



CORRESPONDENCE I. IN PRE-ISLAMIC PERSIA

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i. In pre-Islamic Persia

There is no information about correspondence in Median times, except for a fictitiously paraphrased letter from Cyrus to Cyaxares that began “Cyrus to Cyaxares, greeting!” (Xenophon, *Cyropædia* 4.5.27). All surviving evidence for pre-Islamic Iran is from the Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sasanian periods up to the early Islamic centuries, when the older tradition continued (see ii below).

Achaemenid period

The earliest surviving evidence of official correspondence in pre-Islamic Persia is a collection of thirteen almost complete letters and some damaged fragments, all written on leather (see [čarm](#)) in [Aramaic](#), the lingua franca of the Achaemenid period (Driver). They include official and semiofficial letters written by skilled scribes at the order of [Aršāma](#), the Persian satrap of Egypt, or of high-ranking Persian officers to subordinate Persian administrative officers in Egypt (Driver, p. 4). The stereotyped mode of address is “from Aršāma to X” (*mn ’ršm l X*) followed by the greeting formula: “I send thee much (greetings of) peace and prosperity” (*šlm wšrrt šgy’ hwšrt lk*). In some letters the titles of sender and recipient follow their respective names. The content of each letter is introduced by the phrase “and now” (*wk’t*). The



The same system continued in Parthian letters written in the early Sasanian period. One fragmentary letter in Parthian on parchment dating to the end of the 2nd or the early 3rd century c.e., with administrative or commercial contents, was discovered at Dura Europus (Henning, 1959, p. 414). The mode of address is simple and resembles that of the Aršāma letters (see above), opening with the name of the sender, followed by that of the addressee: “from X to Y” (*MN snysrk(n) ʿL (h)wsrw*). Next is the greeting, containing words like “health” (*ŠLM*) and “prosperity” (*ŠRRT*). In the Pahlavi treatise *Ayādgār ī Zarērān* (*Pahlavi Texts*, ed. Jamasp-Asana, p. 2 par. 17), which is of Parthian origin, there is a quotation of a letter (*frawardag*) from Wištāsp to Arjāsp: “From king Wištāsp, the sovereign of Ērān, to Arjāsp, the king of the Xyons, greetings” (*az wištāsp šāh ērān dahibed ō areāsp ī xyōnān šāh drōd*).

Further information can be gleaned from the Parthian romance *Vīs o Rāmīn*, which survives only in an 11th-century Persian verse translation. It contains a number of letters, said to have been written on parchment or silk (*harīr*) with musky ink, rolled, and fastened with strings (*band*; ed. Mīnovī, pp. 329, 346, 482, 486). The address formula is simple and sentimental.

Among the Manichean texts from Chinese Turkestan there are two Parthian letters (Boyce, *Reader*, pp. 48, 50); one is probably from Sisinnius to Mār Ammō, thus from the end of the 3rd century c.e.; the second is a fictitious letter, probably originating among the schismatic Dēnāvārīya (6-7th century c.e.), alleged to have been written by Mani to Mār Ammō (see Sundermann, 1986, p. 59 and n. 61). The beginnings of both letters, with the address formula, are missing, but in the latter two previously unattested epistolary terms are present, *ēdar-nām* “sender” (lit. “the name of [the one] here”) and *abardar-nām* “addressee” (lit. “the name of [the one] above”; Boyce, *Reader*, p. 51 par. 6).

Sasanian period

Aside from the late documents in Parthian (see above), there is abundant evidence for correspondence from the Sasanian period and the first three or four centuries of the Islamic era, when the Middle Iranian languages were still in use. A number of letters survive in Middle Persian (Pahlavi), Sogdian, and Khotanese.

Middle Persian (Pahlavi). The oldest surviving specimen of a letter written in Middle Persian can be dated to shortly after 253 c.e.; it is among the documents excavated at Dura Europus (Henning, 1959, pp. 415-17), a fragmentary



parchment with economic content, written on both sides. The name of the sender is mentioned first; the recipient's name is damaged, though parts of the greeting formula, including the words "health" (*ŠRM*) and "reverence" (*SGDE*), are preserved. The text of the letter begins "and now" (*WK'N*; cf. the Aršāma letters, above). There are also a number of Middle Persian letters on papyrus and parchment surviving from the late Sasanian period. The most important collection, dealing with the short-lived Persian occupation of Egypt in 619, is preserved in the Staatliche Museen in Berlin (Hansen, pp. 9-22). Others are scattered among museums and private collections in various countries (Weber, pp. 25-43). The mode of address is usually simple, consisting only of the name and title of the addressee (e.g., *L hwt'k'yzd'nkrt' nč* "reverence to the lord Yazdānkard"), followed by a benedictory formula containing the words "greetings" (*ŠRM*), "health" (*drwstyh*), "happiness" (*l'mšn*), and "every joy" (*KL' plhwyh*; Hansen, p. 23). In a few the names of the recipients are preceded by stereotyped epithets or phrases (e.g., *L yzd'n hm'y plhwtl krt' yzd'nkrt' nč* "reverence to him whom the gods have made to be always the most fortunate one, Yazdānkard," *L yzd'n 'byd't yzd'nkrt' nč* "reverence to the one who is remembered by the gods, Yazdānkard" (Hansen, pp. 29, 33; Weber, pp. 36, 37).

A brief manual on letter writing, *Abar ēwēnag ī nāmāg-nibēsišnīh* ("How to write a letter"; *Pahlavi Texts*, ed. Jamasp-Asana, pp. 132-40; Zaehner), was probably compiled toward the end of the Sasanian period. It was intended to provide scribes with models of polite formulas for various occasions, including condolences (*nāmāg pad bēš-pursišnīh ud hunsandīh dādan*; *Pahlavi Texts*, pp. 135-36 pars. 18-24) and letters to dignitaries, men of lower rank, and relatives and friends (p. 132 par. 1). If the letter was to be written in a hurry, the simplest mode of address could be used: "from X to Y much greetings" (*az wāhmān *ō wāhmān drōd ī was*; p. 136 par. 26), but most of the recommended models are composed of long, turgid phrases and sentences. They may be divided into several types, according to structure, each type consisting of several parts.

Type I consisted of the name and title(s), if any, of the addressee and a benedictory formula, often introduced with the relative pronoun *kē* ("who," referring to the gods) and usually concluding with a subjunctive verb expressing wishes for the recipient, addressed politely in the second person plural pronoun *-tān* or *ašmā* (e.g., *Pahlavi Texts*, pp. 132-35, 139 pars. 2, 4, 13-14, 17, 36 and 3, 15-16 without the relative pronoun). The mode of address in the *Epistles of Mānuščihr* (Dhabhar, pp. 1, 53) is of this type. Another



example occurs in a letter (*Pahlavi Texts*, pp. 137-38 pars. 30-33) asking for news about the addressee and his health; the body of this letter begins with the adverb “now” (*K’N/nūn*, par. 32). Type II began with laudatory epithets, followed by a benedictory formula and the name of the addressee in the form “X son of Y” (*Pahlavi Texts*, p. 133 par. 5). Type III included only the initial laudatory epithets and the name of the addressee (*Pahlavi Texts*, pp. 133-34 pars. 6, 7, 10-12). In type IV the initial laudatory epithets were followed by the name of the addressee and then the benedictory formula (*Pahlavi Texts*, pp. 134, 138-40 pars. 8-9, 34-35, 38-39, 43). In type V the first element consisted of greetings to Zoroaster (*namāz ō Zardušt*), followed by laudatory epithets and the name of the addressee (*Pahlavi Texts*, p. 137 pars. 28-29). Finally, type VI began with a benedictory formula in which the recipient’s name and title were mentioned (e.g., *hērbēd xwadāy X*; *Pahlavi Texts*, p. 139 par. 41).

In one model (*Pahlavi Texts*, p. 140 par. 44) the name of the sender appears at the end of the letter: “sent by X son of Y” (*wāhmām ī wāhmānān frēstīd*). The *Epistles of Mānuščihr* conclude with benedictions, the names and titles of the senders, and the dates (I, chap. 11, no. 12, II, chap. 9, nos. 12-15, III, no. 21).

Islamic sources, in which earlier letters were translated into Arabic or Persian, provide some additional information about correspondence in the Sasanian period. The mode of address may be discerned, for example, from a letter from Kōsrow I Anōšīravān (r. 531-79; Ṭabarī, I, p. 981), beginning “from Kesrā [Kōsrow], king of kings, to No‘mān b. Monḍer,” and another from the same king (Ṭabarī, I, pp. 892-93), beginning “from the king Kesrā b. Qobād [Kawād] to Zādūya (?) b. Naḵīrajān [Naxwēragān], the Fādūsban (Pādōspān) of Azarbaijan.” Other examples were quoted by Mas‘ūdī (*Morūj*, ed. Pellat, I, pp. 289, 307-09) and Ebn al-Nadīm (ed. Tajaddod, p. 15). A number of letters about military affairs are contained in the *Šāh-nāma*; they include examples written by Persian kings to other rulers (Moscow, II, pp. 110, 113, VIII, p. 79), governors, and army commanders (II, p. 194, VII, p. 306), as well as the replies. There are also dispatches announcing victories (I, p. 124, VIII, p. 375) and letters of surrender (III, p. 74, IX, p. 184). They usually open with praise of the god, followed by greetings to the addressee, a formula recommended in the *Nāmag-nibēsišnīh* (*Pahlavi Texts*, pp. 133, 137 pars. 3, 30). The *Nāma-ye Tansar* (Letter of Tansar), of which both the original Pahlavi and its Arabic translation have been lost, has survived in a Persian translation by Ebn Esfandiār only. It was supposedly written in response to one from Gošnasp, king of Ṭabarestān. It begins “from Gošnasp [his titles] a letter reached Tansar [his titles],”



followed by the greeting formula (ed. Mīnovī, 1932, p. 5; 1975, p. 49).

Sasanian kings and dignitaries seem to have been partial to laudatory epithets and lengthy benedictory formulas. According to early Arabic sources, which may have been based on the Pahlavi *Xwadāy-nāmag*, letters were short until the time of Goštāsp, the Kayanian king and contemporary of Zoroaster; he ordered that they should be lengthened through the addition of details (Ebn al-Nadīm, ed. Tajaddod, p. 15; Ebn al-Balkī, p. 49). The simple style of the Achaemenid letter was thus gradually developed by the Sasanians into the pompous and somewhat bombastic style of the late Pahlavi parchments and papyri (see above), as prescribed in the Pahlavi treatise *Nāmag-nibēsišnīh*. Roman and Islamic sources support this conclusion. In a letter to the emperor Constantius, Šāpūr II (r. 309-79) called himself “king of kings, companion of the stars, brother of the sun and the moon” (Ammianus Marcellinus, 17.5.3). Two centuries later Kōsrow I, writing to the emperor Justinian, also glorified himself with a number of such titles (Christensen, *Iran Sass.*, p. 260).

The Sasanians mainly used parchment for correspondence, except in Egypt. Ebn al-Nadīm (ed. Tajaddod, p. 22) related that Persians had once written on the hides of buffaloes, cows, and sheep (see [daftar](#)). According to Balāḡorī (*Fotūḥ*, ed. Monajjed, p. 570), royal letters were written on white leather scented with saffron; in the *Šāh-nāma* they are said to have been written on silk or parchment (*parnīān*, *ḥarīr*), scented with ambergris (*anbar*) and musk (*mošk*). Letters were sealed by the senders; Islamic sources relate that the Sasanian kings had various seals (*kawātem*, sing. *kātam*) for different purposes. The seal put on the letters was said to have the impression “fidelity” (*wafā*) or “haste” (*waḥā*’; Balāḡorī, *Fotūḥ*, ed. Monajjed, p. 569; Jahšīārī, p. 2; Mas’ūdī, *Morūj*, ed. Pellat, pp. 309, 320-21; Gardīzī, p. 37). The parchment was folded and tied with string, and a clay sealing (bullā) was attached to the knot (Frye, 1974, pp. 156-57). According to the *Šāh-nāma* (Moscow, IX, p. 184), however, the royal letters were wrapped in polychrome damask envelopes.

In the Sasanian period the correspondence was under the supervision of the royal scribe, the *Ērān-dibīrbed* or *dibīrān mahist* (Christensen, *Iran Sass.*, p. 134; see [DABĪR i](#)). According to Islamic authors, Middle Persian letters were written in a special script called *frwrđh dfyrh* (i.e., *frawardag-dibīrīh*; see *dabīrīh*; Ḥamza, *Tanbīh*, p. 64, cf. Ebn al-Nadīm, ed. Tajaddod, p. 16), almost certainly the cursive script known from the Pahlavi papyri, parchments, and ostraca.



Sogdian. The earliest surviving evidence for correspondence in Sogdian is a collection of five more or less complete private commercial letters and some smaller fragments written on paper, known collectively as the *Ancient Letters* (Reichelt, 1931, pp. 1-42), probably dating from the beginning of the 4th century (Henning, 1948; Grenet and Sims-Williams, pp. 101-22). Each letter was folded several times and bore the name of the sender and the addressee on the outside (“to X from Y,” *D X MN Y*). Most were tied with string. Letters II and III begin with “to” (*D* “to”; see Sims-Williams, pp. 134ff.) and the names and titles (*xwt’w* “lord,” *βγ-* “sir”) of the addressees. Then comes the greeting, containing words like “blessing” (*’pryw(n)*), “reverence” (*nm’cyw*), “a good day” (*šyr YWM/my’*). Next the names of the senders are given, followed by benedictory sentences addressed to the recipients. In letter IV the sender’s name comes immediately after that of the addressee, followed by the greeting formula. In letter I, however, the name of the sender is mentioned first, apparently because it is an informal letter from a woman to her mother. Some letters end with the dates.

Among the Sogdian documents discovered at Mount Mug in northern Tajikistan is a collection of letters written on Chinese paper and parchment, dating to the 8th century. They came from the archives of the Sogdian chieftain *Dēwāštič*, the last ruler of Panjikant, and the contents are administrative and commercial (Livshits; Bogolyubov and Smirnova). The mode of address in some letters is very simple, beginning with the names and titles of the senders followed by those of the recipients: “from X to Y greetings” (e.g., *MN syw’yk MLK’ yw’štyc ’t prm’nδr ’wttw ’rwth* “from *Dēwāštič*, the sovereign of Sogdiana, to Utt, the administrator, greetings” (Livshits, p. 132 A 18; Bogolyubov and Smirnova, p. 69). If the sender was of lower rank than the addressee, his own name came second, and he designated himself the servant of the addressee (*yyp’ βntk*), often using a lengthy formula with laudatory epithets: “addressed to Afrun, the lord, the sovereign, the great support, the greatest of all supports, sovereign of *Kāksar* (region), sent by *Rīwāk*, who is his least (and) millionth servant. Much reverence to the glorious lord” (*’t βγw xwβw RBch ’nwth MN wyspn’cy ’nwty ’msy’tr x’xsrcw xwβw ’pr’wn pyšt MN xyp’ kstr 100 RYPWmyk βntk ryw’kk ptškw’nh ZY βγγ ZKn RB-prn γrβy nm’cyw*; Livshits, p. 126 B 16.1-4, cf. p. 129 B 14). In some letters the address formula is repeated at the end (e.g., Livshits, pp. 78 A 14, 117 B 17, 138 A 3).

There are also some fragmentary Sogdian letters in the collection of documents found at Turfan in Central Asia; they are of a private religious



nature and were written from an unknown community to a Manichean teacher (perhaps a bishop) who resided in Qočo (Kucha). They belong to the period between 763 and 880 (Henning, 1936, pp. 14-18; Sundermann, 1980). Unfortunately, the beginnings and ends of these letters are missing, so that the mode of address is unknown.

Khotanese. There are a large number of Khotanese private and business letters on paper surviving from the 8th-10th centuries. Some begin with names and titles or laudatory epithets of the addressees; the senders use the first person singular pronoun “I,” as in “to the Prior *dvipīṭa* teacher Prajñendrabhadra then I make report” (Bailey, 1963, V, p. 386 no. 18; idem, 1968, p. 77). The courtesy formula in a private letter written by an estate owner to his wife is “I the official *Īramaña* bow down before my wife” (*spāta Īramaña neri śamḍā haṃbajai hu@nūṃ*). It is followed by stereotyped inquiries after his relatives’ health; the letter concludes with the date (Bailey, 1969, II, p. 71 no. 42; idem, 1968, p. 73; cf. a similar letter in idem, 1963, V, p. 217 no. 455; idem, 1968, p. 90). A private letter from a Buddhist doctor to a colleague opens with an inquiry after the recipient’s health (Bailey, 1963, V, p. 216 no. 454; idem, 1968, p. 82). Many Khotanese letters bear dates at the ends, and on the versos the names of the recipients are mentioned: “to be given to X” (e.g., Bailey, 1968, p. 82).

Choresmian. No letter has survived in Choresmian, but the 11th-century historian Bayhaqī (ed. Fayyāz, p. 912) mentioned a letter in Choresmian addressed to the ruler of Choresmia.

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