



DABĪR I. IN THE PRE-ISLAMIC PERIOD

i. In the Pre-Islamic Period

According to the *Nāma-ye Tansar*, secretaries constituted one of the four classes in Sasanian society (p. 57; tr., p. 37; *Ahd-e Ardašīr*, p. 63; *Testament of Ardašīr*, in Grignaschi, pp. 54, 74; *Ayīn of Ardašīr*, in Grignaschi, pp. 95, 115; [Pseudo] Jāḥeẓ, p. 25; see [class system iii](#)). The introduction of these classes was attributed in most Islamic sources to the legendary king Jamšēd (Ṭabarī, I, p. 180; Baḥ'amī, ed. Bahār, p. 130; Ṭa'ālebī, *Ġorar*, p. 12; Ebn al-Balkī, p. 31; Jahšīārī, p. 2; Meskawayh, I, p. 6), though some authors named instead the Sasanian king *Ardašīr* (*Nāma-ye Tansar*, p. 57; Meskawayh, I, p. 61; [Pseudo] Jāḥeẓ, p. 25; *Ahd-e Ardašīr*, p. 63; *Testament of Ardašīr*, in Grignaschi, pp. 54, 74). In another account the art of *dabīrī* was attributed to Ṭahmūreṭ ([Pseudo]–Ḳayyām, p. 44; cf. *Šāh-nāma*, Moscow, I, p. 38). Secretaries had the important and delicate duty of handling the royal [correspondence](#) and of recording the orders, verdicts, speeches, words of counsel, exhortations, harangues, testaments, and other utterances of the king and his high officials. They were also charged with recording everyday events and chronicles, and some of them served in various state offices (*dīvāns*) or were engaged in writing, compiling, and copying books. In the inscriptions of the early Sasanian kings and dignitaries a number of *dabīrs* were mentioned as important political figures. A(r)štād the “letter scribe” of Ray, from the Mehrān family, is mentioned among the retinue of Šāpūr I (241-72) in the latter’s inscription on



the Ka'ba-ye Zardošt (ŠKZ, Mid. Pers. l. 34 *dibīr*, Parth. l. 28 *frawardag dibīr*, Gk. l. 66 *epi epistolôn*; Back, p. 365). In the Middle Persian and Parthian inscriptions in the synagogue at Dura Europus (q.v.) several *dabīrs* are mentioned among eminent visitors (Geiger, pp. 297ff. nos. 42-44, 46-47, 49, 54). In the inscription of Šāpūr Sagānšāh, brother of Šāpūr II (309-379), at Persepolis the title of the dignitary Narseh can be reconstructed as *dibīr* (ŠPs I l. 7; Back, p. 493). The context of this inscription suggests that he had the rank of *āzādān* (q.v.). One *dabīr* of Šāpūr I, *Apasā of Ḥarrān, left an inscription in which he reported having made a statue of the king, who in return had rewarded him generously (ŠVŠ; Back, pp. 378-82). He may have been more than a *dabīr*, however, probably also a governor (cf. Back, p. 507 n. 250); during the reign of Kōsrow I Anōšīrvān (531-79) a governor of Ctesiphon was addressed as *dabīrbad* "chief secretary" (Browne, p. 231). One of Kōsrow's secretaries (*kottāb*), called Bābak son of *Behrovān (instead of Nahrovān/Bīrovān, etc., as in the mss.), was appointed chief of the military chancery (*dīvānal-jond*) and enjoyed much influence and prestige (Ṭabarī, I, p. 963; Dīnavarī, ed. Guirgass, p. 74; Baḷ'amī, ed. Bahār, pp. 1047ff.; cf. *Šāh-nāma*, Moscow, VIII, pp. 62ff.: *mowbad*). *Dabīrs* were authorized to place their own names at the ends of inscriptions; for example, the *dabīr* of Šāpūr's inscription on the Ka'ba-ye Zardošt was Ōhrmazd son of Šēlag/Šērag (Parth. l. 30; Back, p. 371), and the *dabīr* of the inscription of Kirdēr (Kartīr) at Naqš-e Rājab was Bōxtag (KNRb l. 31; Back, p. 487). A number of inscribed Sasanian seals of *dabīrs* have been published (Brunner, p. 141 no. 9; Bivar, p. 44; Gignoux, p. 25; Göbl, pp. 44 no. 15, 52 no. 601; Gignoux and Gyselen, 1992, p. 49); among the owners was a Christian named Sebōxt (Gignoux and Gyselen, 1987, p. 246).

Dabīrs played an important part in the political events of the Sasanian period; for example, after the death of Yazdegerd I (399-421) the Persian nobles decided not to choose any of his sons, including Bahrām (who became Bahrām V Gōr, 420-38), as his successor. Instead they nominated a certain prince called Kōsrow. Among these nobles there were three *dabīrs*: Gōdarz, secretary of the army (*kāteb al-jond*); Gošnasp Ādur (Jošnas Ādar), the finance secretary (*kāteb al-ḡarāj*); and Jovānōy, the chief scribe (*šāheb dīvān al-rasā'el*), who was sent to the Arab ruler Monḍer in Ḥīra to deter him from protecting Bahrām. When Jovānōy met Bahrām, however, he came to an agreement with him (Dīnavarī, p. 57; Ṭabarī, I, p. 859; Baḷ'amī, ed. Bahār, p. 934; Meskawayh, I, p. 80; Browne, p. 223; *Šāh-nāma*, Moscow, VII, pp. 285-88; Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser*, p. 92 n. 1). Later both Jovānōy and Gošnasp-Ādur were mentioned as secretaries for Bahrām (*Šāh-nāma*, Moscow, VII, p. 308 vv. 82-84). *Dabīrs* were also reported



to have been consulted on knotty problems; an example is Ƙosrow Anōšīrvān's consultation with his secretary, Yazdegerd, and the chief *mowbad*, Ardašīr, about his proposed campaign against the Turks (*Šāh-nāma*, Moscow, VIII, p. 161). The same persons, together with some other wise men, were present at the seven catechismal sessions held in the presence of Ƙosrow to test young *Bozorgmehr-e Boktagān* (*Šāh-nāma*, Moscow, VIII, pp. 116-46, esp. vv. 1367, 1386, 1416, 1425, 1495; cf. Browne, p. 232). The successor to the throne was customarily designated in the presence of the chief secretary and the chief *mowbad* (*Šāh-nāma*, Moscow, VII, p. 253, vv. 606ff.). When a careful investigation was required the king would appoint one reliable man from among his *dabīrs*, one from among the clergy, and one from among his attendants for the purpose (Meskawayh, I, p. 105). After the imprisonment of Ƙosrow II (590-628) in 628 his son and successor Šērōya (Kavād II, r. 628) appointed his chief secretary to investigate his father's crimes (Browne, p. 253). The powerful position of *dabīr* carried with it the risk of severe punishment or even death, however. For example, Dād-bendād (Dād-windād), the chief secretary of the army under the last Arsacid king, Ardavān IV (ca. 216-24; see *artabanus*), was put to death by Ardašīr after his defeat of Ardavān (Ṭabarī, I, p. 819; Baḷ'amī, ed. Bahār, p. 882). A secretary of Ƙosrow Anōšīrvān who ventured an objection to the king's fiscal reforms was also put to death (Ṭabarī, I, p. 961; Baḷ'amī, ed. Bahār, p. 1046; Jahšīārī, p. 5; Meskawayh, I, p. 98; Browne, p. 231). The same king ordered the execution of eighty officials accused of corruption and oppression, among whom there were fifty secretaries (*kottāb*; Jahšīārī, p. 9).

Dabīrs enjoyed certain privileges. They were among those exempted from taxes (Ṭabarī, I, p. 962; Dīnavarī, p. 73; Meskawayh, I, p. 99) and were authorized, like the king and the judges, to ride on "gently and steadily going horses" (*hemlāj*; Jahšīārī, p. 9). They wore special dress, except when accompanying the army (see below; Jahšīārī, p. 3). To acquire the rank of *dabīr* required certain qualifications. A commoner was not as a rule allowed to become a *dabīr* (Ebn al-Balkī, p. 93). Ferdowsī narrated the story of a shoemaker who asked to be educated as a *dabīr* in exchange for lending the king a considerable amount of money, but his request was refused (*Šāh-nāma*, Moscow, VIII, pp. 297-99). The school in which the *dabīrs* were trained was called *dibīrestān* (*Pahlavi Texts*, ed. Jamasp-Asana, pp. 63.1, 69.13).

The court *dabīrs* were selected from among the young *dabīrs* by examination conducted by the chief secretaries. After the names of the accepted persons



had been submitted to the king, they were counted among the royal attendants. They were forbidden to associate with anyone not sanctioned by the king (Jahšīārī, pp. 3, 4). Those less qualified in handwriting and intelligence were assigned to high officials (*kārdār*; *Šāh-nāma*, Moscow, VII, p. 173, vv. 320ff.). Apart from his professional skills (see below), a *dabīr* was supposed to be a person of insight (*ahl al-baṣar*), continence (*ahl al-ʿefāf*), and efficiency (*ahl al-kefāya*); he was to be assigned tasks in which he was experienced (Jahšīārī, p. 6, citing Šāpūr I's testament to his son). He was expected to be the "king's tongue" for those remote from him, his interpreter (Ebn al-Balkī, pp. 92-93, citing Anōšīrvān; Jahšīārī, p. 3).

The estate of the *dabīrs* was subdivided into several groups, the establishment of which was attributed to Jamšēd (Jahšīārī, p. 2; Ṭaʿālebī, *Ġorar*, p. 12; Meskawayh, I, p. 6; Ebn al-Balkī, p. 31). In *Namā-ye Tansar* (p. 57; tr. p. 38) seven groups of officials are mentioned; the first four were categories of *dabīr*, each with specific functions: official correspondents; accountants; recorders of verdicts, registrations, and covenants; and chroniclers (see also [dabīre](#), [dabīrī](#)).

Official correspondents. The Pahlavi title for correspondents was *frawardag/nāmag-dibīr* (cf. SKZ, Parth. I. 28); they wrote in a script called *frawardag/nāmag dibīrīh*. The ideal correspondent was supposed to have beautiful handwriting (*xūb-nibēg*), a swift hand (*rag-nibēg*), subtle knowledge (*bārīk-dānišn*), nimble fingers (*kāmakkār-angust*), and wise speech (*frazānag-saxwan*; *Pahlavi Texts*, ed. Jamasp-Asana, p. 27 par. 10). He also had to be skillful, vigilant, and quick-witted, so that, if the king dropped a hint, he could understand the intention fully and express it in a fluent, smooth, and pleasant style. He was also supposed to have some notion of various sciences (Ebn al-Balkī, p. 31). At the Sasanian court there were bilingual *dabīrs* who also served as interpreters; for example, one Indian secretary was reported to have lived at the court of Kōsrow II (Ṭabarī, I, p. 1053). The same king always had an Arab *dabīr* as well, for example, ʿAdī b. Zayd ʿEbādī, whose father had also served this king and his father, Hormozd IV (579-90; Ṭabarī, I, pp. 1016, 1017, 1024; Browne, pp. 246-47). It was customary for some *dabīrs* to accompany the army into the field, and the commander-in-chief was supposed to consult them (Jahšīārī, p. 4). Sometimes they were also charged with reporting to the king in secret and spying for him; for example, when [Bahram Čōbīn](#) became angry with Hormozd and decided to revolt, Yazdak the scribe, together with another official, fled by night to inform the king (Dīnavarī, p. 86; Browne, p. 237). The same Yazdak, with the title *kāteb al-jond* (probably **spāh-dibīr* in Pahlavi; cf.



dabīr-e sepāh in *Šāh-nāma*, Moscow, VIII, p. 142 v. 1493), was mentioned among the attendants of Kōsrow I (Dīnavarī, p. 90; Browne, p. 240). The same title was borne by one of the grandees in the time of Yazdegerd I (399-420; Dīnavarī, p. 57). Certain *dabīrs* were entrusted with the secret correspondence. They were called *kāteb al-serr* in the Arabic sources; the Pahlavi term was probably **rāz-dibīr*. For example, Kōsrow II, having killed Bendūya (Windōya) intended to kill his brother Beštām (Wistahm; see [BESTĀM O BENDŌY](#)) as well. He therefore ordered his *kāteb al-serr* to write a letter to Beštām, summoning him for consultation. The office of confidential secretary survived into the ‘Abbasid period (Dīnavarī, pp. 106, 389; see ii, below).

Accountants. The accountants were further divided into subgroups. The financial secretaries (Pahl. *šahr-(h)ā/āmār-dibīr* (Paikuli inscription, Mid. Pers. l. 16, Parth. l. 14; Humbach and Skjærvø, III/1, pp. 42-43, III/2, p. 45) handled tax affairs; some were mentioned as *kāteb al-ḡarāj* in Arabic sources (e.g., Ṭabarī, I, p. 960). During the reign of Kōsrow Anōšīrvān they were charged with assessing the value of the land as the basis for a new system of taxation (e.g., Meskawayh, I, p. 98). Each region had its own tax accountant, *kāteb al-kūra* (Meskawayh, I, p. 102). The court accountants bore the title **kadag-(h)ā/āmār-dibīr*. There were also accountants attached to the treasury (*ganj-(h)ā/āmār-dibīr*). The title of the accountants of the (royal) stables was **āxwar-(h)ā/āmār-dibīr*, of those attached to the fire temples *ātašān-(h)ā/āmār-dibīr*. Some inscribed seals of the latter survive; for example, one bears the name *Bōxtōg ī Āmihr ī ādur ī Gušnasp dibīr* “Boxtōg son of Āmihr, scribe of the fire temple Gušnasp” (Göbl, p. 52 no. 601; cf. p. 44 no. 15). Accountants of pious foundations were known as **ruwānagān-(h)ā/āmār-dibīr*. After the Arab conquest Persian accountants, *kāteb* or *kāteb al-ḡarāj*, continued to play an important part in the imperial administration; one example is the famous Zādān-farroḡ and his family (Balāḡorī, *Fotūḥ*, ed. Monajjed, p. 368; Jahšīārī, p. 38).

Judicial secretaries. Secretaries responsible for recording judicial decisions and verdicts were probably called *dād-dibīr*. A certain Xwadāy-būd, with the title *dibīr*, mentioned as a judicial commentator (*Mādayān*, pt. 1, p. 2 l. 5), may have belonged to this group.

Chroniclers. Certain *dabīrs* were responsible for recording daily events. One of them, a secretary of Šāpūr II called Xwarrahbūd (Arm. Xorōhbowt), was captured by the Romans. In the Roman empire he learned Greek and wrote a book on the deeds of Šāpūr and Julian. Later he also translated into Greek a



Persian book on the history of primitive times written by one of his Persian companions in captivity, Rāstsaxwan (Arm. Rastsohown; Moses of Khorene, chap. 70; tr. Thomson, p. 217). Sergius, an interpreter for Ƙosrow Anōšīrvān summarized the court archives and translated his summary into Greek; this work was used by Agathias (Christensen, *Iran Sass.*, p. 76). Hormozd IV, after his imprisonment, asked for a *dabīr* to be sent to him with a book, in order to read to him ancient stories and the exploits of the kings (*Šāh-nāma*, Moscow, IX, pp. 13-14 vv. 56-57, 65). According to Balāḍorī (*Fotūḥ*, ed. Monajjed, p. 569; cf. Lukonin, pp. 711-12), in a report pertaining to the late Sasanian period, the king's orders and decisions were recorded in his presence, and another official copied them into the royal monthly diary; then the king put his seal on the diary, which was kept in the treasury. It is also related that Ardašīr charged two intelligent pages, probably two *dabīrs*, with dictating and recording what he said in the presence of his courtiers while he was drinking. The next day his *dabīr* would read out his words to him ([Pseudo] Jāḥeẓ, p. 27). Those *dabīrs* whose duty was to know the rank, position, and special place of each courtier probably belonged to this group; in instances of ambiguity or dispute they were consulted (Ebn al-Balkī, p. 49; Meskawayh, p. 29).

Copyists. Little is known about the *dabīrs* who engaged in writing down and copying secular and religious books in the Sasanian period. Those who transcribed or copied Zoroastrian religious books, especially the *Avesta*, were probably called *dēn-dibīr*. Manichean *dabīrs* were regarded as a class of the elect (*Mir. Man.* II, p. 325 n. 1).

The chief secretary bore the title *dibīrbed*, attested in the Parthian documents from Nisa as *dpyrpty* (D'yakonov and Livshits, nos. 90, 99, 2150, 2172). In the inscription of Šāpūr I on the Ka'ba-ye Zardošt the *dibīrbed* is mentioned among the royal dignitaries. A certain Mard with this title was named among Ardašīr's retinue (ŠKZ, Mid. Pers. l. 29, Parth. l. 24; Back, p. 352). In the same inscription a dignitary called Ohrmazd, with the same title, is mentioned among Šāpūr I's retinue; his father had borne it as well (ŠKZ, Mid. Pers. l. 34, Parth. l. 28; Back, p. 363). In the Arabic and Persian sources this title was given as *dabīrbad* (Mas'ūdī, *Tanbīh*, p. 104; Grignaschi, pp. 103, 129; Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rik*, I, p. 202; [Pseudo] Jāḥeẓ, pp. 77, 160, 173; Browne, p. 231) or *dabīrfad/d* (*dbyrfd/d*; Ebn al-Balkī, p. 49; Meskawayh, I, p. 29). In some of the sources this title is translated *ra'īs kottāb al-rasā'el* (Dīnavarī, p. 112). Another title for the chief secretary, also known from Parthian times, was Pahlavi *dibīrān mahist* (*Pahlavi Texts*, pp. 2 par. 8, 3 par. 22; *Kār-nāmag*, ed. Antia, chap. 15.9), which



was translated in the Persian sources as *mehtar-e dabīran* (*Nāma-ye Tansar*, p. 87; tr., p. 61; Baḡ'amī, ed. Bahār, p. 1160), *mehtar dabīr* (*Šāh-nāma*, Moscow, VII, p. 127 v. 271), or *bozorg dabīr* (Baḡ'amī, ed. Maškūr, p. 186). The fact that the title *dabīrbad* was used for the *kāteb al-kārāj* indicates that he was chief secretary for taxation. The official so designated was the first person, after the king, to deliver a speech at the Nowrūz ceremony (Grignaschi, pp. 103, 129). The chief priest (*mowbad*), the chief secretary (*dabīrbad*), and the chief religious teacher (*hīrbad*) were present at public pleadings ([Pseudo] Jāḡeẓ, p. 160). It was also reported that on “delicate” occasions the king dined only with three of his attendants, the chief *mowbad*, the *dabīrbad*, and the chief of the cavalry (*ra's al-asāwera*; [Pseudo] Jāḡeẓ, p. 173; cf. p. 77). The *dabīrbad* was expected to be the wisest, the most intelligent, and the most vigilant of men (Ebn al-Balkī, p. 49).

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