



MANUŠČIHR

MANUŠČIHR AND THE EPISTLES OF MANUŠČIHR, a Zoroastrian official of the 9th century CE and the three extant epistles authored by him in 881 CE.

Manuščihr, son of Juwān-Jam, was the Commander of the Profession of Priests in Fārs and [Kerman](#) and the author of three epistles, written in 881 CE: one to the authorities of Sīrgān, one to his younger brother, [Zādspram](#), and one, a public decree, condemning Zādspram's ruling that allowed a simplified purification ritual instead of Baršnūm ([BARAŠNOM](#)) in case of contact with the dead.

Living in the second half of the 9th century, Manuščihr was one of the most prominent Zoroastrian theologians of the early Islamic period. Whether he penned his other work, the *Dādestān ī Dēnīg*, before the Epistles (West, 1896-1904, p. 104) or after cannot be decisively determined (de Menasce, 1975, 547). His father, a son either of Šābuhr (I, 3.10) or of Wahrām-šād (*Bundahišn*, 35a.8), was a “leader of Zoroastrians” (*hū-dēnān pēšōbāy*; I, 3.10, 7.5). There is, however, no evidence that Manuščihr himself held this office. On the contrary, he subordinates himself to the office (*Dādestān ī Dēnīg*, Int.11. 25), and calls himself variously “the Authority and the Commander of the Profession of Priests in Fārs and Kerman” (*pārs ud kirmān rad ud āsrōnān pēšag framādār*; *Dādestān ī Dēnīg*, the closing paragraph), “the Commander of the Profession of Priests in Fārs and Kerman” (II, 9.13), or “the Authority of Pārs and Kerman” (III, 1). Besides his brother Zādspram, he had at least one other brother, Ašawahišt, the father of Farnbay, the editor of the *Bundahišn*. When he wrote his *Epistles*, Manuščihr must have been an elderly priest (II, 9.1) but not too old



to travel (II, 8.4 f.), and was evidently overburdened with administrative tasks, such that he complains of little assistance and insufficient time to devote to his theological endeavors (I, 3.12 f.; II, 1.3; 5.18 f.; *Dādestān ī Dēnīg*, Int.15).

In the ninth century, the prevalent purification ritual for a Zoroastrian who came into contact with a **corpse** was the costly *Baršnūm*, which is presented in *Vidēvdād* (VENDĪDĀD) 9.1-36 and also designated in the *Epistles* (I, 6.3, 7, 9.5, 12; II, 3.12, 14; III, 1 and 5) as (*pad*) *pixag* (Av. *nava. pixəm* “nine-knotted (stick)”, Vd. 9.14). It requires two qualified purifiers as well as enough consecrated bull’s urine (*gōmēz*) for 6x3x33 washes. Because of the diminishing quantity of available purifiers (II, 3.4f.) and *gōmēz*, Zādspram decreed the permissibility of a rather simpler purification ritual, without a purifier and with only 15 washes (Av. *pañča dasa*) with *gōmēz* and one with water (III, 1), as presented in Vd. 8.99-103. Manuščihr is informed of this decree by two lost letters, one from Zādspram himself, and one written from Sīrgān (I, 1.2; 3.13) along with an additional text (I, 2.1, 5.1), possibly but not definitely also authored by Zādspram (I, 6.1, 7.1, 16, 8.1). Manuščihr writes two replies refuting Zādspram’s decree: The first one is addressed to the religious authorities (*wēhān*, I, 1.0; II, 1.4, 7.1, 5), rather than addressing the wider Zoroastrian population of Sīrgān. This latter group is designated in the *Epistles* as “the people” (*mardōm(ān)*, I, 2.7 f., 6.9; II, 1.14, 2.3, 9.11), “Zoroastrians” (*hūdēnān*, I, 10.5; III, 21) or “the commonalty” (*pāyramīgān*, I, 2.7; *amaragān*, III, 5). Of the two, Manuščihr considers his first letter more detailed, longer, and comprising more arguments (II, 7.2). His theological argumentation, for example, elaboration of the positions of the three commentary schools, speaks to theologians rather than laypeople. The comprehensiveness of the first letter, consisting of about 5850 words in comparison to the 1050 words of the third letter and 4500 of the second, further signifies that this was not directed to laypeople. Manuščihr sends both epistles with a special courier, Yazdānpānag-mardak (I, 11.1, 2, 6, 10; II, 7.2), and asks the recipients of the first epistle to make a reliable copy of it, sending it with the courier to Zādspram (I, 11.10). He also addresses Zādspram expressing his hope that he receives this copy (II, 7.1f.).

This third epistle, an open letter to the Zoroastrians of **Ērānšahr** to nullify Zādspram’s decree, written and sealed by Manuščihr in some copies (III, 21), is dated to the third month (Hordād) in the year 250 Yazdegerdi (June-July 881 CE). The first epistle is dated to the fifth day (Spandarmad) of the twelfth month (Spandarmad) with no year. The second one is not dated, but was



presumably written shortly before or after the first, both letters cross reference one another (I, 11.1, 5; II, 7.1f.; West, 1882, p. xxv). In the first two epistles (I, 11.4; II, 7.3), Manuščihr promises to visit Zādspram in three months. This interval is exactly the period between the first two epistles and the last one, if we assume that Manuščihr wrote the first two in the year 249. We might thus conceive of a dispute between the two brothers having taken place in Zādspram's city, leading to Manuščihr's decree. We are further informed (II, 1.2) that Zādspram wrote his letter to Manuščihr in the eighth month (Ābān). As it is highly improbable that Zādspram waited 16 months or longer for an answer from Manuščihr, we can unerringly date his letter, too, to the year 249.

Zādspram wrote his letter to Manuščihr from Nēw-šābuhr (II, 1.2). Manuščihr cautions Zādspram: "Since you did not hold this opinion before, what wise man, learned in religious matters, did you find in Saraḵs [=Shiraz] who has enlightened you about this (matter)?" (II, 5.3; Mid.Pers. *saraxs* written in Av. script and glossed as *šīrāz*). Manuščihr chastises Zādspram that only in the assembly (*hanjaman*) of remote Toghuzghuz could his decree have met with so little resistance (II, 1.12; see *EI*², X, 555-57). He furthermore complains that Zādspram is not in his vicinity, otherwise he could visit and talk to him (I, 11.3). These passages evidence that Zādspram must first have been in Fārs and later Sīrgān, where he did not publicize his decree, before moving to publicize it in Khorasan (II, 5.2, 5, 9, 14). He does, however, seem to have consulted the Assembly at Shiraz (*hanjaman abar šīrāz*) about his ruling, "who did not find any sin in it" (II, 1.11).

The first epistle implies that the authorities of Sīrgān do not object to Zādspram's ruling, and are at least considering putting it in practice, such that Manuščihr asks them to wait until the matter has been clarified (I, 5.1, 6.7). Indeed, he is worried that his opinion will not be accepted (I, 3.16f.). He invites them to discuss the matter (I, 3.3), and asks Zādspram to come for a while to Fārs (I, 11.7), promising also to write another text containing precise analysis (*saxtag-nigerišnīhā*) of the matter (I, 10.2, 11.2, 6). It is clear, however, from his presentation of the situation that the Zādspram's decree is a source of doubt and concern in Sīrgān (II, 1.4). As the Commander of the Profession of Priests in Fārs and Kerman, Manuščihr was based somewhere in Fārs (I, 11.7), not in Shiraz, whither he had to travel for some administrative tasks (*Dādestān ī Dēnīg*, Int.15) in the intervening time between receiving the letter from Sīrgān and answering it (I, 3.13). It seems that it was in his capacity as the holder of this office that Manuščihr was consulted by the people of Sīrgān.



Both Manuščihr and Zādspram, as far as is manifested in the *Epistles*, resort to the teachings of the three Sasanian exegetical schools Mēdyōmāh, Abarag, and Sōšāns as their principle authorities. This indicates that these schools formed the main sources of authority for the Zoroastrian tradition in the early Islamic period. Both brothers avail themselves of the Pahlavi commentaries, especially the *Wīdēwdād* (PV), as the identified (mostly by Kanga and Dhabhar, 1912, 4-14) quotations both from the *Zand* (PV 7.79, 5.21 in I, 2.3; PV 9.2 in I, 2.12; PV 9.41f. in I, 4.3; PV 9.32 in I, 6.1) and the *Avesta* (Vd. 9.41f. in I, 4.3; Vd. 9.33 in I, 7.10; Vd. 8.98f. in II, 3.2; Vd. 19.7 in II, 6.2), and the use of Avestan terms (I, 6.6, 7.4; II, 2.7, 5.13) demonstrate. Neither Manuščihr nor Zādspram adheres exclusively to one of these schools, instead resorting eclectically to all three as befits any given argument.

It is tempting to conclude from the epistles that Zādspram was more liberal than his brother, but on closer scrutiny this appears to be only partially true. It should be noted in this regard that Zādspram held the view that *Baršnūm* must be performed with three washes of every limb (I, 6.7; II, 3.14, 4.4-6), by casting 300 pebbles in water and *gōmēz* (I, 7.16), and with a minimum stipulated amount of water and *gōmēz* for purification (I, 7.1-5), elements which departed from usual practice at the time, and which Manuščihr did not consider obligatory. Regardless, it appears that Zādspram's reformation was to some extent successful, since Manuščihr was compelled to write an open letter to all Zoroastrians proclaiming his own view and deeming dissenting priests as "heretics deserving death" (*pad ahlomōy margarzān hangārišn*; III, 19).

Manuščihr's *Epistles* are important both because of their genre as religious administrative letters, and because of the intra-religious debate on purity that they contain. As Middle Persian writings are rarely dated, the partly dated letters are of further importance for the history of Zoroastrian literature. They inform us about the nature and structure of authority, both human and textual, in early Islamic Zoroastrianism, and moreover contain evidence of Sasanian Zoroastrianism, including the three commentary schools, Wehšābuhr's activities concerning the formation of the Sasanian Avesta in [Kosrow I's](#) (r. 531-79) reign (I, 4.15, 17), and [Sasanian astronomy/astrology](#), for instance the three astronomical tables (*zīg*) used in Sasanian Iran (II, 2.9-11, Panaino, 1998, 34f.; see also PLANETS).

Manuščihr's style is dense and intricate, described by [M.F. Kanga](#) (1951, p. 192) as "carefully jeweled mosaic style." His terminology is elaborate, his tone solemn and dignified in the first epistle and imperative in the second (de



Menasce, 1975, 546f.). With his numerous quotations from the *Zand* and the *Avesta*, he represents himself as a knowledgeable high-priest. In some places he uses metaphors and similes (I, 3.11; II, 1.15, 2.9-11, 3.16). Zādspram's letter must have been abstract and enigmatic (*pad nišānag*), such that it was difficult for Manuščihr to understand Zādspram's argumentation from the letter alone (II, 1.2f.). We can pinpoint the phase of linguistic transmission from Middle to New Persian in the *Epistles*: e.g., *nāmag ī-tān* instead of **u-tān nāmag* (II, 2.1), *rāy* as postposition for accusative object (II, 5.9) and *man* instead of *an* (III, 1) for the 1st singular personal pronoun.

The three oldest manuscripts of the *Epistles*, copies (*paččēn*) of Manuščihr's three letters, are the following: 1) TD4a, 406-80, copied between 1511 and 1550 by Gōbedšāh Rostam; 2) K35, fols. 206r-233v, copied in 1572 (see CODICES HAFNIENSES); 3) BK, now missing, a direct copy of K35 by Frēdōn Wahrām Rostam Bundār, probably made in 1592. All the three manuscripts copied in Kerman, go back to the copyist of TD4a, who had relocated to Kerman from Khorasan. The other manuscripts are much younger (König, 2014, 43, 61; 2019; Dhabhar, 1912, 18-20).

B. N. Dhabhar edited the text in 1912 and, in 1921, translated it into Gujarati. In twelve different articles (see Bibliography), Kanga translated the whole first epistle with the exception of the eighth chapter, chapters 1-3 of the second and the whole third into English. E. W. West's (1882) complete translation into English is outdated. B. T. Anklesaria (1964, I, xxv-xli) reads, translates and comments upon some passages and Dhabhar (1912, 4-14) paraphrases and summarizes the epistles.

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