



SYRIAC LANGUAGE I. IRANIAN LOANWORDS IN SYRIAC

SYRIAC LANGUAGE. Syriac, originally the eastern Aramaic dialect of the city of Edessa, became the most important language spoken and written by Christian communities during the Sasanian era from Egypt and Asia Minor to Syria, Iran, and Mesopotamia. Syriac is attested from the first century CE, and flourished from the fourth to the eighth centuries CE among eastern Christians who lived under the direct political authority of the Sasanian empire, or were at least under its cultural influence. After the Arab conquest, Syriac remained in use as a literary language until the thirteenth century and even later.

i. IRANIAN LOANWORDS IN SYRIAC

Syriac literature is extremely rich: most works deal with Christian religion and related matters, but there are also many works on secular subjects, such as history, philosophy, and science. The authors of Syriac literature were frequently bilingual, or trilingual (if we include Greek), and many of them were Persians who wrote in Syriac, either because they were Christian converts, or because they wrote about subjects that had a literary tradition in Syriac, such as medicine. For example, almost all the physicians of the medical academy of [Gondēšāpur](#) were Persians, yet they wrote their treatises in Syriac (see Schöffler, 1980; Rosenthal, 1987, p. 254). Many works are also translations of Persian texts; for example, the juridical book of Yišōʿ-boxt, the Persian metropolitan (eighth century CE), was composed in Persian, but has come



down to us in a Syriac translation made after the author's death (edited in E. Sachau, *Syrische Rechtsbücher* III, Berlin, 1914, pp. 1-201).

Syriac texts contain a large amount of Iranian loanwords, but it should be borne in mind that they were borrowed at different times and from different dialect areas. As to the first point, many loanwords result from the aforementioned political and cultural contacts between eastern Christians and Sasanians; but not all the Iranian loanwords in Syriac were borrowed in Sasanian times. Speakers of Iranian and Aramaic languages were in contact from the earliest times of the Achaemenid empire onwards, and probably already in the eighth century BCE (see Lemaire, 1998; for the linguistic contacts between Old Persian and Official Aramaic, see Folmer, 1995). Consequently, Syriac inherited many Iranian words previously absorbed by Official Aramaic during the Achaemenid era, and by later varieties of Aramaic. In this case, we can speak of Iranian loanwords in Syriac only from an historical point of view, but from a synchronic point of view it would be anachronistic to regard them as borrowings, because these Old Persian words, inherited from Official Aramaic, behaved exactly as those belonging to the indigenous Syriac lexicon. A strong indication that these words were no longer perceived as foreign is the fact that these old borrowings often became productive and were the starting point for the creation of denominal verbs, often attested also in other post-biblical Aramaic varieties. For example, Syr. *gazzā* “treasure” is inherited from Official Aramaic *gnz'*, an old borrowing from Old Persian **ganza-*; its complete assimilation into the indigenous lexicon of Syriac is proved by the presence of the denominal verb GNZ “to preserve, to accumulate” attested in Syriac (only in the form of the passive participle *gənīz*), in Babylonian Jewish Aramaic, in Hebrew (see Mancini, 1987, pp. 36 ff. and passim; Telegdi, 1935, p. 237.42; Shaked, 1987, p. 260). Other old borrowings that gave rise to denominal verbs are, e.g.: *dšn'* “gift” (Old Persian *dāšna-*, MPers. *dāšn*); *hdm'* “member” (OPers. **handāma-*, MPers. *handām*); *zyn'* “weapon” (OPers. **zaina-*, Av. *zaēna-*, MPers. *zēn*); *mgwš'* “Magian” (OPers. *maguš*); *r'z'*, *rz'* “secret, mystery” (OPers. **rāza-*, Av. *razah-*, MPers. *rāz*); *šrg'* “lamp” (Parth. *čīrāy*).

Another conspicuous group of Iranian borrowings dates from the New Persian period; borrowings from New Persian are especially abundant in later Syriac authors, such as Bar Hebraeus (see EBN AL-EBRI) and Michael the Syrian (twelfth-thirteenth centuries CE), and in lexical works, such as the lexicon compiled by Bar Bahlul (tenth century). Some of these loanwords from New



Persian were borrowed indirectly through Arabic, as their phonological shape sometimes indicates; but, in general, their exact provenance is difficult to determine.

As far as the different dialect origin of Iranian loanwords is concerned, we note that, as in other Middle Aramaic dialects, a group of Iranian loanwords in Syriac shows non-southwestern phonologic features. It is incorrect to think that in such cases we always deal with words borrowed from Parthian during the Arsacid era. First of all, it is necessary to distinguish between the dialectal features of a loanword and the language from which it is actually borrowed. For instance, many loanwords showing northwestern features are very old, and Official Aramaic surely borrowed them from Old Persian: here we deal with words of remote Median origin, borrowed by Old Persian, that entered Official Aramaic, and from the latter they spread to many Middle Aramaic dialects, Syriac included.

To give only some examples, Syr. wrd' "rose" (Arm. loanword *vard*, Talmud. Aram. *wrd'*, Mand. *w'rd'*) is considered by Widengren (1960, p. 103) a loanword from Parthian *vard* (while Middle Persian has *gul*), but in fact it is a loanword already attested in Official Aramaic as *wrd*: therefore, it is most likely that the word was borrowed in the Achaemenid period and from Old Persian **vrda*-. Another example is Syr. 'špz', špz', špyz', 'špyz- "house": cf. Parth. *əspinž*, MPers. *aspinj*, attested in Mand. *špynz'*; Talmud. Aram. *'wšpz'*; Armenian loanword *aspnjakan*. The presence of the voiceless postalveolar fricative /š/ in all the Aramaic forms, surely a secondary phenomenon, proves that the word was not borrowed independently for each of the Aramaic varieties. This strengthens Telegdi's hypothesis (1935, pp. 231 ff. and 218) that the word had already been acquired by Official Aramaic.

The question of loanwords from Middle Iranian is more complicated. Some of the Iranian words in Syriac show Parthian features, and therefore a number of scholars asserted that these words were borrowed from Parthian in the Arsacid period. As Shaked rightly pointed out, speaking about Iranian loanwords in Middle Aramaic (1987, pp. 259 ff.), such a hypothesis is in many cases difficult to defend on linguistic grounds alone. Frequently, words that display Parthian phonetic features are also commonly employed in Middle Persian, a language that had become a *koiné* at an early stage. Syriac probably borrowed these words from Middle Persian, and not from Parthian. This must be the case of Syr. *byspn'* "messenger, postal courier" < Parth. *bayāspān*, a word also attested in Pahlavi, together with the southwestern form *dayaspān* >



dēspān. It is possible that Syriac borrowed some Parthian words directly from Parthian, and not through Middle Persian. This is more likely to have occurred when the Parthian words in question had not been absorbed into Middle Persian. But also in this case the loanwords were not necessarily borrowed into Syriac during the Arsacid period, because Parthian continued to exist as a language of culture and trade for a long time after the Arsacid period. Therefore, it is not sufficient to rely on phonological criteria if we want to ascertain that an Iranian loanword in Syriac was borrowed from Parthian, but we must consider several other semantic, philological, textual, and cultural factors.

Further examples of Iranian loanwords in Syriac which display non-southwestern features are: 'hmr'gr "accountant," OIr. **ahmā/ār-kara-* Parth. *ahmā/ārkar*, MPers. *āmārgar*, Arm. LW *hamarakar*; 'wzn', wzn' *'āwzānā, wāznā* "cistern," Mlr. **āβzan*, NPers. *ābzan* and *ābdān*; 'spydk', spydg "white lead," MPers. *spēdag*; 'spst' "alfalfa, lucerne," MPers. *aspast*, OPers. **aspā/āsti?*– (Median; Hinz, 1975, p. 45); 'sprs', 'sprys' "race-course," MPers. *asprēs*, Arm. LW *asparēs*, –ēz; 'mbr' "store," MPers. *hambār*, OPers. **hambāra*– (cf. Hinz, 1975, pp. 112 ff.), Arm. LW *ambar*, Talmud. Aram. *'mbr*; brz' "sown field," MPers. *warz*, Av. *varəza-*, OPers. **varδa*– (Hinz, 1975, p. 256), Arm. LW *varj*; dyzdr' "governor of a castle," OPers. **dizā*– and *diδā*– (Hinz, 1975, p. 88; see Ciancaglini, 2005).

Another important aspect of the Iranian loanwords in Syriac is their number. They are of utmost importance for Iranian lexicography, particularly because Syriac preserves several Middle Iranian words not attested elsewhere. Nonetheless, a modern systematic study about this topic is still lacking; de Lagarde's work was published in 1866 and is out of date in many respects.

Syriac texts show several hundreds of Iranian loanwords. It is hard to believe that all these loanwords were actually used in the spoken language. It has long been recognized that Syriac literature shows a number of "occasional quotations," which either add local color or try to fill gaps in the local vocabulary. These "occasional quotations" (called *casuals* in the linguistic literature) do not qualify as real loanwords, which are as a rule much more deeply rooted in the receiving language; they are often introduced by sentences like "as it is said in Persian" or "as Persians usually say." For example, Syr. *krbwz* "oryx" (MPers. *xar-buz*) is attested only once, as a gloss to Syr. *'ezzay ḥemār* (which is in turn a calque on MPers. *xar-buz*: see Ciancaglini, 2001, p. 127). No formal criterion helps us to distinguish a casual from an



unadapted loanword. Therefore, if we analyze the Iranian borrowings into Syriac from a sociolinguistic point of view, we should in theory be able to exclude *casuals* from the number of genuine Iranian borrowings. However, casuals can be remarkably important to Iranists, since they often attest Middle Persian words otherwise attested only in New Persian or not attested at all elsewhere.

Iranian loanwords in Syriac belong to several different semantic fields. Official titles connected with the state administration, or the army, are in general old borrowings dating back to the Achaemenid, Arsacid, or Sasanian period (see Greenfield, 1987, p. 258; Khurshudian, 1998, p. 319). Examples: hzrpt “chiliarch,” MPers. *hazārbed*, Parth. *hzwpt*; hrmdr’ “commander, ruler,” MPers. *framadār* (for quantity of the second /a/, see Skjærvø, 2001, p. 288); mrzbn’ “margrave,” MPers. *marzbān*; nwhdr’ “army commander,” Parth. *naxwādār*; pṭḥš’, pṭkš’, pṭḥš’, pṭkš’ OIr. **dvitīya- xšaya-*, MPers. *bīdaxš*, lit. “the second (after the) king”; pšgryb’, bšgryb’ MIr. **pačāyrīw* or **pašāyrīw*, lit. “behind, instead of the self” (for the historical value of the last two titles, see Khurshudian, 1998, pp. 19-53 and 184-92); dḥš’ “chief guard,” cf. Parth. **daxšpat*, Arm. LW *dahič*, *dahčapet*; dhqn’, dyhqn’ “chief, or magistrate, of a village,” MPers. *dehgān* (see *DEHQĀN*). Other military terms are, for example, gyn’bspr MPers. *gyān-abespār* “reckless, devoted”; pyg’ MPers. *payg* “foot-soldier, courier”; swr’ MPers. *aswār* “horseman, rider”; sph, MPers. *spāh* “army”; sphbyd, sphbyd, MPers. *spāhbed* “general, commander”; zrd’, zry, MPers. *zrēh* “armor”; nyzk’ MPers. *nēzag* “lance”; qṭrq’, qṭyrq’ MPers. *kantigr* “quiver.”

A group of loanwords is concerned with the administration of the law. Examples: dt’ OPers. **dāta-*, MPers. *dād* “law, justice”; bhd’dstnyh MPers. *weh-dādestānīh* “preferential right”; byhnmg “letter of rebuke”; MPers. **weh-nāmag*; dwdgslyrh MPers. *dudag sālārīh* “guardianship of a family”; pwrššnmg, MPers. *pursišn nāmag* “record of investigation”; psnd, MPers. *passand* “lenity, reduction of what the law formally prescribes”; dstbyr’ “bill of divorce” (cf. MPers. *dastwar* “authority”; Shaked, 1985, p. 513).

A conspicuous group of loanwords is connected with religion. Examples: bwrsn’, the bunch of twigs used in the Yasna ceremony MPers. *barsom*; dyn, d’yn “religion,” OPers. **dainā-*, MPers. *dēn*; dynyg “religious,” MPers. *dēnīg*; drwn consecrated bread and the ceremony in which it is used, MPers. *drōn*; yzd “god,” MPers. *yazd*; kwdy “lord,” MPers. *xwadāy*; kwṭwdwtyh “kin marriage,” cf. MPers. *xwēdōdah* (see *FAMILY LAW*); mgwš’ “Magian,” OPers.



maguṣ; *mwbd*, *mwhpt*, cf. MPers. *mowbed* “chief of the Magians”; *’bstg*, *’bstg’*, *’bst* “*Avesta*”, MPers. *abestāg*; *nsk*, a section of Avesta, MPers. *nask*; *kwstyg* “sacred girdle,” MPers. *kustīg*.

Syriac also preserves a great number of Iranian words relating to medicine, botany, and pharmacopoeia, many of them not attested in Middle Persian literature (see, on this matter, Gignoux, 1998 and 1998-99). Examples: *’mlg* “myrobalan,” MPers. **āmalag*, NPers. *āmula*; *blylq’* “belleric myrobalan,” MPers. *balīlag*; *hlylq’* “myrobalan,” MPers. *halīlag*; *bnpšg*, *bnwšg* “violet,” MPers. *wanafšag*; *gzmzg* “fruit of the tamarisk-tree,” cf. NPers. *gazmāzak*; *gyldrwg* “fern,” MPers. **gīldārūg*, NPers. *gīl-dārū*, the name of a certain medicinal wood (F. Steingass, *Persian-English Dictionary*, repr., Beirut, 1975, p. 1109); *grmdng*, a kind of remedy, MPers. **garmdānag*; *drstbd* “chief physician,” MPers. *drustabed*; *dršyny* “cinnamon,” NPers. *dār-čīnī* (q.v.); *dhmst* “laurel,” NPers. *dahmast*; *zrd’lwg* “apricot,” MPers. *zardālūg*; *ysm’* “jasmine,” MPers. *yāsaman*; *kyrwg* “ox-eye, mallow-flower,” MPers. **xīrūg*; *mrđgš*, *mrđygwš*, *mrzgwš* “marjoram,” MPers. *marzangōš*; *mrđzwbg* “asparagus,” MPers. **m’ārčōbag*; *’ngbdyn*, *’nbgyn* “*honey*”, MPers. *angubēn*; *ṭrngbyn*, *ṭlngbyn* “fresh honey,” MPers. **tarr-angubēn*; *škngbyn* “oxymel,” MPers. **sikangubēn*; *’nš’dwr*, *’nwš’dwr*, *nš’dr*, *nwš’dr* “sal ammoniac,” MPers. *anōš ādur* “fire antidote” (see Gignoux, 1998-99, p. 200); *pyrwz’nwš*, MPers. *pērōz anōš* “victorious, triumphant antidote”; *pr’nwš* MPers. *farr-anōš* or *pur-anōš* “glorious or complete antidote”; *gwgršn šhryr’n* “royal digestive,” MPers. *gugārišn šahryārān*.

Moreover, many Iranian loanwords are related to minerals, precious stones, and the like. Examples: *’mbr* “ambergris,” MPers. *ambar*; *’lms’* “steel, diamond,” MPers. *almās(t)*; *blwr’* “crystal,” MPers. *bēlūr*; *dhng* “malachite,” MPers. **dahanag*, NPers. *dahana*; *zywg* “mercury, quicksilver,” MPers. **zīwag*, NPers. *žīwa*; *l’zwrđ* “lapis lazuli,” cf. NPers. *lāžuward*; *mrđk’*, *mwrđk’*, *mrđsng* “litharge, lead protoxide,” MPers. *mord(e)-sang*; *s’m’* “silver,” MPers. *asēm*; *pylstg* “ivory,” MPers. **pīlastag*, NPers. *pīlasta*; *pwld*, *bwl’d* “steel” MPers. *pōlāwad*; *plz’* “bronze, brass,” MPers. *brinj*; *pyrwzg* “sapphire,” cf. NPers. *pīrōza* “turquoise.”



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May 22, 2006