



MARZPĀN, MARZ(O)BĀN

MARZPĀN, MARZ(O)BĀN, “guardian of the borders; margrave; military commander”, a title from the Arsacid and Sasanian periods (marza-pāna; Parth. *mrzwpn*; MPers. *mlcp’n*; Aram. *mrzbn*; Arm. *marzpan*; Syr. *marzbanā*; Ar. *marzawān*; Pers. *marzbān*, *marzvān*, *marzabān*). Although the title *marzpān* is well known from non-Iranian (Armenian, Arabic, Syriac) sources, it is not attested in official Sasanian epigraphy until the late Sasanian period.

The title is first attested on ostracon no. 1899 (1624) from [Nisa](#) documents, dated in the year 176=72 BCE (Diakonoff and Livshits, 1960, p. 114; idem, 1977, p. 144), where there is a *mtrssnk mrzwpn* “Mīhr-sasank *marzupān*” without any further indication of his rank. In two ostraca, the title is associated with a special category of land, denoted by the Aramaic ideogram of MRDYT ‘land fit or used for the growing of crops’ (nos. 1624 [1899], 2301 [1635]). In one fragment (no. 2303 [1621]) of the ostracon, the *marzpān* is mentioned in connection with the delivery of wine from some estate; and in four cases (nos. 2301 [1635], 2301 [1635], 2303 [1621], 1787 [2200a]), *marzpāns*, unlike many other officials, are named as proper names. Two other titles are mentioned in the ostracon of Nisa: *dizpat* (Parth. *dyzpty*; MPers. *dzpty*) ‘the head of the fortress’ and *satrap* (Parth. *s’trp*; MPers. *st’lpy*) ‘governor of a province’. All three titles are usually accompanied with the Aramaic ideogram LYD (or ZY LYD) ‘in possession of; in disposal; by means of’. Depending on the concept, this ideogram can be understood as an indication of the responsibility of the official for sending of wine (see Diakonoff and Livshits, 1960, pp. 22-23, 44-45).

The earliest direct evidence for this title in Sasanian times is a seal of an



official from the province of *Asōrestān*: *’twlnlshy ZY pylwc pyrwc ’swrst’n mlcp’n: ādurnarseh ī pēroz pēroz asōrestān marzbān* ‘Ādurnarseh (son) of Victorious-Pērōz, margrave of Asōrestān’ (Lerner and Skjaervø, 1977, p. 72; [Figure 1](#)). The latest direct attestation is in the inscription of *Eqlid* from the 6th year of a Yazdegerd where we have *Wehšābuhr marzbān* (Gropp, 1969, p. 241; Lerner and Skjaervø, 1977, p. 72).

Judging from the Manichean texts, the meaning of Parthian *marz* in Sasanian times must have been both “border” and “territory”. The word has been restored in the 3rd-century inscription of *Šāpur I* (r. 239-70) on the *Ka’ba-ye Zardošt* at *Naqš-e Rostam*, line 3 of the Parthian text: *pty ’swrstn m[rz] = pad Asōrestān marz* ‘on the border (**marz*) of Asōrestān’ (Back, p. 291; Lerner and Skjaervø, 1977, p. 72). The border of Asōrestān is also referred to in the inscription of *Narseh* (r. 293-302) at *Paikuli*, line 23: *[pr]’c [O]L ’swrst[n] w[y]mndy = frāz ō Asōrestān wimand* “up to the border of Asōrestān” (Humbach and Skjaervø, 1983, 3.1, pp. 49-50). In the inscription of *Narseh*, we also find the expression *pāhrag ī Asōrestan* ‘the border watch-post of Asōrestān’ (Humbach and Skjaervø, 1983, 11.22, pp. 36-37).

In Manichean texts, *marz* was used as both “border” and “territory.” A piece of evidence from a Manichean text may indicate that the *marzbān* was the official in charge of the *pāhrag*, the border watch-post: the Middle Persian text M2 from the Manichean mission history (Andreas, 1932, *Mir. Man.* ii), states that *Mar Ammō*, one of *Mani*’s companions who knew Parthian, was sent to the eastern provinces to preach *Mani*’s teaching. When he arrived at the border (*pāhrag*) of *Kūšān*, the spirit of the border (*wimand*) of *Hwarāsān* appeared before him in the shape of a young woman (*Mir. Man.* ii, p. 12 [303]) and after a while informed *Mar Ammō* that she was the border guard (*wimandbān*) of *Hwarāsān* and that she was unwilling to let him in because if she did then the gate (*dar*) of all of *Hwarāsān* would be open to him (Andreas, 1932, *Mir. Man.* ii, p. 14 [305]).

In Syriac sources, *marzbāns* are mainly mentioned in connection with their activities as warlords in the territories occupied by the Sasanians, where the Christian population predominantly lived. An unnamed *marzbān* of the province of *Bēt Āramayē*, the region and Sasanian province of Asōrestān, is attested under *Šāpur II* (r. 309-79) in the *Acts of the Persian Martyrs*, which shows that the institution of Sasanian *marzbān* existed at least from the 4th century CE (Bedjan, 1890-97, IV, p. 190).



Mēšīhā-Zēkā, the author of the *Chronicle of Arbela*, which treats early church history in *Adiabene*, speaking of the origin of the Sasanian state, notes that the Persians subjugated all the kings of the Eastern countries and replaced them by *māuhpaṭē* (*magupatān*) and *marzbānē* (*marzpanān*) (Mingana, 1907-8, p. 31). According to this text, a *marzbān* had his own army and lived in a fortified castle. When a *marzbān* rebelled against king *Bahrām III*, the latter sent an army, dismissed the rebellious *marzbān*, and appointed a new one (Mingana, 1907-8, pp. 31, 36-38; Kolesnikov, 1981, p. 53).

John of Ephesus (ca. 507-88) in his *Historia Ecclesiastica* (VI 6, 13, 17) describes an Adormahun as a powerful *marzbān* (*marzbānā rabbā*), commander of king *Kosrow I* (r. 531-79 CE). Under Šāpur II and *Yazdegerd I* (r. 399-420 CE) *marzbāns* took an active part in persecuting Christians (Christensen, 1944, p. 311; Mingana, 1907-8, p. 128).

Judging from the Syriac sources, the *marzbāns* exercised control over local administrative authorities. In the regions of Upper Mesopotamia, where the Christian population was numerically predominant, administrative functions were partly performed by Nestorian and Monophysite bishops, and partly by *marzbāns*. In the region of Transcaucasia, for example, in Georgia, the powers of the king were performed by the *marzbān*, and local authority was exercised by one elected from among the nobility (*erismtavar*). *Marzbāns* collected impost and taxes and organized punitive operations. According to *Auszüge aus syrischen Akten persischer Märtyrer* (Hoffmann, 1880, p. 64), Atropatene (see *Azarbaijan iii. PRE-ISLAMIC HISTORY*) was governed on behalf of the Sasanian monarchs by a *marzbān*, Tohm-Hormizd; Šahrēn, from the Mihrān family, was *marzbān* of *Bēt Darayē* (Hoffmann, 1880, p. 68); Pirān-Gušhnasp (Christian name Grigor), also from the Mihrān family, was *marzbān* of Georgia and Armenia and was tortured in 542 (Hoffmann, 1880, pp. 78-79); and there were anonymous *marzbāns* of *Ganzak* (Bedjan, 1890-97, II, p. 620) and *Nisibis* (*Chronicle of Seert*, p. 194). *Marzbāns* were often descendants from ancient, noble families, already known in the Parthian period. About a dozen *marzbāns* referred to in Syriac sources have the personal or generic name Mihrān (Justi, pp. 214-15); some of them came from the house of *Kārīn* (Kolesnikov, 1981, p. 55; on Mār Qardag, *Bidaxš* of Asōrestān and *marzbān* of the region see Khurshudyan, 2015, p. 59).

The term *marzpan* is commonly found in early Armenian sources: *Agathangelos*, *Faustus*, and *Łazar P'arpec'i*, all from the final quarter of the 5th century, provide some information about the role of the



mazpāns. The *Patmut'wn Hayoc'* or *Buzandaran* by Faustus have references to a Varaz-Šapuh, *marzpān* of Atrpatakan (Ādurbādagān) during the reign of King Narseh (Faustus, 3.20 [61], tr. Garsoïan, 1989, p. 94) and a member of the Surēn family named *marzpān* of Armenia in the 370s (Faustus, 5.38 [248-51], tr. Garsoïan, 1989, p. 221; McDonough, 2005, p. 157).

According to Łazar (1991, pp. 25-26; tr. Thomson, 1976, pp. 65-74) Vřam (*Bahrām V Gōr*) “sent for the first time a Persian *marzpān* to Armenia,” deposing the last of the Aršakuni (Arsacid) family in the sixth year of the Armenian king Artasēs. Łazar describes the administrations of several individuals with the title *marzpān* of Armenia, who generally appear to have been representatives of the Iranian high nobility (see Łazar, 1991, 47, 59-60, 73, 84-86), while their Armenian counterparts entrusted with the protection of the Armenian borders are identified with the hereditary *bdeašxs* or as *sahmanapahs* (Garsoïan, 1989, p. 544).

The title is attested in some late Zoroastrian Middle Persian texts (see Gignoux, 1984, pp. 12-15). According to the *Kār-nāmag ī Ardaxšīr ī Pābagān*, *Pābag marzbān ud šahryār ī Pārs būd ud az gumārdag [ī] Ardawān būd* ‘Pābag was *marzbān* and governor of Pārs, he was among those whom Ardawān had appointed’ (*K ār-nāmag* 1.3; Grenet, 2003, pp. 26, 116-17, 125). The *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr*, a Middle Persian treatise on geography, dated to the late 8th or early 9th centuries provides us with information about *marzbāns* (secs. 25, 52) appointed under the first Sasanians to the vassal kingdom of Hira, known in pre-Islamic times as the capital of the Lakhmid Arab dynasty, clients of the Sasanians. In the concluding section of the *Kusrow ī Kawādān ud Rēdag-ēw*, it is said that after the page fulfilled his tasks, the king rewarded him by appointing him *marzbān* over a large country (sec. 120; Monchi-Zadeh, tr., p. 86).

According to Arthur Christensen the absence of the title *marzbān* in the early Sasanian inscriptions is due to the fact that Sasanians inherited the title from the Arsacids. In the early Sasanian period, *marzbāns* were part of the *šahryārs* (*štr'd'l* ‘lords of the land’), the aggregate designation of the nobility appearing in the royal inscriptions. The Sasanians maintained the old division of the empire, and from the beginning of the 5th century the petty kings bore the title of *marzbān*. These *marzbāns* were of the same rank as the royal families and had the title of shah (Christensen, 1944, pp. 102, 131-39; Widengren, 1976, p. 271; cf. the definition of the term *marzbān* in Ya‘qubi [p. 202], where *balad* corresponds to Iranian *šahr*; the terms *šahryār* may seem



equivalent, Kolesnikov, 1981, p. 50). However, the fundamental difference in the nature of these two terms is significant: the estate (“social”) *šahryār*, which in certain contexts received a specific official functional meaning, “regional governor,” and on the other hand, the position of *marzbān*.

In the history and chronicle *Ta'rik al-rosul wa'l-moluk* of [Ṭabari](#), eight *marzbāns* of Yemen (6th-7th centuries) are mentioned (Ṭabari, I, pp. 2897-2900; tr. XV, pp. 102-4).

Ṭa'ālebi states (*Ḡorar*, p. 573) that [Yazdegerd II](#) (r. 439-57 CE) passed the decision of the question on the heir to the throne of the king of kings to the court of “great states” and “main *marzbāns*”. According to the same author, under Šāpur I, the *marzbān* in the hierarchy of the nobility stood directly after the kings (i.e., the vassal kings; p. 4). Under Yazdegerd III the *marzbān* was also responsible for collecting taxes in the provinces of Marv, Marvrud, Tāleqān and Gorgān (*Ḡorar*, p. 744).

[Mas'udi](#) classified *marzbāns* as courtiers of the second rank. Besides the *marzbāns*, Mas'udi includes also the governors of the provinces in this group that were staying at the court of Ardašir and the *spāhbed*s, “generals, commanders,” who could be entrusted with the administration of regions. For example, he designates a certain Šahrwarāz as *marzbān* of the western quarter (sec. 647, 654; Khurshudyan, 2015, pp. 195-219).

[Dinavari](#) notes that the poll tax (see [JEZYA](#)) was levied under Kōsrow I on four classes, and the nobility, *marzbāns*, knights, scribes, and anyone in the service of the king were exempted (p. 73, lines 2-5). At the same time Dinavari distinguishes “ordinary *marzbāns*” from “great *marzbāns*” (pp. 121-24, 140; Kolesnikov, p. 52). Judging by the reports of Dinavari (pp. 94-96) and other sources (Grignaschi), Armenian Mušel Mamikonean (see [MAMIKONEAN FAMILY](#)) can be regarded as one of the “great *marzbāns*.”

In the period before the Arab Islamic conquest of Iran in some areas of the Sasanian state, the *marzbāns* led military squads acting independently or as part of a large army, collected taxes in several provinces, and were in charge of administrative affairs (for a list see Justi, pp. 197-98).

According to Ḥamza Iṣfahāni (fl. 350/961), sixteen *marzbāns* ruled Arab territories at different times (pp. 136-39; for instance, Dād-Pēroz, whom the Arabs called Mukabir, was a *marzbān* in Bahrain and Oman, and also collected



tax from the nomads). [Balāḍori](#) mentions the *marzbān* of Ādurbādagān, who was engaged in the levy of *karāj* (= *jezya*) and his residence was located in Ardabil, the capital of Ādurbādagān ([Balāḍori](#), p. 811). Thus, the *marzbāns*' activity, at least in some provinces, included the execution of fiscal functions.

Based on Arabo-Persian sources, it seems that *marzbāns* in the late Sasanian period formed a closed group of nobility, mainly belonging to the military class ([Gignoux](#), 1984, p. 26). They played a decisive role in the removal of [Kosrow II](#) (r. 590-628 CE) from the throne and his imprisonment ([Widengren](#), 1969, p. 131). They participated also in the events connected with the overthrow of [Hormozd IV](#) (r. 579-590 CE; [Dinavari](#), p. 87), son of [Kosrow I](#), as well as in the attempt by the usurper Šahrwarāz ([Ta'ālebi](#), p. 734). According to [Kolesnikov](#) (p. 54), in the social hierarchy of the Sasanian court, the *marzbāns* occupied a place between the *bozorgān*, 'chiefs of the most important aristocratic families', and *āzādāns* 'nobles' (see [ĀZĀD](#)).

On the use of the title *marzb ān* in Armenia, see also [ARMENIA AND IRAN ii. THE PRE-ISLAMIC PERIOD](#).

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