

Touraj Daryaee

**TO LEARN AND TO REMEMBER FROM OTHERS:  
PERSIANS VISITING THE DURA-EUROPOS SYNAGOGUE\***

In memory of Zeev Rubin  
עליו השלום

The city of Dura-Europos<sup>1</sup> in modern day Syria provides a microcosm of multi-ethnic and multi-religious life in the late ancient Near East. Although there are debates as to the exact date of the conquest of the city, the year 256 CE appears to be the most plausible date in which the King of Kings, Šāpur I took Dura.<sup>2</sup> In the third century, the city was abandoned and so the life of Dura came to an end after more than half a millennium of existence.<sup>3</sup> Its apparent sudden abandonment has made it a wonderful archaeological playground for studying life in the third century CE on the border of the Irano-Hellenic world of antiquity. The city had changed hands several times since its creation in the fourth century BCE by the Seleucids to when Mithradates II (113 BCE) conquered it and brought it into the Arsacid imperial orbit, where it remained for three centuries. The Arsacid control of a trading town or as it was once called a caravan town, works well with the story that Mithradates II, several years before the takeover of Dura-Europos, had concluded an agreement with the Chinese Emperor Wudi for trade cooperation. In the larger scheme of things, these activities, no matter how accurate the dating is, suggest the idea that the Arsacids may have been thinking of the creation of a large trade network as part of what modern historians have called the "Silk Road." Dura was subsequently conquered in the second century CE by Emperor Trajan (115–117 CE) and later, in 165 CE, by Avidius Cassius, after which it stayed in Roman hands for almost a century. The Sasanians in turn conquered the city in 256 CE.

Along the western walls of the city, between gates 18 and 19 stands the Jewish synagogue which attests to the Jewish life in the third century, side by side with those of other religious persuasions in Dura. But what is of interest for us here is the evidence at Dura indicating contacts between the Jewish and Iranian elements and the ramifications of this

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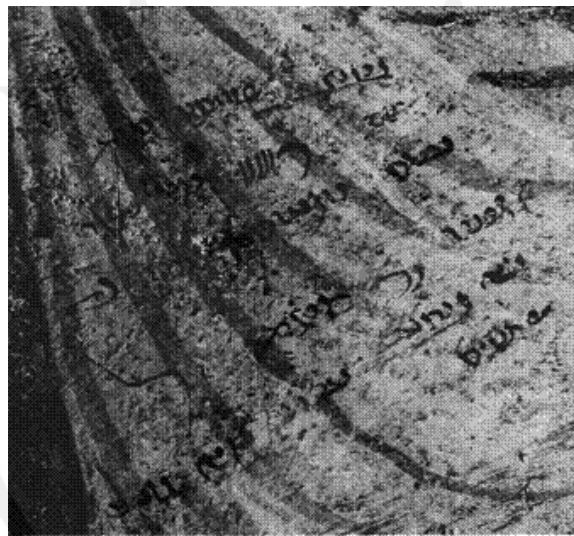
<sup>1</sup> The classic work on the city is by Rostovtzeff 1938, followed by Hopkins 1979.

<sup>2</sup> The dating is based on the numismatic evidence Bellinger 1943–1944: 64–71. W. Ensslin (1949: 6–8), based on the dating of Šāpur I's enthronement has suggested the first conquest and hence the Middle Persian graffiti to 253 CE. Subsequently most studies have accepted this date. See Henning 1957: 119; 1958: 46; Carson 1967–1968: 132–133; Baldus 1971: 263–265; Goldman & Little 1980: 289–298.

<sup>3</sup> D. MacDonald (1986: 67–68) has disagreed with the abandonment of the city in 256 CE and suggests 257 CE. This suggestion of course resolves many problems of chronology and Iranian material culture from the Sasanian period. MacDonald suggests that a year was needed to transfer the booty from Syria back to the Sasanian Empire and so 257 CE was the final date of the abandonment.

encounter for the history of antiquity in the Near East. In memory of my colleague, Zeev Rubin, I would like to touch upon some of the Middle Persian inscriptions which have important implications for Iranian views of the Jews, but more importantly what these inscriptions can tell us about the Iranian view of religion and their historical memory of the Achaemenid period. Furthermore, the inscriptions may suggest a different length of Sasanian presence in that city.

The Sasanians left many inscriptions demonstrating to their presence and curiosity in understanding the meaning of the paintings / frescos on the walls of the synagogue.<sup>4</sup> In total, twelve Middle Persian inscriptions have been found at the synagogue.<sup>5</sup> The subject matter of the inscriptions is interesting in themselves, and they were translated by philologists and historians since the late 1930s and 1940s with different readings, no doubt due to the difficulties associated with the way they are written and their place.<sup>6</sup> Some of the inscriptions, such as those of number 42 and 43 indicate coming of Persian scribes to the synagogue and their observation (*nigerīd*)<sup>7</sup> and their liking or approval (*passandīd*) of the scenes painted on the walls. Two inscriptions are relevant to our discussion of Iranian historical memory and observation on the past through a Jewish perspective. What I have tried to do is to provide a reading of the inscription based on Kaerling plates and to suggest some improvements on these readings (Geiger 1956: no. 42, pl. xlv, i):



After Geiger 1956, pl. XLIV

<sup>4</sup> Frye 1968.

<sup>5</sup> Brunner 1972: 495; MacKenzie, Dura Inscriptions ii. Inscriptions = <http://www.iranica.com/articles/dura-europos>.

<sup>6</sup> For the study of the graffiti see Pagliaro 1941–1942: 578–616; Altheim & Stiehl 1952; Geiger 1956: 283–317; Henning 1959: 414–417 and more recently Grenet 1988: 133–158.

<sup>7</sup> Geiger 1956: no. 43, line 7.

*māh frawardīn abar  
sāl 15<sup>8</sup> ud rōz rašnū  
ka yazdān-tahm-farranbay  
dibīr ī dahm<sup>9</sup> ō  
ēn xānag u-š ēn nigār  
passandīd<sup>10</sup>*

In the month of Frawardīn, on  
year 15 and the day of Rašn  
when Yazdān-tahm-farrnбай,  
the pious scribe came to  
this building and he liked  
this painting.

More important is the following inscription (Geiger 1956: no. 44) which is placed on the panel scene associated with the story of Purim:



Purim panel, after Gutman 1992



After Geiger 1956, pl. XLIV

<sup>8</sup> Year 15 of king Šāpur should correspond to 256 CE the year of the conquest of the city according to most scholars, see Altheim & Stiehl 1978: 116.

<sup>9</sup> Geiger reads the word as *zhmy* but the word is clearly *t'hm/dahm* to mean "pious," and should be corrected in other texts as well. See MacKenzie, *Dura Inscriptions ii. Inscriptions*.

<sup>10</sup> Geiger's reading as *\*ptcyt* "observed" was corrected by MacKenzie to *ps(nd)yt*: *MacKenzie, Dura Inscriptions ii. Inscriptions*; Grenet (1988: 148) opts for de Menasce's reading of *pēsēnīd*.

My reading of the second inscription is as follows:

*māh mihr abar sāl 14 ud rōz frawardīn  
ka homrizd dibīr ud kardag<sup>11</sup> ī zandak ud dibīr ī dahm  
ud ēn zandak<sup>12</sup> ī jahūdān ō ēn parastak ī bay ī bayān ī  
jahūdān āmad hēnd u-šān ēn nigār niyīšīd  
u-šān nigīrēd ud passandīd<sup>13</sup> ... nigīrēd  
... nigār ...*

In the month of Mihr, on the year 14 and day of Frawardīn when Hormizd the scribe and the Kardag of the district and the pious scribe and they came to this district of the Jews, to this place of worship of the god of gods of the Jews, they saw this painting, they saw and liked ... saw ... painting ...

Why would the Sasanian scribes and officials have liked seeing these images is a question which may be related to the issue of identification by our Sasanians scribes of the ancient Persian personages and stories of the Achaemenids on the walls of the synagogue. In a sense, one can see the Achaemenid ruler and personages on the wall painting in an Arsacid garb. This connection probably went well with the Arsacids claims that they were descended from the Achaemenids. In the first half of the first century, due to internal, but more importantly external affairs such as wars with the Romans, the Arsacids emphasized their relation to the Achaemenid Empire and claimed to be continuing their policies.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, the Romans, following their own tradition, often used the history of Alexander the Great against the Arsacids. This Roman *imitatio Alexandri* must have resonated with the Arsacids who were using the Achaemenids and in a sense, *imitatio Achaemenidi* for their imperial initiative.<sup>15</sup>

But there is a lively debate as to whether the Sasanians knew about the Achaemenids and if they made any similar claims as the Arsacids made.<sup>16</sup> I believe this was initially the case and the Sasanians were aware of the Achaemenids at the beginning of their history, but by the fourth century CE, Avestan and the sacred tradition had replaced the history and memory of the Achaemenids. The reason for such a change seems rather simple. The Achaemenids lost to Alexander and so there was not much of an advantage to continue to remember this loss of the Persian Empire.<sup>17</sup> I have indicated in several studies that the early Sasanians probably had knowledge of the Achaemenids and that

<sup>11</sup> Geiger reads *kntk* which is not altogether clear from the photograph. It can certainly be read as *krtk* which can have a judicial sense, that is someone having judicial authority, see Nyberg 1974: 113. Since I did not have access to the plates, I have left the word untranslated.

<sup>12</sup> Kaerling reads the word as *zandik* and leaves it untranslated. I would suggest that the word should be read as *zandag*, meaning "district" which has the sense of Jewish neighborhood or district, Persian *mahalleh*, see MacKenzie 1986: 98.

<sup>13</sup> Geiger's reading is *niyīšīd*.

<sup>14</sup> Neusner 1963: 56; for the connections to Cyrus the Great see Wolski 1982–1984: 160; and also for Cyrus and Arsacid's further connections, cf. Wiesehöfer 1996: 59.

<sup>15</sup> Shayegan 2004: 285–315; Daryaee 2007: 89–97.

<sup>16</sup> Yarshater 1971: 519; Kettenhofen 1984: 190; 1994: 99–108; 2002: 49–75; Wiesehöfer 1986: 177–185; Roaf 1998: 6; Huyse 2002: 297–311.

<sup>17</sup> I owe this comment to Antonio Panaino (May 2010).



denying this is a rather difficult task, even though the Sasanian records do not mention them. Still, by the fourth century the Sasanians gravitated toward a sacred historiography and chose Avestan dynasties, most importantly the Kayānids, as their ancestors. It was only through the Zoroastrian historical necessity that Darius (III) was remembered and inserted into the historical narrative of the Sasanian *Xwadāy-nāmag* (Book of Kings).<sup>18</sup>

In this sense, some of Dura inscriptions and their choice of location points to the fact that the Sasanian should have and did know about the Achaemenids. The encounter at Dura by the Sasanian Iranians with the Achaemenid Persians via the paintings at the synagogue was only one of the possible avenues of transmission of this tradition. The visit to the Dura synagogue by the Sasanian officials should make us ponder about the relation between the Jews and Sasanians and how the Biblical stories, specifically those related to the Achaemenids may have been received by the Sasanians.

We know that the Sasanians visited Persepolis<sup>19</sup> in the fourth century CE and left inscriptions similar in tone to what we see with the Middle Persian inscription at the Dura synagogue,<sup>20</sup> indicating Sasanian officials coming to these structures, visiting them and leaving comments. This fascination with the past and what related to the Sasanians pertains to the issue of memory and history in the Near East and the Iranian World. In the Judeo-Iranian context, the transfer of one set of knowledge about the Persian past, in a Biblical, to the Sasanians seems most probable if not certain. One has to only think what the Jewish officials at the city of Dura would have told their conquering Sasanian officers about what they were seeing at the synagogue. The Jews had always felt more secure under Iranian control and protection, and the Purim panel would have been more evidence to this end at a critical moment in history, when the Sasanians conquered Dura from their Roman adversaries. How the population would be treated depended on the position of different people in the city, and every bit of precedence for Judeo-Iranian contacts would have thus become useful.

The "Purim" panel where the aforementioned inscriptions appears, shows Mordechai's horse being led by Haman towards king Ahasuerus, that is the Achaemenid King of Kings, Xerxes (486–465 BC). Ahasuerus and Esther sit side by side on thrones which are identified by the Aramaic inscription on the steps and under the footstool. D. Levit-Tamil who has studied the panel provides very important and pertinent information not only for the Jewish portrayal of the Biblical stories where Persians play a part, but also for the clear portrayal of Persian norms, gestures and beliefs current at the time.<sup>21</sup> Of course the scene is very much couched in the Arsacid artistic style, including

<sup>18</sup> Daryaei 1995: 121–145; 2005: 287–293; 2006: 493–503.

<sup>19</sup> The content of the inscription of ŠPs-I at Persepolis is as follows: *māh spandarmad abar sāl II mazdēsān bay šābuhr šāhān šāh ērān ud anērān kē čīhr az yazdān pad ān jār kā jār ka šābuhr sagān šāh hind sagestān ud türestān tā drayāb danb pus mazdēsān bay ohrmizd šāhān šāh ērān ud anērān kē čīhr az yazdān kē az dar ōyšān bayān namāz bur dud pad ēn rāh ī abar staxr andar ō sagestān šud ud pad kirbagīh ēdār ō sadstūn āmad uš nān andar im xānag xward uš wahrām ī naxw-ohrmazd sagestān andarzbed ud narsē ī mog ī warāzān ud wēn rēwmīhrān ī zerang šahrab ud narsē ī dibīr ud abārīd pārs-āzād ud sag-āzād ud zerangān ud frēstag ī az pāygōs ud sālār abāg būd hēnd uš wuzurg šādīh kard uš yazdān kardagān framād kardan uš pidar ud nīyāgān āfrīn kard uš šābuhr šāhān šāh āfrīn kard uš xwēš ruwān āfrīn kard uš ōy-iz āfrīn kard kē ēn mān kard.* For the Persian translation see T. Daryaei, "Katībe-ye Šāpūr Sakānšāhr dar Takht-e Jamšīd," *Farhang*, Nos. 37–38, 1380: 109–110 and for German see Back 1978: 492–494.

<sup>20</sup> The first notice of this fact is by Geiger 1956: 297.

<sup>21</sup> Levit-Tawil 1979: 93–109; 1983: 57–78.

the dress and pose of the king of kings.<sup>22</sup> The Purim panel not only portrays the Biblical tradition which the Jewish officials and coreligionists understood, but also displays Iranian notions of kingship and the receiving of *xwarənah* or royal glory in the context of the Biblical tradition. These events link the history of the Jews and Iranians in a way that must have been mutually understood by both people.<sup>23</sup> The Sasanians officers would have understood the scene through an Iranian pictorial tradition. Xerxes was a Persian king and the Jews must have related the story as part of the common tradition that bound the two people from antiquity onwards. In this sense, we also have evidence for the continuous Arsacid and then Sasanian contacts with the Jewish population,<sup>24</sup> meaning that they were not isolated as opposed to perhaps the Jews and others in Palestine.<sup>25</sup>

Of course the manner in which the Persians describe the God of the Jews is more instructive of the view of the Zoroastrian religion in the third century than that of Judaism. The Middle Persian phrase: *ēn parastak ī bay ī bayān ī jahūdān* "this place of worship of the god of the gods of the Jews" suggest a hierarchy of deities which bodes well with Ohrmazd and the other *yazatas* of the Zoroastrian tradition in late antiquity. Here then we are not faced with the strict ethical monotheism of the Jews, but the description of a hierarchical monotheism of Zoroastrianism. That is the Zoroastrian Persian scribes tried to explain what they had heard and seen from the Jews at the synagogue, already filtered through a kind of Hellenic tradition to which both the Jews and the Iranians were exposed. However, the explanation is set within the theological context of Zoroastrianism and its understanding of the relation between its deities. These channels of expression not only are telling of the dialogue and contact between the different people in such cities as Dura-Europos, but also how they described the other via their own understanding of themselves.

The last point that I would like to make is that it is conventionally thought that the Sasanians laid siege and conquered the city in 256 CE. But how can we explain the remains of these inscriptions at the Synagogue? Initially, an earlier date of 253 CE for the conquest was suggested which then could justify the presence of Middle Persian and Iranian material. However, this earlier date has been abandoned by most scholars. MacDonald suggested that indeed the Sasanians remained in the city till 257 CE, that is it took a year for the Sasanians to collect the booty from the city and transport it back from Syria to further east.<sup>26</sup> I believe the question still remains as to why the Sasanians would leave so much material evidence such as ostraca and parchments. Frantz Grenet has made the important comment that the Sasanian occupation of Dura shows a certain level of administrative and economic activity which cannot be considered a short stay. With the presence of *gund-sālār*, *dibīr* and others officials and letters back and forth, the idea of a temporary stay for looting the city becomes a difficult proposition.<sup>27</sup> As has been

<sup>22</sup> Levit-Tawil 1983: 60.

<sup>23</sup> Levit-Tawil 1983: 71.

<sup>24</sup> For various forms of contact see Neusner 1976: 139–149. For the dialogue and influence on the religious and intellectual sphere see Elman 2004: 55; 2009: 165–197.

<sup>25</sup> Neusner 1964: 95–96.

<sup>26</sup> MacDonald, *Dura Inscriptions ii. Inscriptions*, p. 68.

<sup>27</sup> Grenet 1988: 136–137.

suggested by Harmatta<sup>28</sup> and now Grenet,<sup>29</sup> the Sasanians remained in the city, which was an active trading station, until the 260s when the Sasanian-Palmyrenian alliance made Dura useless.<sup>30</sup> The conquest of Syria by the Sasanians really brought the Palmyrenians to power as a viable economic force, but this was also temporary as the Romans put an end to this independent economic entity during the reign of Aurelian. Between the two superpowers of late antiquity, in the third and fourth centuries CE such independence would have been very difficult and as Frye has noted, this meant the decline of Hatra, Dura-Europos, Palmyra and the caravan cities of the desert which had existed during the Arsacid-Roman rivalry.<sup>31</sup> The Arabs in the sixth century again rejuvenated the trade that had been hampered through the Sasanian-Roman rivalry, and this time southern and eastern Arabia eventually became a political force which brought down both empires in the seventh century.

We can conclude by stating that such visits by the Sasanian officials to the Dura Synagogue provides evidence of avenues of transmission of knowledge about the Achaemenid Empire whose memory had resonated with the other people in the Near East. It is very difficult to deny that Sasanian officials and then others at the court would have remained ignorant of a past which was always propped up by the Romans and the Jews, from without and within the empire about the Achaemenids. The Sasanians simply chose to take on another historical vision of their past which removed the Achaemenids from their historical records. Still, the Jewish presence was a continuous reminder of the Persian and Jewish co-existence and historical events which bound them together and has done so till today.

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<sup>28</sup> Harmatta & Pékáry 1971: 467–475.

<sup>29</sup> Grenet 1988: 145–146.

<sup>30</sup> Grenet 1988: 145–146.

<sup>31</sup> Frye 1984: 294.

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