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A NOTE ON THE GREAT SEAL OF PĒRŌZ
AND MIDDLE PERSIAN NYCNY

The discovery of the seal of the Sasanian king Pērōz (459–484 CE) is certainly another addition to our understanding of Sasanian imperial propaganda, phraseology and art. Ph. Gignoux published his reading of the seal in *Studia Iranica* in 1990,¹ and P.O. Skjærvø gave an improved translation of the legend by reading the seal from a different position.² According to Skjærvø the legend should be read as the following:

- 1- *nycny mzdysn bgy l'mštry kdy pylwcy MLKAN MLKA ZY plhwy W hw'ply W klpkly MNW yzd'n nwkly GDE 'pzwty 'yr'n*
- 2- *W '(n)yr'n MNW ctry MN yzd'n BRE mzdysn bgy kdy yzdk(rt)y MLKAN MLKA ZY hw'ply W klpkly npy bgy whl'n MLKAN MLKA*
- 3- *ZY klpkly*

“The *nycny* of the Mazdean Lord – who keeps the land at peace – Kay Pērōz, king of kings – the fortunate, munificent, and beneficent one, in/by whom the new fortune of the gods has increased – Ērān and *Non-Ērān, whose seed is from the gods, son of the Mazdean Lord Kay Yazdegerd, king of kings – the generous and beneficent one-, grandson of the Lord Warahrān, king of kings – the beneficent one”.³

The first word in this legend was emended by Gignoux to *wycny/wēžān*, which with the preceding word, according to him rendered ‘yr’n *wycny/ērān wēžān*. In the footnote Gignoux mentioned that the word in question is written as *nycny*, but suggests that it may be a mistake on the part of the engraver.⁴ Skjærvø on the other hand does not emend the word, and believes that *nycny* refers to the object itself. He derives the etymology of the word in question from **nizan*- “strike in”, but goes on to state that “I am not familiar with it from other texts. I therefore

¹ Ph. Gignoux, “A Propos de l’airiana vaējah” *Studia Iranica*, fas. 2, 2000, pp. 163–166.

² P.O. Skjærvø, “The Great Seal of Pērōz”, *Studia Iranica*, tome 32, fas. 2, 2003, pp. 281–288.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 282–283.

⁴ Gignoux, p. 3, footnote 3.



leave its interpretation open, hoping that others may be familiar with this word".⁵

I propose that *nycny* is nothing but Middle Persian *nīšān* which has a secondary meaning preserved in Classical Persian. If *nycny* is in fact *nyšny* the question that must be raised is that why *c* instead of *š*? Although the legend is in Middle Persian, the engraver did not necessarily need to be a Persian. Thus, the answer may be that it is possible that the scribe was Parthian and so he placed the Parthian form on the seal. In Šābuhr's inscription (ŠKZ 30/24/58) we come across the word *pākcihr* which in Parthian is *pwkctr-y*, rendering Middle Persian *p'šhr*, hence the *c/š* correspondence.⁶

In the Middle Persian texts *nīšān* stands for "sign, mark, banner", and it usually appears in the context of omen, foretelling and in an apocalyptic setting. For example in *Dēnkard VII*, the word appears in the context of the appearance of the evil mumbling priest, that of Karb's *daxšag ī anāg* "evil sign" or "evil mark".⁷ In the Psalms in Middle Persian as well we find the word appearing in the context of omen and signs. In Psalter 134.9 the Lord sends signs and wonders among the Egyptians *frēstēd-iš nišān ud widimāsagīh nyandar mešreyn* "He sent signs and wonders among the Egyptians."⁸ In Manichaean Middle Persian, Mani again uses *nyš'n* in an apocalyptic context where *pc zmyg w 'sm'n 'wd (x)[wr] 'wd m'h w 'xtr'n ['wd] ['st[']rg'n wzrg nyš'n pyd['g] b[w]'d* "on earth and in heaven, and on the moon and in the constellations and stars, a great sign will appear".⁹

In Classical Persian, however, the word *nišān* not only means a sign, but also signet which was worn by officials and dignitaries in different manners. *Nīšān* as a signet would be found in such compounds as *pādišāh-nīšān* "King's signet",¹⁰ which would corroborate our suggestion. Signets (*nīšān*) of the kings and grandees were usually worn in different ways in ancient Persia. The *nišān* was either mounted on a necklace, as it appears on the seal of Wehdēn-Šābuhr, the "chief store-keeper of Ērān" from the fifth century CE,¹¹ or as an armband. In the

⁵ Skjærvø, p. 283.

⁶ M. Back, *Die Sassanidischen Staatsinschriften*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1978, p. 352 (ŠKZ 30/24/58); I indebted to G. Windfuhr for the reference.

⁷ H.S. Nyberg, *A Manual of Pahlavi*, Part I, Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 1964, p. 48.

⁸ Srōg Nāmag, *The Book of Psalms*, Erman, 2000, p. 28.

⁹ Šābuhragān, 15, D.N. MacKenzie, "Mani's Šābuhragan", *The Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. xlii, part 3, 1979, p. 504.

¹⁰ M. Mo'in, *A Persian Dictionary*, vol. 4, Tehran, 2002, p. 4730.

¹¹ P.O. Harper, *The Royal Hunter, Art of the Sasanian Empire*, The Asia Society, 1978, p. 148.

well-known story of Rustam and Tahmineh in the *Šāhnāme* of Ferdowsi, the epic hero gives his signet to the lady to place it with their eventual offspring. Once Rustam has mortally wounded his son, Sohrab states that "(Thamineh) on my arm she tied a seal-ring (*mohreh*), telling me it was a memento of my father which I must preserve and hold in sight".¹² The other common use of the signet until today in Persia is its mounting on the ring. Therefore I would suggest that the word in question could be interpreted as "signet", belonging to king Pērōz. Thus the passage should be read as: "The signet of the Mazdean Lord – who keeps the land at peace – Kay Pērōz, king of kings".

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¹² *The Shāhnāme*, ed. Dj. Khaleghi-Motlagh, vol. 2, Mazda Publisher, 1990, ln. 877, p. 187; *The Epic of the Kings*, translated by R. Levy, Arkana, 1967, p. 79.