



e-Sasanika 8 (2009)

A Bulla of the Ērān-Spāhbed of Nēmrōz

Touraj Daryae & Keyvan Safdari, University of California, Irvine

In 2001, R. Gyselen brought to light bullae impressions that confirmed the literary evidence that the Sasanian Empire was militarily quadripartitioned in the sixth century CE.¹ Prior to this, literary sources suggested that administratively, four chanceries (*dīwāns*) were created for the empire, a fact later confirmed by the numismatic evidence.² In an important article, G. Gnoli suggested that there certainly was a military quadripartition as well, where Ērānšahr was placed under the control of four generals (*spāhbeds*). This was done as a reaction to the incursions from the four corners of the Sasanian Empire.³ However, according to him, this military reform was short lived because of the political upheaval of the late Sāsānian period, but its traces remained in the Arabic and Persian sources.⁴

Initially there had been a single general, the Ērān-Spāhbed who was in charge of the entire Sasanian military. The fifth century CE, however, had seen new pressures and invasions on the Sasanians from the east, causing the murder of at least one of their kings, Pērōz, by the Hephthalites. This was combined with the Roman frontier wars in the west, and the Arab raids into the empire from the south. All these made it crucial for the empire to be able to deal with problems on several fronts. Consequently, four generals were placed in charge of each quarter or *kust*: 1) *kust ī xwarāsān* “quarter of the

¹ R. Gyselen, *The Four Generals of the Sasanian Empire: Some Sigillographic Evidence*, Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente, Roma, 2001.

² F. Gurnet, “Deux notes à propos du monnayage de Xusrō II,” *Revue belge de Numismatique*, 140, 1994, pp. 36-37.

³ G. Gnoli, “The Quadripartition of the Sassanian Empire,” *East and West*, vol. 35, 1985, pp. 265-270.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

northeast;” 2) *kust ī xwarwarān* “quarter of the southwest;” 3) *kust ī nēmrōz* “quarter of the southeast;” and 4) *kust ī ādūrbādagān* “quarter of the northwest.” Interestingly, this division into four quarters resembles the divisions in the later Roman empire, where there were *Praefectura praetorio per Orientem* “prefecture of the East;” *Praefectura praetorio per Illyricum* “prefecture of Greece and the Balkans;” *Praefectura praetorio Illyrici, Italiae et Africae* “prefecture of Illyrium, Italy and Latin Africa;” and *Praefectura praetorio Galliarum* “prefecture of Roman Britain and the Iberian Peninsula.”⁵

The Middle Persian, Islamic and Armenian sources all discussed the quadripartition of the Sasanian Empire,⁶ and this is supported by modern scholars.⁷ There is certainly some inconsistency to be found in this division. For example, Moses Xorenats’i discussed such a scheme,⁸ but its exact division was contradicted by other literary sources. Xorenats’i places Fārs and Sīstān in the *k’usti nemrog* (Middle Persian *kust ī nēmrōz*), while Tha’alibī placed Sīstān in the quarter of the East, *kust ī Xorāsān* (Middle Persian *kust ī xwarāsān*), and Fārs in the *kust ī nēmrōz*.⁹ The reason for the differences may lie in the nature and time of the various reforms and divisions which begun at the time of Kawad and were continued till the late sixth century by Khusrō I. We can certainly state that there was not only a military, but also administrative and religious quadripartitions as well, where the *kust* was under the control of a *rad* “spiritual master.”¹⁰

⁵G. Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, Rutgers University Press, Revised Edition, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1969, pp. 97-98; J. F. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century*, Cambridge, 1990, p. 35.

⁶Tha’alibī, *Ta’rīkh Tha’alibī*, Noqreh Publishers, Tehran, 1368, p. 393; Mas’ūdī, *Murūj al-dhab w-ma’ādīn al-jawhr*, Tehran, 1384, II.211.2.

⁷A. Christensen *L’Iran sous les Sassanides*, Copenhagen, Levine & Munksgaard, 1944, p. 371; F. Altheim, *Finanzgeschichte der Spätantike*, Frankfurt, 1954, p. 138; R.N. Frye *The History of Ancient Iran*, C.H. Beck’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, München, 1983, p. 333; R.N. Frye; “The Political History of Iran under the Sasanians,” *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Vol. III (2), ed. E. Yarshater, Cambridge, 1985, p. 154; Ch. Brunner “Geographical and Administrative Divisions and Economy,” *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Vol. III (2), ed. E. Yarshater, Cambridge, 1985, p. 750; M. Morony *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*, Princeton, 1984, p. 28.

⁸J. Marquart, *Ērānšahr nach der Geographie des Ps. Moses Xorenac’i*, Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, Berlin, 1901, p. 16.

⁹Tha’alibī, p. 393.

¹⁰Ph. Kreyenbroek, “The Zoroastrian Priesthood,” *Transition Periods in Iranian History*, Actes du symposium de Fribourg-en-Brisgau (22-24 Mai 1985), Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, p. 152.

It is because of Gyselen's work that the *Spāhbed* bullae, mainly based on the collection of A. Saeedi, have come to light in order to confirm our late antique and medieval historians.¹¹ As most of the evidence till now have come from the Saeedi collection, it is worth publishing new bullae evidence from another collection, that of K. Safdari. The single *Spāhbed* bulla published here is from an unknown provenance, but it of course originated from Iran.¹²



K. Safdari's collection

The bulla is not in perfect shape and some of the letters have withered. As far as we could make a reading is as follows (from the outer to inner circle):

LBA 'yl'n kwsty ZY nym...cy ...'whlmzdy
't sp'hpty

wuzurg ērān kust ī nēm...z...ohrmazd
āt spāhbed

This bullae matches that of Gyselen's seal 2b in her catalogue published in Rome and if we are to accept her reading the order should be as such:

¹¹ R. Gyselen, *Sasanian Seals and Sealings in the A. Saeedi Collection*, Acta Iranica 44, Peeters, Louvan, 2007.

¹² C. Cereti has informed me that along with D. Akbarzadeh they are to publish the bullae collection from Khoy, which includes some *Spāhbed* bullae.

*'whlmzdy LBA 'yl'n kwsty ZY nym..cy
't sp'hpty*

*ohrmazd wuzurg ērān kust ī nēm..z
āt spāhbed*

The word in fragment, *nēm..z* can easily be reconstructed to *nēm̄rōz* which suggest the bulla belongs to the Spāhbed of Nēm̄rōz or the southeastern quarter. The other issue is the word *āt* which has been suggested by Gyselen to be a personal monogram appearing on the cap of the Persian nobility.¹³ Considering there, the reading is as such:

“-Ohrmazd, the grandee, Ērān-Spāhbed of the quarter of the southeast”

The word –Ohrmazd is part of the slogan “well-omened (is) Ohrmazd” (*hwyt'whlmzdy / hujadag-hormazd*) which appears for only three Ērān-Spāhbēds, one belonging to Xwarāsān,¹⁴ another to Xwarbarān¹⁵ and now, our seal from Nēm̄rōz. While the majority of the Spāhbēds have the title of *hwyt'hwslwdy / hujadag-khusro*, these three generals have “Ohrmazd” instead of “Khusro.” This fact makes our seal rare and a worthy bulla among the Spāhbed bullae that so far have come to light.

¹³ Gyselen, 2001, p. 30.

¹⁴ Gyselen, 2001, P. 36 and Gyselen, 2007, p. 252.

¹⁵ Gyselen, 2001, P. 43.