



SPĀHBED

SPĀHBED, Sasanian title that denoted a high military rank and meant ‘chief of an army, general’; cf. New Pers. *sepāhbad*, Arm. loanword (*a*)*sparapet*, Chr. Sogd. *sp’dpt*, Khot. *spāta* etc., all from Old Iranian **spāda-* ‘army’ and **pati-* ‘chief’. This entry considers recently discovered sigillographic evidence on the title and its bearers in late Sasanian Iran.

Until recently third-century inscriptions were the only Sasanian primary sources that attested the title of *spāhbed*. From the trilingual inscription of Shapur I (r. 240-72) on the walls of the “Ka’ba-ye Zardošt,” we learn that a *spāhbed* by the name of Raxš lived at the court of Ardašir I (224-240). The same name paired with the same title appears twice in the inscription of Narseh (r. 293-303) at Paikuli. The chronological gap between the two individuals indicates homonymy rather than identity. In his reference work on the Sasanian Empire (*L’Iran sous les Sassanides*), Arthur Christensen essentially used information drawn from secondary sources, which he attempted to harmonize despite their frequently contradictory and often ambiguous character. Later studies of the subject of the Sasanian *spāhbed* have rarely produced more coherent results because they rely on the same type of sources from which it is impossible to draw an accurate picture. The main emphasis of our literary sources is their attribution to Kōsrow I (r. 531-79) of a military reform coupled with a change in its supreme command, although it is possible that the reform had already been planned by his father Kawād I during his second reign (499-531).

With the discovery of a dozen seals in the form of clay impressions (bullae),

there now exists a primary source that provides first-hand information and makes it possible, at least to some extent, to examine the accuracy of what is transmitted in literary sources about the *spāhbed*. This improvement pertains only to the sixth century, however, because the *spāhbed* seals belong to this period and, more specifically, to the reign of Kōsrow I (531-579) and Hormozd IV (579-590). No new information has come to light regarding the *spāhbed* between the third century and the beginning of the sixth, and the same holds true for the period after Hormozd IV (579-590). Since the information provided by these *spāhbed* seals is, at first glance, absent from literary sources, a rereading of the latter is necessary for a reinterpretation of some passages.

Among the most remarkable aspects of the early sixth century military reform, our literary sources mention the abolition of a single command of the army and its replacement by four generals, each in charge of a *kust*, that is, a region corresponding to a cardinal point, best translated as ‘side’ (see Gyselen 2001, pp. 13-14). This quadripartition of military power is now confirmed by the seal inscriptions, which name the following officials: *kust ī xwarāsān spāhbed* ‘Military chief of the side of the east’, (for other possible readings and interpretations see Gyselen 2001), *kust ī nēmrōz spāhbed* ‘Military chief of the side of the south’, *kust ī xwarbārān spāhbed* ‘Military chief of the side of the west,’ and *kust ī Ādurbādagān spāhbed* ‘Military chief of the side of the north’ (the term *abāxtar* ‘north’ was generally avoided because of its negative connotation, the north being considered the territory of demons).

The twelve *spāhbed* seals now known can be dated on the basis of the regular presence of the honorific title *hujadag* ‘well-omened’ followed by the name of Kōsrow or Hormozd. That the title of *hujadag*-Kōsrow refers to Kōsrow I and not Kōsrow II (r. 590-628) is confirmed by the legends on the seals. In two cases we know a single *spāhbed* by two different seals, one giving him the epithet ‘well-omened (is) Kōsrow’, the other ‘well-omened (is) Hormozd’. In both cases the *spāhbed* with the epithet ‘well-omened (is) Hormozd’ bears more titles than the *spāhbed* with the epithet ‘well-omened (is) Kōsrow’. Therefore the Kōsrow evoked in the latter formula necessarily antedates Hormozd and consequently can only be Kōsrow I. Thus far the following *spāhbed* s are known from their seals:

1. For *kust ī xwarāsān*: Čihr-Burzēn under Kōsrow I, and Dād-Burzēn-Mihr under Hormozd IV.

2. For *kust ī nēmrōz*: Wēh-Šāhbur and Pīrag under Kōsrow I. A certain

Wahrām held the same title under both Ɣosrow I and Hormozd IV.

3. For *kust ī xwarārān*: Wistaxm under both kings.

4. For *kust ī Ādurbādagān*: Gulgōn (?) and Šēd-ōš (?) under Ɣosrow I and a *spāhbed* whose name is not legible under Hormozd IV.

In addition to the epithets *hujadag-Ɣosrow* or *hujadag-Hormozd*, all these *spāhbeds* also bear the title *wuzurg* ‘Grandee’, always written in the form of the ideogram *LBA*. From Narseh’s Paikuli inscription, we know that *wuzurg* represents the highest rank of nobility, appearing immediately below royal princes. There is a tendency to assume that this rank was acquired *ipso facto* by birth, but the statement of Kirdīr, the powerful third century religious leader, that the great king conferred on him this same title shows that it could also have been obtained by royal decree. The question arises therefore, whether the *spāhbeds* were regularly chosen from the great nobility, or received the rank of *wuzurg* after achieving prominence, as did Kirdīr. Whatever may be the case, several literary sources suggest that certain grand generals were related to the royal family or were members of the magnate houses. Thus, under the Arsacids, several generals came from the Sūrēn and Kāren families, and during the Sasanian period it was mostly the Sūrēn who held the rank of general. In contrast, on the *spāhbed* seals only the Mihrān family is mentioned: Gulgōn (?) and Šēd-ōš (?), the two *spāhbeds* of the side of the north and Pirag, the *spāhbed* of the side of the south are specified as Mihrāns.

Besides the three titles ‘Well-omened (is) Ɣosrow/Hormozd’, ‘Grandee’ and ‘*spāhbed* of a specific side of Ērān,’ all the *spāhbed* seals carry at least one more title. Some of these titles are attested elsewhere but never in association with the function of the *spāhbed*. The presence of so many titles is thought provoking. Did these titles correspond to an actual function or were they purely honorific or both? In other words, was the title kept for life after having performed a function? The successive titles on the seals could be seen as reflections of a career, somewhat in the image of what we read in the inscriptions of Kirdīr, who under each new sovereign received increasingly more prestigious titles. At any rate, each *spāhbed* mentions on his seal at least one additional title, thereby enabling us to trace him in literary sources. However, a comparison of sigillographic and literary sources reveals the frequent inexactitude of the latter in which numerous errors have crept due not only to mistaken interpretations of titles for family names or family names

for titles but also to wrong chronological attributions. In any event, among the *spāhbeds* attested by their seals at least two are mentioned in literary sources: Wistahm the *hazārbed spāhbed* of the side of the west and Pīrag the *šahrwarāz spāhbed* of the side of the south from the Mihrān family. The ninth-century Muslim historian Dinavari mentions them in a list of dignitaries who after the death of Yazdgerd I (r. 399-420) opposed the succession of his son. Dinavari (ed. ‘Āmer and Šayyāl, p. 55) explicitly refers to “Beštām [Wistahm] the *spāhbed* of Sawād, whose rank was the *hazāruft* [hazārbed].” Here Sawād is a region that most probably corresponds to the side of the west. While a case of homonymy cannot be ruled out, it seems more likely that the Wistahm of our seal is the same person who, through hazards of literary transmission, reappears at the time of Yazdgerd I. If the institution of the four *spāhbeds* dates from the sixth century, then Dinavari’s text implies an anachronism.

The title of *hazārbed* was borne by certain individuals mentioned in third-century inscriptions, but then they are never identified as *spāhbeds*. Although Dinavari does not specify that Pīrag was the *spāhbed* of the south, he remarks (ibid.) that “his rank was Mihrān” which is also strongly echoed on Pīrag’s seal. In fact, we have two successive instances of Pīrag’s seal: on one the inscription is analogous to the other *spāhbed* seals, on the other the name Mihrān has been added at the end of the inscription instead of appearing immediately after the proper name of the *spāhbed*. That these two *spāhbeds* known from their seals as those of the west and the south respectively, are also named in Dinavari’s list, admittedly one of them without the title of *spāhbed*, could suggest that other individuals from the same list, for example Yazd-Gošnasp or Gošnasp-Ādurwēš, were also *spāhbeds*. Judging by the seals, the *spāhbed* always had one or more additional titles. This must have contributed to the apparent confusion in the literary sources, which often transmit one title only or confuse the titles. This is particularly the case in the title of *šahrwarāz* ‘boar of the empire’ borne by Pīrag, *spāhbed* of the side of the south. This same title appears in literary sources, but there it often becomes a proper name.

The term *šahr*-, which in this case can only mean ‘country, empire’ and not a ‘provincial district’, also appears in some *spāhbed*’s titles. Thus, Sēd-ōš (?), *spāhbed* of the side of Ādurbādagān under Kōsrow I is *šahr-asped*; and Wahrām, *spāhbed* of the side of the south, had the title *šahr-hazāruft* engraved on his seal during the reign of Hormozd IV. Wahrām could have received this additional title from Hormozd IV because he does not carry it under Kōsrow I. Unless the title is purely honorific, it would be surprising that a general of a

part of the empire could also assume a “national” duty. If that is the case, this would constitute yet another reason for the many errors in literary transmissions. Titles composed with *šahr-* do not appear in third-century inscriptions although they do mention *asped* and *hazāruft*. As two *asped*s and *hazāruft*s are never mentioned in the same list, we can assume that their function applied to the whole of the empire, and that there was no need to emphasizing it through the addition of *šahr*. Only Kirdīr insists on the fact that he is *hāmšahr mogbed ud dādwar* ‘mogbed and judge of the entire empire’. Once the quadripartition of the empire with respect to military authority was in place, it was understandable that an official appointed as the *asped* or a *hazāruft* for the entire empire should want to make an explicit reference to it by adding the term *šahr-*.

All the same, certain titles do not refer to a “national” status as *šahr-warāz*, *šahr-asped* and *šahr-hazāruft*. Rather, they have a “regional” character. That is the case in the titles of *asped ī pārsīg* ‘Persian *asped* (chief of the cavalry?)’ carried by Weh-Šāpur *spāhbed* of the side of the south and *asped ī pahlaw* ‘Parthian *asped*’ carried by Dād-Burz-Mihr *spāhbed* of the side of the east.

Other titles do not refer directly to a military function. For instance, Wahrām *spāhbed* of the side of the south bears the additional titles of *nēwānbed* ‘chief of the brave’ and *šābestan* ‘eunuch’. It seems to me that Wurzburgmihr, the “minister” of Kōsrow I bore the same title (*Ayādgār ī Wuzurgmihr*) as did Māhān on his seal (Gignoux 1991, p. 201 who translates ‘maître d’hôtel et eunuque’) and the *Bīšāpūr-marzbān* attested in the Eqlid inscription (different transliteration by Gropp 1969, p. 241; and divergent interpretation of *nēwān[bed]* by Shaked, 1975, pp. 224-25).

Literary sources often give an unclear image of the relationship between *spāhbed* and *marzbān* ‘guardian of the borders’. For example, Mas‘udi designates Šahrwarāz as *marzbān* of the western quarter (II, p. 226, 233). As for the *marzbān*, primary sources demonstrate that it is a provincial function perhaps practiced at the level of a single province (cf. the *Bīšāpūr-marzbān* of the Eqlid inscription: Gropp 1969) or of a conglomerate of provinces (cf. seal of the *Asōristān-marzbān*: Lerner and Skjærvø 1997), but there exists no direct evidence of a *marzbān* of a quarter of the empire. Certain literary sources put the *spāhbed*, the *marzbān*, and the *pāygōsbān* ‘guardian of the district’ on equal footing, or at least they insert the latter two in the same quadripartition of the empire – east, south, west, and north – parallel to the *spāhbed*s. Until now no primary source has confirmed this supposition, and the secondary

sources are so unclear with regard to the exact relationship between the *šahrab*, the *marzbān*, and the *pāygōsbān* that they do not lead to any clear conclusions.

The institution of the four *spāhbeds* was perpetuated after Hormozd IV, but we rarely find explicit mention of a *spāhbed's* territory. However, there is the famous case of the general of Kōsrow II, Šahrwarāz, who could have been the *spāhbed* of the side of the west, and Nāmdār-Gošnasp, the *spāhbed* of the south (during the reign of Ardašir III), who helped Šahrwarāz to seize the throne. Sometimes it is possible to deduce from the literary context a *spāhbed's* territory. For example, it would seem that Farrox-Hormozd (under Āzarmīduxt), as well as his son Rostam were *spāhbeds* of the north. The *spāhbed* of Tabaristan who gave refuge to Yazdgerd III could well have been the *spāhbed* of the east. After the fall of the Sasanian Empire the title of *spāhbed* (or *espahbed*) of Tabaristan survived in the coinage of the local dynasties.

Many post-Sasanian literary sources refer to the supreme *spāhbed* as *spāhbedān spāhbed* ‘general of generals’ or *Ērān-spāhbed*. The title ‘*spāhbed* of a side of the empire’ appears only in a few literary sources (*Bundahišn*, *Sūr Saxwan*), always in a truncated form, without the term *kust*, which reveals their post-Sasanian composition and suggests a progressive loss of historical information in such types of texts.

Sigillographic sources do not refer to the role of the *spāhbed* as diplomat and peace negotiator, as is often suggested by literary sources. On the other hand, they provide a material image of the *spāhbed*: a horseman, his body and mount fully protected by iron-plated scale-armor and a coat of mail, equipped with a long lance and a sword. The seal of Wahrām son of Ādurmāh provides a good example. Its three-line Pahlavi inscription reads:

1. wlhl'n ZY n'mhw[']st hwslwdy 'twlm'h'm[W nyw]'npt W š'pstn W hwyt

2. n(sic)hwslwdy LBA 'yl'n 't kwst ZY nymlwc 3.sp'hpt.

This is transliterated as: *wahrān ī nāmxcw[ā]st xusrāw ādurmāhān ud nēwānbed ud šābestan ud huḵada[g]-xusrāw wuzurg ērān{āt}kust ī nēmrōz spāhbed*. Translation: “Bahrām, who has acquired the name Kōsrow, son of Ādurmāh, chief of the brave and eunuch and (having the honorary title) ‘well-omened (is) Kōsrow,’ grandee, Ērān-spāhbed of the side of the south.”

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