



GONDĒŠĀPUR II. HISTORY AND MEDICAL SCHOOL

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Gondēšāpur (< Mid. Pers. Weh-Andiōk-Šābuhr; Mid. Pers. Inscription: why-’ndywk-Šhypwhry “Better Is Šābuhr’s Antioch,” ŠKZ l. 32”; for the successive transformation of the Mid. Pers. form into subsequent Ar. Jondaysābur, cf. the Gk. Bendosabora and Nöldeke’s observations on similar changes from Mid. Pers. /v/ to NPers. /g/), name of a Sasanian and post-Sasanian district and its urban center in Kuzestān; its site has been located “south of the village of Šāhābād, three km below the last of the low ridges marking the northern limit of the Kuzestān plain” (Adams and Hansen, p. 53), between Tostar and Dezful (q.v.).

According to epigraphic, archeological, and literary evidence, the city owed its existence to the Sasanian Ardašir I’s son and successor, Šāpur I (r. 242-72). Following the long-established royal custom, Šāpur commemorated his role as founder (and possibly patron) in the new establishment’s name, including also a reference to his recent victory over the Roman emperor Valerian III (r. 253-60) by claiming superiority for his “Antioch” over the homonymous metropolis of Syria. Consequently, the date of Šāpur’s founding act is contingent on the much debated chronology of his Roman war(s) and conquests of Antioch-on-the-Orontes (see antioch). Even though the existence of the “parallel” Syriac name of Bēt Lāpāt (q.v.) would seem to point to a



previous settlement in the area, the archeological surface reconnaissance of 1963 (Adams and Hansen, p. 53), which in the absence of a systematic investigation of the site is our only archeological evidence, discovered no trace of a pre-Sasanian occupation.

A literary echo of such occupation predating Šāpur is also found in the late Sasanian list of provincial capitals (Markwart, *Provencial Capitals*, pp. 20, 98, sec. 48) and in the (garbled) legendary account of Šāpur's survey of the site in view of his intended foundation (Ṭabari, I, pp. 830-31, tr., V, pp. 38-39; Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser*, pp. 41-42, n. 2, tr. pp. 87-88, 99-100; Dinavari, ed. Guirgass, pp. 48-49, who mentions two corrupted forms, Nilāṭ and Nilāb, of the original Aramaic name as the town's name in Kuzi and in the language of its population, i.e., in Syriac; for the legend of Šāpur's love for a Byzantine princess and the founding of Gondēšāpur on the model of Constantinople to please her, see Ebn al-Qeṭṭi, p. 133). The transparently etiological tendency of the report, as quoted by the *Anonymous Berolinensis* Sprenger 30 (see Ṭabari, tr., V, p. xxiii) on the one hand and Ṭabari on the other, would seem to discredit it as merely explaining the popular Persianized name Bēlābād, but the early attestation of the Aramaic form as *byl'b'd* and Bēlapat, in the Parthian and Coptic Manichean tradition respectively, would seem to indicate a historical nucleus of the later, embellished accounts, given the fact that in the Sasanian-Arabic tradition, Mani's imprisonment and death was well-nigh unanimously located in Gondēšāpur (Nöldeke, pp. 42, n., 47 and n. 5).

The architectural remains on the ground permit us to trace an orthogonal street grid within an oblong rectangular walled enclosure, thus approximating Ḥamza Eṣfahāni's idealized description of the site's layout as a chessboard of eight by eight streets (p. 49, ll. 7-9). In addition, primary sources, such as inscriptions and bullae, attest Gondēšāpur only at the beginning and during the last few decades of the Sasanian period; to date, its history in the later centuries are documented archeologically primarily by ceramic finds from the above-mentioned surface reconnaissance. These, casting substantive doubt on the literary evidence, clearly point to the site's rapid decline after the late 9th century. Consequently, the geographers of the 10th and subsequent centuries (e.g., Eṣṭakri, p. 93; Maqdesi/Moqaddasi, p. 405) would appear to have derived their information on the site's continued prosperity from uncritical compilations of older texts rather than from autopsy or contemporaneous records (Adams and Hansen, pp. 57-59).

Šāpur's official record of the satrapy of Weh-Andiyōk-Šābuhr in his famous



trilingual inscription at Ka'ba-ye Zardošt (ŠKZ) near Persepolis is paralleled in Sasanian narrative historiography as transmitted to, and partially preserved by, later Arabic and Persian authors; thus he is credited with the establishment of both district and city of Gondēšāpur (Ṭabari, I, pp. 830-831; Ya'qubi, *Ta'rik* I, p. 180). Ṭabari as well as Ḥamza (pp. 48-49), or perhaps their common source, even undertook to explain the city's name as deriving from Persian *Beh-az-Andiu-Šāpur*; in spite of the obvious interpolation of the word "az," their attempt deserves recognition for the correct identification of the main elements of the name: "weh" and "Andiōk." Also, the possibility of contamination by a later Sasanian pattern of toponymy as exemplified by *Weh-az-Āmid-Kawād* remains to be considered (see Gyselen 1989, p. 62, no. 47; cf. *Weh-Ārdašir* and *Weh-Kawād*, *ibid.*, pp. 61-62, nos. 46, 48).

The terminus post quem of Šāpur's foundation was his occupation of Antioch. However, he conquered the city twice within a few years, the earlier one was arguably in 256 (according to the patriarch Nicephorus, Demetrianus's patriarchate in Antioch began in 253 and lasted altogether four years; see Schwaigert, pp. 20-23) and the later one in 260, during Valerian III's fateful campaign. If the report of Demetrianus's deportation from Antioch and his incumbency as bishop of Gondēšāpur in the *Chronicle of Se'ert* (*Patrologia Orientalis* IV/3, p. 221) is accepted, the date of Šāpur's foundation would fall into the period between his two occupations of Antioch, i.e., the years 256-60. Documentation of Weh-Andiōk-Šābuhr's subsequent history under Sasanian rule is very uneven. The relative prominence of Christians in the region is attested by the *Chronicle of Se'ert*, which mentions the election of a certain Ardaq as the episcopal successor to Demetrianus, thus adumbrating the later importance of Bē(t) Lāpāt as the metropolitan see of Bēt Ḥuzāyē (Schwaigert, *passim*). According to the literary tradition, Weh-Andiōk-Šābuhr repeatedly fulfilled the function of royal residence during the 3rd and 4th centuries, at least un-til the great persecution of Christians under Šāpur II. The earliest relevant witness is that of the Manichean tradition of Mani's doomed confrontation with King Warahrān I and his counselors at 'Bēlapat' and his ensuing fatal imprisonment there in 276-77 (Dinavari, ed. 'Āmer and Šayyāl, p. 47).

The next firm date is furnished by the Syriac witnesses to Šāpur II's persecution of Christians; in the decade of 340, the Catholicos Šāhdōst and others were tried there in the king's presence and executed (Schwaigert, p. 110). Thus the city must have retained some of its former standing even after



Šāpur moved residence from Gondēšāpur after the first thirty years of his reign, if Ḥamza (p. 52) is lent credence, and the coincidence of this date with the (re-)foundation of Karkā de Lēdān as Xwarrah Šābuhr in 338 would seem to support it (cf. Schwaigert, pp. 109-10; thus Gyselen's attractive hypothesis, p. 75, against Ḥamza, p. 52, who cites Xwarrah Šābuhr as Susaḏs name and, among Šāpur II's foundations, refers to an unnamed town near Sus that the author of *Mojmal al-tawāriḳ* [ed. Bahār, p. 67] identifies with Karkā de Lēdān). If this is accepted, then 'Omar Kesrā's statement (apud Mas'udi, *Muruj* I, p. 295) that Gondēšāpur served as residence from its foundation through the reign of Hormazd II (303-9) would have to be revised.

Sources of Sasanian history mention Gondēšāpur as the hub of Anōšazād's rebellion against his own father, Kōsrow I Anōširavān, in about 550 (Dinavari, ed. 'Āmer and Šayyāl, pp. 69-70; Nöldeke, pp. 467-74, tr. pp. 708-14; here, a similar dissociation between the city's two names, Beṭ Lāpāṭ and Weh-Andiōk-Šāpuhr/Jondaysābur, obtains as does generally between the Syriac Christian and the Arabic sources). Thus, Procopius, on the strength of this observation relying on Syriac authorities (see above), cites Anōšazād's place of banishment as Bēlapata, whereas the Islamic texts, beginning chronologically with Abu Ḥanifa Dinavari (ed. Guirgass, p. 71, ed. 'Āmer and Šayyāl, p. 70), only use the popular Arabic adaptation of the royal Sasanian name: Jondaysābur (see [ANŌŠAZĀD](#)). They are paralleled, if not preceded, in this usage by Theophylactus Simocates' Bendosabōra.

Sasanian rule at Gondēšāpur ended with the city's surrender to the Muslim forces in 17/638 (Ṭabari, I, pp. 2566-68, tr., XIII, pp. 146-49; Ebn al-Aṭir, Beirut, II, p. 553). This event, as well as the city's subsequent history, are well-documented by narrative sources, with the notable exception of the archeological evidence mentioned above. Gondēšāpur figures in the geographic literature of the 9th and following centuries, but in political history it recaptures attention only once, and then briefly, in the latter part of the 9th century. In 262/875-76, in the course of the successive challenges to caliphal authority, one of the contending leaders, Ya'qub b. Layṭ Šaffār, made Gondēšāpur his residence; whatever further ambitions he may have had were, however, cut short by his sudden death in 265/879. His grave there became one of the city's sites for its remaining span of existence (Eṣṭakri, p. 93; Ebn Ḥawqal, p. 256; Mas'udi, *Tanbih*, p. 368; idem, *Muruj*, ed. Pellat, sec. 601; *Tāriḳ-e Sistān*, p. 233; Ebn Kallekān, tr. de Slane, IV, pp. 320-22; *Ḥodud al-'ālam*, ed. Sotuda, p. 139, tr. Minorsky, pp. 131, 381-82). During the following century and



a half, Gondēšāpur gradually faded out of history, although the literary tradition would have it otherwise.

Gondēšāpur's real fame in the history of Islamic Persia rests on its alleged role in the transmission of Hellenistic learning, or more precisely, of Galenic medicine and the institution of the teaching hospital (*bimārestān*) to the metropolitan 'Abbasid society and beyond that to Islamic civilization at large (see [BĪMĀRESTĀN](#) and [BOḲTĪŠŪ](#) iv, *pace* Dols, esp. pp. 381-85). The earliest testimony to Gondēšāpur in the context of medical learning refers to a medical-philosophical disputation convened on Ḳosrow II's orders in about 610, in which the *drustbed* (q.v.) Gabriel of Šiggār participated; the hospital itself first finds specific mention in the events of the year 148/765, when the caliph al-Manṣur is said to have summoned the then head of Gondēšāpur's hospital, Jewarjis b. Jebrā'il b. BoḲtišu', to Baghdad (Ebn al-Qeṭī, pp. 158-60). In spite of the dearth of detailed and reliable information about local and regional conditions in the pre-'Abbasid periods, Ḳuzestān and in particular the city of Gondēšāpur must be considered the locale where Syro-Persian Nestorians were weaned on what the later biobibliographical authors celebrated as superior medical learning. The information found in narrative sources concerning the derivation of such knowledge during the Sasanian period from outstanding individual Greek and Indian sources, as well as from the local Aramaic and Iranian roots, (see [BOḲTĪŠŪ](#) and Aydın Saylı, p. 1120) has substantially been corroborated by the extant texts themselves, however limited their scholarly horizon indubitably is. The differential which in the first 'Abbasid decades obtained between Nestorian medical competence and that of society at large was sufficient to launch the BoḲtišu' family and others onto a brilliant career in the orbit of the 'Abbasid court (cf. Jāḥeẓ, pp. 109-10; idem, apud Dols, p. 382). Moreover, they rose to the challenge and successively improved their theoretical and practical command of the discipline, not least by rediscovering and eventually passing on to the Muslims, Galen and the other classics of Hellenistic medicine (see [BOḲTĪŠŪ](#) and [EBN BOḲTĪŠIU'](#)).

As regards the Gondēšāpur hospital, which for several generations was under BoḲtišu's direction (see [BOḲTĪŠŪ](#)) and presumably the city's only such institution, the sources provide only scattered information on how it fared after the BoḲtišu' finally moved to Baghdad (Dols, pp. 377, 381-82); specifically, the question is whether the death of the last known director, Sābur b. Sahl, in 255/869 (Ebn al-Qeṭī, p. 207), also spelled the end of the hospital itself.



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