*, Acta Iranica 18, Tehran and Liège, 1978, p. 286, 500 n. 151); in the inscription of Narseh I at Paikuli (ed. E. Herzfeld, *Paikuli. Monument and Inscription of the Early History of the Sasanian Empire* I-II, Berlin, 1924; H. Humbach and P. O. Skjærvø, *The Sasanian Inscription of Paikuli*, pt. 3.1, Wiesbaden, 1983, Mid. Pers. text lines 4-25, Parth. text lines 4.22, cf. glossary p. 81f.); in the *Bundahišn* (pp. 87.1, 234.8); as a loanword in Armenian (Asorestan, Hübschmann, *Armen. Etymologie*, p. 22); in the *Šāh-nāma* (in the later form Sūrestān); and in Chinese transcriptions (see Honigmann and Maricq, *Recherches*, pp. 41ff.). The adjective *āsōrīg* in Pahlavi accordingly means "Babylonian" (cf. the Pahl. text *Draxt ī Āsōrīg* "The Babylonian Tree"). On the other hand Syriac *Ātōr* means "Assyria"—hence the confusion of Āsōristān with Assyria, which one already notices in Ammianus Marcellinus, and which has prevailed among scholars until recently.

Āsōristān, in Aramaic called Bēt Aramāyē, was largely identical with the old country of Babylonia. The borders were, in the west, the Euphrates and, in the east, a strip of land east of the Tigris. The northern border is somewhat uncertain but probably went along a line from Anta to Takrīt. Ḥīra was probably the southernmost point, the border then following the northern part of the swamps of Wāseṭ. The province of Mayšān was situated to the south.



One principal road went along the Euphrates down to Pērōz-Šāpūr (Anbār) where it turned westwards to Seleucia-Ctesiphon. Another important road followed the Tigris northwards from Wāseṭ to Takrīt. For communications river-traffic also played a great role. Āsōristān was intersected by a great number of canals, used chiefly for irrigation.

The most important cities are enumerated by Ammianus Marcellinus who, however, includes many cities actually belonging to Mayšān (33.6.23). He mentions Babylon, Seleucia, and Ctesiphon, said to have been founded by Vardanes (unknown) and later fortified by Pacorus (the son of Orodes). Babylon, the old capital was falling into ruins already in Parthian times. Ḥīra in the south is mentioned in the Pahlavi “Catalogue of Provincial Capitals” as founded by Šāpūr I (Markwart, *Provincial Capitals*, pp. 14, 67).

The population of the province was a mixed one. The Greek element in the cities, still strong in the Parthian period, was absorbed by the Semites in Sasanian times. This element was composed of Arameans, Jews, and Arabs. The Arabs were nomads in the vicinity of the desert. The Jews were chiefly farmers, but to some extent also dwelling in cities, concentrated around Sura, Pumbadita, and above all Nehardea. The majority of the population were Arameans, speaking East Aramaic dialects, as did the Jews. The Iranians were found in the higher classes of society, as courtiers, army officers, civil servants, judges, and feudal lords, living partly in the country, partly in Ctesiphon, where they possessed houses.

The administrative division during the Sasanian period used various terms, differing from time to time and according to local usage. In Āsōristān the term for province was *šahr*, the greater district either *kūra* or *ōstān*; the smaller district was called *rustāk*; and every *rustāk* was divided into four *tasūks* (quarter). The smallest unity was the village, *deh*. In Syriac the terminology was *ʾatrā*, *kūra* (seldom found), *rustāqā*, *qʾrītā* (village), a term corresponding to *tasūk* does not occur. Moreover in the later period of Sasanian government, from which the available data chiefly derive, *rustāk* and *tasūk* seem to have changed place, *tasūk* denoting the greater district.

Āsōristān, owing to its great majority of Christian Arameans, always was unreliable; and the government did little to create loyal subjects. Also the Arabs were rather hostile after the abolition of the semi-independent kingdom of Ḥīra. Āsōristān therefore was easily conquered by the Arabs after their victory at Qādesīya. We hear of no resistance from the population against the



invading Arabs. The richest province called “the heart of the Empire of Iran” *del-e Ērānšahr*, was thus lost to the Arabs.

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