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EXIT GORDIANUS, BUT HOW? *
SHAPUR'S TRILINGUAL INSCRIPTION REVISITED

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Abstract — This article aims at re-evaluating the Classical (Eutropius, *Historia Augusta*, Ammianus), Byzantine (Orosius, Zosimus, Zonaras) and Iranian (the trilingual Ka‘ba-ye Zardošt inscription) sources on the death of the Roman emperor Gordian III during his campaign against the Sasanid king Shapur I in AD 244. In the current scholarly debate, two groups of scholars can be distinguished: the first group, following the Classical and Byzantine sources, argues that Gordian III was killed by his own peers, attributing a vicious role to his imperial successor Philip the Arab. Basing themselves on the Iranian sources, the second group believes that Shapur I claimed to have killed Gordian III in a military confrontation. The study will use historical and linguistic arguments, focussing on the trilingual Ka‘ba-ye Zardošt inscription, to come to a new historical interpretation about the end of the life of Gordian III.

Keywords — Roman history, Middle Iranian languages, Sasanid-Roman relations, Greek epigraphy, military history.

Résumé — Dans la discussion académique actuelle sur les circonstances précises de la mort de l’empereur romain Gordien III, on peut apercevoir deux groupes. Le premier groupe, suivant les sources classiques, croit que Gordien III fut tué par ses propres troupes. Se basant sur les sources iraniennes, l’autre groupe croit que c’est Shapur I qui tua Gordien III dans une confrontation militaire. Cet article propose une nouvelle étude des sources gréco-romaines (Eutrope, Histoire Auguste, Ammien), byzantines (Orose, Zosime, Zonaras) et iraniennes (l’inscription trilingue du Ka‘ba-ye Zardošt) qui nous racontent cet épisode. Se concentrant sur l’inscription du Ka‘ba-ye Zardošt, il utilise des arguments historiques et linguistiques pour aboutir à une nouvelle interprétation historique de la fin de la vie de Gordien III.

Mots-clés — histoire romaine, langues moyen-iraniennes, relations romano-sassanides, épigraphie grecque, histoire militaire.

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خلاصة – نلمح في النقاش الأكاديمي الحالي حول الظروف الدقيقة لوفاة الإمبراطور الروماني جورديان الثالث فثتين: تعتقد الأولى، متبعة المصادر الكلاسيكية، أن جورديان الثالث قتل على يد قواته؛ وتعتقد الأخرى، مستندة إلى مصادر إيرانية، أن شابور (أو سابور) قتل جورديان الثالث في مواجهة عسكرية. يقترح هذا المقال دراسة جديدة للمصادر اليونانية الرومانية (يوتروبيوس، التاريخ الأغسطي، أميانوس)، والبيزنطية (أوروسيوس، زوسيموس، زوناراس)، والإيرانية حول هذه الواقعة. ويستخدم حججا تاريخية ولغوية، بالتركيز على نقش كعبة زرادشت الإيراني، للوصول إلى تفسير تاريخي جديد لوفاة جورديان الثالث.

كلمات محورية – التاريخ الروماني، اللغات الإيرانية الوسطى، العلاقات الرومانية الساسانية، علم النقوش اليونانية، التاريخ العسكري.

INTRODUCTION

It goes beyond any doubt that one of the greatest rulers of the Sasanid dynasty, which controlled Iran and Mesopotamia from AD 224 till 642, was Shapur I, who in 242, after a short period of co-regency, succeeded his father Ardashir I.¹ Shapur, whose reign lasted until 270 or 272, is especially famous for his military exploits, for his various rock reliefs (e.g. in Bishapur, Darab and Naqsh-e Rostam) and for his trilingual inscription on the so-called Ka'ba-ye Zardošt (ŠKZ), among classical scholars better known as his "*Res Gestae Divi Saporis*."²

In this article one specific episode of his reign will be examined: the end of his first of three wars with the Roman Empire. This first war (242-244) started with an attack by the Roman Emperor Gordian III, and ended with the latter's unfortunate death and the rise of the new emperor Philip the Arab (244-249).

The death of Gordian III is documented by two groups of textual sources: the Classical and Byzantine authors on the one hand and the trilingual inscription ŠKZ on the other hand.

Almost all Classical and Byzantine authors blame Philip the Arab for the murder on Gordian,³ either indirectly by blocking the army's food supplies, which triggered the famished soldiers to rebel against Gordian,⁴ or directly by inciting the troops against the emperor by accusing him of incompetent leadership.⁵ Of all modern authors, only Ensslin⁶ and Harder⁷ seem to accept these accounts, as they argue that Gordian died a violent death at Zaitha (situated on the Euphrates, between Circessium and Dura Europos, i.e. in Roman territory) and that Philip had played a role in this death.

Most modern scholars, however, do not believe these classical authors,⁸ accusing them of obscuring the fact that a Roman emperor died on a foreign battlefield, or of spreading anti-Philippian propaganda.⁹ They mostly refer to Orosius 7.19.5, who wrote in his *Adversus paganos* that Gordian was murdered by his troops only, and claim that others, such as Zosimus and Zonaras, did mention that Philip was not

1. SHAHBASI 2002.

2. Name used for the first time by ROSTOVITZ 1943-1944, p. 17. He was criticized for this by SPREGLING 1953, p. 3, a strong believer in the truthfulness of the *Res Gestae Divi Saporis*. Sprengling argued that a name *Res Gestae* suggests that the text is unreliable and therefore "It is unfortunate that for Shahpuhr's inscription a name scholar like Rostovtzeff has put into the world a catchy title like *Res Gestae Divi Saporis*, which carries a disparaging slur. *Res Gestae* were historically not very reliable."

3. Eutropius 9.2; Aurelius Victor 27.7-8; Ammianus 23.5.7 and 17; Festus 22 (p. 64), 2-7; Jerome s.a.a. 241-244, p. 217, 1-7; Jordanes 282, p. 36, 27-31; *Chronicon Paschale* p. 504, 2-6; John of Antioch, *FHistGr* IV, p. 597.

4. *HA v. Gord.* 29; 30.9; Zosimus, 1.19.1; Georgius Cedrenus i, p. 450, 23-451, 1, 11-12; Zonaras 12.18.

5. *HA v. Gord.* 29; 30.9; *Epitome de Caesaribus* 27.1-3; Syncellus, p. 433, 3-9.

6. ENSSLIN 1949, p. 16.

7. HARDER 1960, p. 281.

8. HOMMEL 1965, p. 330.

9. See for death on a foreign battlefield: MAZZARINO 1971, p. 76; KETTENHOFEN 1982, p. 32; KETTENHOFEN 1983, p. 155. For the anti-Philippian propaganda, see SPREGLING 1953, p. 364; HONIGMANN & MARICQ 1953, p. 119; POTTER 2004, p. 324; DRINKWATER 2005, p. 36.

present at the camp when Gordian was murdered. A reason for Orosius' isolate position could be the fact that he perceived Philip as a Christian and thus wanted to give the emperor a favourable role in this story.¹⁰

In addition, Oost¹¹ argues that the philosopher Plotinus, who travelled with Gordian's entourage to the east, but had to escape the camp after troubles broke out, would not have returned to Rome if Philip had had a hand in it.¹² This argument, together with the fact that Philip deified Gordian III with lavish splendour (e.g. *AE* 1964 231), makes them believe that Philip cannot be accused of the murder on his predecessor.¹³ In a later statement, Frye prudently writes that Gordian either died in the battle or was murdered by his own men.¹⁴

Furthermore, a later alternative version is derived from Byzantine authors who state that one of the Gordians fell from his horse during the Persian campaign, broke his thigh and died later of his injuries.¹⁵ Yet, here again, modern scholarship does not attach much value to this story, firstly because it is not mentioned in earlier sources,¹⁶ and secondly, because these Byzantine chroniclers make many mistakes regarding the age, deeds and kinship relations of the Gordiani and the Philippi.

In sum, the diversity of conflicting stories brought to us by the Classical and Byzantine authors is nicely reflected in modern scholarship. Each specialist bases his view on his own preferred source.¹⁷

To avoid this problem, various scholars rather tend to follow the statements made in the trilingual inscription *ŠKZ*, in which they want to read that Gordian was killed in a battle with Shapur.¹⁸ Some even want to reconcile this evidence with another "Roman" version, the *Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle* 13.13-20, which declared that Gordian, personified as a new Ares, was slain by a jealous colleague during a battle against the Persians, asserting that the Roman emperor had died on a foreign battlefield.¹⁹

However, some other authors have serious doubts about the historicity of Shapur's account. Stolte believes that the report of Shapur on the events surrounding Gordian's death is pure propaganda.²⁰ The Dutch scholar bases this theory on two main arguments: (1) Shapur does not mention the successful beginning of Gordian's campaign and (2) a statement of Ammianus. Ammianus writes that the later emperor Julian the Apostate (361-363) arrived at the place of Shapur's victory over Philip on the 26th of April, called Peroz-Shapur. This is 225 km further than the place where, according to Ammianus, Gordian was murdered and buried.²¹ Stolte, who follows Ammianus, concludes that as a consequence, a battle between Shapur and Gordian could never have taken place and therefore calls Shapur's report "een mooi staaltje van oorlogsbulletinschrijverij."²²

10. MACDONALD 1981, p. 502; POTTER 1990, p. 208-209.

11. OOST 1958, p. 107.

12. Porphyry, *Vita Plotini* 3. Cf. POTTER 2004, p. 210-211.

13. See, for instance, MACDONALD 1981, p. 507-508; POTTER 2004, p. 206 and 211; DODGEON & LIEU 1991, p. 256 n. 13.

14. FRYE 1983, 125.

15. Malalas 12, 295 (ap. *Synopsis Sathas*); George Monachus 32. p. 461, 12-15; Zonaras 12.17.

16. POTTER 2004, p. 204-205; *contra* SCHENK 1931, p. 62; MAZZARINO 1971, p. 72-73 and 79, followed by CHRISTOL 1997, p. 97; MACDONALD 1981, p. 506-508. Some of these authors explicitly looked for a link with earlier writers.

17. For matter of completeness, LORiot 1975, p. 657-787, has categorized all theories around Gordian's death into four streams of traditions without, however, taking a stand himself.

18. SPRENGLING 1940, p. 364; FRYE 1951, p. 104; FRYE 1954, p. 184; GUEY 1955, p. 117; KEHLER 1970, p. 161; BACK 1978, p. 501; LANG 1983, p. 519; CHRISTOL 1997, p. 97; DIGNAS & WINTER 2001, p. 96-97; KÖRNER 2002, p. 121; as part of a "strategic error" of Philip, see in particular: LORiot 1975, p. 773; DODGEON & LIEU 1991, p. 356 n. 10. Kehler erroneously believes that Shapur claimed to have killed Gordian in the battle with his own hands, but this is rightfully denied by KETTENHOFEN 1983 p. 165.

19. OLMSTEAD 1942, p. 254-255; HONIGMANN & MARICQ 1953, p. 119; OOST 1958, p. 106-107; GÖBL 1974, p. 18-20; DODGEON & LIEU 1991, p. 255 n. 9.

20. STOLTE 1970, p. 379-382.

21. Ammianus 23.5.17.

22. "A nice example of writing war bulletins" dixit STOLTE 1970, p. 381.

A similar argument is used by Harder²³ and Hommel,²⁴ who claim that the report of Shapur on the total destruction of the Roman army and its presentation as a complete Persian victory must absolutely be taken *cum grano salis*. Felix believes that the passage on Gordian's death was nothing more than a "propagandistisches Manöver," without any direct relation to the real death of Gordian.²⁵ Nevertheless, the passage perfectly fits a chronological narrative: battle at Misikhe – death of Gordian – annihilation of the Roman army.

This Greco-Roman-centric position has, however, its own flaws. First, it is quite obvious that a royal inscription such as ŠKZ has its level of propaganda. Therefore, it would be very unlikely to see that Shapur, in contrast to all Near Eastern kings, would admit any military defeat. Shapur simply puts himself in a long tradition of boasting with one's own accomplishments. Secondly, Ammianus' account gives just one of the various theories regarding the place where Gordian was murdered. The conflicting opinions of classical traditions concerning the place of murder and the location of the grave of the unfortunate Roman emperor are in themselves already a weakening of Stolte's second argument.²⁶

SHAPUR'S TRILINGUAL INSCRIPTION REVISITED

Because of the confusion created by the ancient sources and its reflection in modern scholarship, our attention should again be turned to Shapur's trilingual inscription ŠKZ²⁷. This long text, describing Shapur's administrative and religious policies, his various exploits as well as his campaigns against the Roman Empire, was engraved between 260 and 262²⁸ on the so-called Ka'ba-ye Zardošt ("Cube of Zoroaster"), a tower-like construction in Naqš-e Rostam, built in the fifth century BC. The inscription, discovered by Erich Friedrich Schmidt in the years 1936 and 1939, is trilingual: Greek (south wall), Middle Persian (east wall) and Parthian (west wall) and contains, *inter alia*, a record of the campaign that ended in Gordian's death.

The episode which is of interest here is only fully contained in the Greek and Parthian versions, the Middle Persian version of it being completely lost. The relevant text of the Greek and Parthian versions goes as follows, according to Huyse's edition of 1999:

1. Greek: (§ 6) Καὶ ὅτε πρῶτος ἐπὶ τὴν βασιλίαν τῶν ἐθνῶν ἔστημεν, Γορδιανὸς Καῖσαρ (7) ἀπὸ πάσης τῆς Ῥωμαίων ἀρχῆς Γούθθων τε καὶ Γερμανῶν ἐθνῶν δύναμιν [συνέλεξ]εν καὶ εἰς τὴν Ἀσσυρίαν ἐπὶ τὸ τῶν Ἀριανῶν ἔθνος καὶ ἡμᾶς ἐπῆλθεν ὃ καὶ εἰς τοὺς ὄρους (8) τῆς Ἀσσυρίας ἐν τῇ Μησιγ[ισ(?)]ῃ ἐξ ἐναντίας πῶλεμος μέγας γέγονεν (§ 7) καὶ Γορδιανὸς Καῖσαρ ἐπανήρη καὶ ἡμεῖς τὴν στρατείαν τῶν Ῥωμαίων ἀνηλώσαμεν καὶ οἱ Ῥωμαῖοι Φίλιππον (9) Καίσαρα ἀνηγόρευσαν.
2. Parthian (transliteration): (§ 6) *W AMT nhwšt pty hštry HQAYMWt HWYm gwrtnyws kysr MN hmk prwm gwt W grm 'ny' hštry z'wry ' hngwšn ' OBDt W OL 'swrstn 'pr 'ry'nhštr WLN AT[Y]t W pty 'swrstn m[rz] B mšyk ptydymn RBA znbk YHWt (§ 7) gwrtnyws (4) kysr QOLt prwmyn z'wry HWBDWt w prwmyn plypws kysr OBDt.*
3. Parthian (transcription): (§ 6) *ud kaδ naxwišt pad šahr awištād ahēm, Gōrdanyos Kēsar aš hamag Frōm, Gōt ud Garmāniyā šahr zāwar hangāwišn kerd; ud ō Asūrestān abar Ērānšahr ud ama āγ[a]d, ud pad Asūrestān m[arz] pad Mišik paddēmān wuzurg zambad būd. (§ 7) Gōrdanyos (4) Kēsar ōžad Frōmāyīn zāwar *wānād, ud Frōmāyīn Filip(p)os kēsar kerd.*

23. HARDER 1960, p. 281.

24. HOMMEL 1965, p. 330 n. 4 and 334 n. 17.

25. FELIX 1985, p. 49.

26. Cf. MACDONALD 1981, p. 504.

27. See HUYSE 1999, vol. I, p. 6-21, for a clear introduction to the inscription.

28. HUYSE 1999, vol. I, p. 14.

Not surprisingly, various modern authors have provided a translation of the fragments concerned. The following section offers an overview of the various translations of the parts relevant for this article:

1. Greek:

- a. Olmstead: ²⁹ “(§ 6) And into the mountains of Assyria, in the Mesichise from opposite a great war arose. And (§ 7) Gordianos Kaisar was killed, and we annihilated the army of the Romans. And the Romans proclaimed Philippos as Kaisar.”
- b. Rostovtzeff ³⁰ (fragment): “(§ 6) And inside the boundaries of Assyria, in Mesichise, there was a great “face to face” or “frontal” battle, and (§ 7) Emperor Gordian was killed, and we annihilated the Roman army, and the Romans proclaimed Philipp emperor.”
- c. Sprengling: ³¹ “(§ 6) And at the frontier of Assyria, at Mesikh, a great frontal battle took place. (§ 7) Gordianus Caesar was killed. We destroyed the Roman force. And the Romans proclaimed Philip Caesar.”
- d. Guey: ³² “(§ 6) Et, aux (ou dans les) frontières de l’Assyrie, dans la Mésichisé, une grande bataille rangée eut lieu, (§ 7) et le César Gordien fut tué (?), et nous détruisîmes l’armée des Romains; et les Romains proclamèrent Philippe César.”
- e. Maricq (adopted by Gagé): ³³ “(§ 6) Et aux confins de l’Asorestan, à Misikhè, il y eut une grande bataille rangée. (§ 7) Et le César Gordien périt, et nous anéantîmes l’armée romaine. Et les Romains proclamèrent Philippe César.”
- f. Stolte ³⁴ (fragment): “(§ 6) []. En binnen de grenzen van Assyrië, bij Misikhe, had een grote veldslag plaats (§ 7) en keizer Gordianus sneuvelde en wij vernietigden het Romeinse leger; en de Romeinen riepen Philippus tot keizer uit.”
- g. Back: ³⁵ “(§ 6) Und an den Grenzen Babyloniens bei Mišīk kam es gegeneinander zu einer großen Schlacht. (§ 7) Und der Kaiser Gordianus fand den Tod, und Wir vernichteten das römische Heer. Da wählten die Römer Philippus zum Kaiser.”
- h. Dodgeon and Lieu: ³⁶ “(§ 6) A great battle took place between the two sides on the frontiers of Assyria at Meshike. (§ 7) Caesar Gordian was destroyed and the Roman army was annihilated ³⁷. The Romans proclaimed Philip Caesar.”
- i. Huyse (also Dignas and Winter): ³⁸ “(§ 6) Und an den Grenzen Asūrestāns – in Misikhē – hat eine große frontale Schlacht stattgefunden. (§ 7) Und Kaiser Gordian wurde getötet, und Wir vernichteten das Heer der Römer; und die Römer riefen Philippus zum Kaiser aus”.

2. Parthian:

- a. Sprengling: ³⁹ “(§ 6) And there was a great battle in the Assyrian mountains [opposite] Mishikaman. (§ 7) Gordian Caesar was killed, the Roman army was annihilated, and the Romans (proclaimed) Philip Caesar.”

29. OLMSTEAD 1942, p. 255.

30. ROSTOVITZ 1943-1944, p. 22-23.

31. SPREGLING 1953, p. 15.

32. GUEY 1955, p. 116-117.

33. MARICQ 1958, p. 306-308; GAGÉ 1964, p. 285-286.

34. STOLTE 1970, p. 379.

35. BACK 1978, p. 290-292.

36. DODGEON & LIEU 1991, p. 35.

37. Although Lieu claims to base himself on the Greek version, he clearly follows the Parthian one in this phrase.

38. HUYSE 1999, Vol. I, p. 26-27; DIGNAS & WINTER 2001, p. 94.

39. SPREGLING 1940, p. 363.

- b. Sprengling: ⁴⁰“(§ 6) And at the frontier of Assyria at Meshik a great frontal battle took place. (§ 7) Gordianus Caesar was killed. The Roman force was destroyed. And the Romans made Philip Caesar.”
- c. Back (also Sommer): ⁴¹“(§ 6) Und an den Grenzen Babylonien bei Mišik kam es gegeneinander zu einer großen Schlacht. (§ 7) Und der Kaiser Gordianus fand den Tod, und Wir vernichteten das römische Heer. ⁴² Da wählten die Römer Philippus zum Kaiser.”
- d. Frye (also Millar): ⁴³“(§ 6) On the border of Babylonia at Misikhe, a great ‘frontal’ battle occurred. (§ 7) Gordian Caesar was killed and the Roman force was destroyed. And the Romans made Philip Caesar.”
- e. Huyse (also Dignas and Winter): ⁴⁴“(§ 6) Und an der Grenze Asūrestāns – in Mišik – fand eine große Schlacht von Mann gegen Mann statt. (§ 7) Kaiser Gordian wurde getötet, die (Heeres)macht der Römer vernichtet, und die Römer machten Philippus (zum) Kaiser.”
- f. Wiesehöfer: ⁴⁵“(§ 6) Und an den Grenzen Babylonien bei Mašik kam es gegeneinander zu einem großen Schlacht. (§ 7) Und der Kaiser Gordianus fand den Tod, und Wir vernichteten das römische Heer. Da wählten die Römer Philippus zum Kaiser.”

The relevant passage concerning the death of Gordian, the main theme of this article, is the part describing the battle. As can be seen above, various translations have been proposed. The crucial sentences are:

Greek: καὶ εἰς τοὺς ὄρους (8) τῆς Ἀσσυρίας ἐν τῇ Μησιχ[ισ(?)]ῃ ἐξ ἐναντίας πνόλεμος μέγ' αὐζέγονεν (§ 7) καὶ Γορδιανὸς Καῖσαρ ἐπανάρη.

Parthian: *W pty 'swrstn m[rz] B mšyk ptydymn RBA znbk YHWt (§ 7) gwrtnyws (4) kysr QΘLt.*

Most is clearly understandable, but the precise description of the battle is unfortunately not completely clear. Two expressions deserve special attention. First, there is the Greek ἐξ ἐναντίας with its Parthian counterpart *ptydymn*, and second, the Greek verb ἐπανάρη with the Parthian *QTLt*.

Greek ἐξ ἐναντίας and Parthian ptydymn

Greek ἐξ ἐναντίας

The early Greek historians used the Greek expression ἐξ ἐναντίας, an adjective in the genitive, to describe a movement in a battle that came “from the front” (*LS*, 555 sv. “ἐναντίας”). Two examples can be cited here:

1. Herodotus (c. 484-420 BC), *Hist.*, 7.225.3: οἱ βάρβαροι βάλλοντες, οἱ μὲν ἐξ ἐναντίας ἐπισπόμενοι. This is generally translated as “The barbarians buried them with missiles, some attacking **from the front** [and throwing down the defensive wall, others surrounding them on all sides].” ⁴⁶
2. Thucydides (c. 460-395 BC), *Hist.*, 4.33: Here it is said that the Athenian hoplites ἐξ ἐναντίας γὰρ οὗτοι καθειστήκεσαν, ἐκ πλαγίου δὲ οἱ ψιλοὶ καὶ κατὰ νότου, “[Meanwhile the main body of the troops in the island, seeing their outpost cut off and an army advancing against them, serried their ranks] and pressed forward [to close with the Athenian heavy infantry] **in front of** them, the light troops being upon their flanks and rear.” ⁴⁷

40. SPRENGLING 1953, p. 15.

41. BACK 1978, p. 290-292; SOMMER 2005, p. 73 n. 98.

42. Here Back follows the Greek version.

43. FRYE 1984, p. 371; MILLAR 1993, p. 154.

44. HUYSE 1999, Vol. I, p. 26-27; DIGNAS & WINTER 2001, p. 94.

45. WIESEHÖFER 1994, p. 216.

46. GODLEY 1922, p. 543; MARG 1983, p. 239.

47. JONES & POWELL 1942, p. X.

The meaning of “from the front, from the opposite; in front of” was also adopted by later Greek writers, such as Plutarch (c. 46-120 AD) and Pausanias (c. 115-180 AD). Plutarch (*Agis and Cleomenes*, 28.3) writes:

τοῦ δὲ Δαμοτέλους ἦν γὰρ, ὡς λέγεται, χρήμασιν πρότερον ὑπ’ Ἀντιγόνου διεφθαρμένος ἀμελεῖν ἐκείνων εἰπόντος ὡς καλῶς ἐχόντων, τοῖς δὲ συνάπτουσιν ἐξ ἐναντίας προσέχειν

“But Damoteles (who had previously been bribed, as we are told, by Antigonos) told him to have no concern about flanks and rear, for all was well there, but to give his attention to those who assailed him **in front**, and repulse them.”⁴⁸

Pausanias (10.22.6), on the other hand, informs us that:

μόνοι προσέκειντο ἐξ ἐναντίας τοῖς βαρβάροις ἅτε ὀπλιτεύειν δεδιδαγμένοι

“Being trained as hoplites they made a **frontal** attack on the barbarians, but suffered severely owing to the number and desperation of the Gauls.”⁴⁹

Nevertheless, a minor shift is also visible in texts dating from the first century AD onwards. Now a clear meaning “opposite” appears. Examples are:

1. Marc 15.39: Ἰδὼν δὲ ὁ κεντυρίων ὁ παρεστηκὼς ἐξ ἐναντίας αὐτοῦ ὅτι οὕτως ἐξέπνευσεν εἶπεν Ἀληθῶς οὗτος ὁ ἄνθρωπος υἱὸς θεοῦ ἦν; “now when the centurion, who stood **facing** him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, ‘Truly this man was God’s Son!’” Other translations are “in front of,” “by opposite,” and “over against.”⁵⁰
2. Plutarch, *Pyrrhus*, 33.3: συνέπιπτε τοῖς ἐπιβοηθοῦσιν ἐξ ἐναντίας προσφερομένοις, οἱ μὲν οὐχ ὑπήκουον ὑποχωρεῖν βοῶντος αὐτοῦ; “he encountered those who were rushing to his aid **from the opposite direction**.”⁵¹
3. Cassius Dio (c. 155-235 AD) 43.34.3.: αὐτοὶ δὲ ἀνέμου σφίσιν ἐξ ἐναντίας ἐν τούτῳ σφοδροῦ προσπесόντος κακῶς ἀπτήλαξαν; “while they themselves fared ill by reason of a violent wind which just then began to blow toward them **from the opposite direction**.”⁵²

The meaning of “opposite party” appears also in Greek literature from the first century AD and onwards, as can be seen in the following examples:

1. Epistle of Paul to Titus (c. 100) 2,8: λόγον ὑγιῆ ἀκατάγνωστον, ἵνα ὁ ἐξ ἐναντίας ἐντραπῇ μηδὲν ἔχων λέγειν περὶ ἡμῶν φαῦλον; “And soundness of speech that cannot be condemned; that **he who opposes** you may be ashamed, having no evil thing to say about us.”⁵³
2. Likewise, Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 1.5.84 (Bias), who lived in the third century AD, used ἐξ ἐναντίας to indicate the prosecutor in a lawsuit: εἰπόντος δὲ καὶ τοῦ ἐξ ἐναντίας καὶ τῶν δικαστῶν τὴν ψῆφον ἐνεγκόντων τῷ ὑπὸ τοῦ Βίαντος βοηθουμένῳ, λυθέντος τοῦ δικαστηρίου νεκρὸς ἐν τοῖς κόλποις εὐρέθη; “the **opposing** counsel made a speech, the judges voted and gave their verdict in favour of the client of Bias, who, when the court rose, was found dead in his grandson’s arms.”⁵⁴
3. The church father Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260-339 AD) used the expression twice in his *Historia Ecclesiastica*. The first passage (5.16.4) describes the adversaries of the Church as those of the opposite side “τοὺς δὲ ἐξ ἐναντίας” and in a second passage (10.5.21) τῶν ἐξ ἐναντίας can be

48. PERRIN 1921, p. 115.

49. JONES 1935, p. 495.

50. RAINBOW MISSIONS, Inc. 2000.

51. PERRIN 1921, p. 455.

52. CARY 1916, p. 273.

53. RAINBOW MISSIONS, Inc. 2000.

54. HICKS 1925, p. 87.

translated as “the opposing parties” who had to come to the bishop of Rome as they disagreed about some doctrines.

- a. First passage: τοὺς δ' ἐξ ἐναντίας πρὸς τὸ παρὸν ἀποκρουσθῆναι καὶ τοὺς ἀντιθέτους λυπηθῆναι, “but **our opponents** were crushed for the moment and our adversaries were distressed.”⁵⁵
- b. Second passage: ἀλλὰ μὴν καὶ τούτων κληθέντων ἀπὸ τῆς Ἀφρικῆς τῶν ἐξ ἐναντίας μοίρας καταλήλως, “that the **opposing parties** who were contending stubbornly and persistently together, should be summoned from Africa.”⁵⁶

Conclusively, one is dealing here with a well-known Greek expression, used from the fifth century BC onwards and always with a meaning of “in front of, opposite.” As Shapur’s triumph inscription is dated to the third century AD, it is plausible to accept a sense of “opposite.” In other words, there is no reason to adopt a meaning “from man to man” in this context.

Parthian ptydymn⁵⁷ (paddēman)⁵⁸

This Parthian lexeme is a *hapax legomenon*, which makes it harder to interpret. Surely it consists of two parts and it is the study of each part that can bring us closer to the real meaning of this word, which is usually translated as “opposite (Misikhe)” (Sprengling), “frontal” (Sprengling 1953; Frye), “against each other (gegeneinander)” (Back; Wiesehöfer) or “von Mann gegen Mann” (Huysse).

As noted above, the lexeme is composed of two other lexemes, *pty* and *dymn*. Both elements are already attested in the Old Iranian linguistic level: *pty* in Avestan (as *paiti*) and in Old Persian (as *p-t-i*) and *dymn* in Avestan (as *daēman*).

In Avestan, *paiti* is seen by Bartholomae as an adverb or a preposition with various meanings: “however; then again” (adverb), “against, contrary to, to, in” (preposition).⁵⁹ Hintze translates “against, in, on, at, to.”⁶⁰ Concerning its Old Persian equivalent *pati*, Kent discerns three functions of the word: (1) adverb (“thereto, again”), (2) preposition (“against, near, at, on, upon”), and (3) prefix to verbs or nouns.⁶¹ Schmitt separates the adverb from the pre- and postposition.⁶² This lexeme is also well known in the middle Iranian languages, e.g. MP and Parth. *pad* “in, at, on, along, among, through, with, upon, on account of.”⁶³

The second part is less attested in the Iranian languages. The oldest lexeme is Avestan *daēman-*, which Bartholomae translates as “eye, eyeball” (as such in Yt. 10,48 and YT. 14,56) or “look(?)” (as such possibly in Yt. 10,107).⁶⁴ Old Persian has no equivalent. In the Middle Iranian languages one can find MP and Parthian *dym* “face”⁶⁵ and Sogdian *δym* “face, eyeball” all derived from Av. *daēman-*.⁶⁶ Finally, modern Persian has *dīm* “face.”⁶⁷

55. LAKE 1926, p. 473.

56. OULTON 1932, p. 457; 459.

57. Other readings were proposed by SPREGLING 1953, p. 7 (*ptyrymn*) and GIGNOUX 1972, p. 62 (*ptyrzmy*, “battle”). Nevertheless, because of the Greek equivalent and of the occurrence in the Parthian version of *znbk*, “battle,” the reading *ptydymn* must be given preference (HUYSE 1999, vol. II, p. 46).

58. Not mentioned in DURKIN-MEISTERERNST 2014, 153.

59. BARTHOLOMAE 1904, p. 822-827.

60. HINTZE 1994, p. 436.

61. KENT 1953 p. 194.

62. SCHMITT 2014, p. 230-231.

63. DURKIN-MEISTERERNST 2004, p. 260-268.

64. BARTHOLOMAE 1904, p. 667.

65. SUNDERMANN 1973, p. 122; DURKIN-MEISTERERNST 2004, p. 150.

66. GHARIB 1995, p. 148 no. 3743; SIMS-WILLIAMS & DURKIN-MEISTERERNST 2012, p. 76.

67. STEINGASS 1892, p. 558.

The combination of both components may lead to various meanings, such as “to the face, in the face, opposite the face, against the face.” A meaning “opposite, in front of” is accordingly very plausible and would correspond to the meaning of its Greek equivalent, which in its turn is in line with Brunner’s⁶⁸ remark that the Greek version of Shapur’s text “adheres closely to the Parthian.”⁶⁹

It should be reminded, for the sake of completeness, that Henning gives a slightly different analysis of this word.⁷⁰ He transcribes *ptydymn* as *pat’dēmān* and translates this lexeme as “from face to face”. However, his transcription must be considered inaccurate, as *pat’dēmān* would rather have been written *ptydym’n*, with ’ as *mater lectionis* for /ā/.⁷¹

Greek ἐπινήρη and Parthian QTLt

Greek ἐπινήρη

Contrary to many other instances where a first plural form is used, here both the Greek and the Parthian version use a passive form of the third person singular. The Greek word was initially reconstructed differently by various scholars. Sprengling, Honigmann and Maricq read ἐπινήρη, whereas Maricq later prefers ἀνήρη.⁷²

A completely different reconstruction was proposed by Hommel, who denies the possibility of the word ἀνήρη. According to him, the 2nd passive aorist does not occur with *verba vocalia*.⁷³ He prefers therefore to read [ἀ]νηρήκ[αμεν], which is modified by his student Wilfried Barner into [ἐπα]νηρήκ[αμεν]. This perfect tense is then influenced by the word γέγονεν, attested for the first time slightly before the verbal form under debate.

Göbl is not convinced by Hommel’s idea and states that “Diese Ergänzung ist aber, wie sich gleich zeigen läßt, unhaltbar”.⁷⁴ He bases himself on the visible traces of the concerned word. The parallel fragments where the emperors Philip and Valerian are mentioned also use the aorist tense, which pleads against a perfect. Göbl finally agrees with the suggestion made by Zwanziger, i.e. that a hitherto unattested strong aorist is possible, accepting a stonemason’s erroneous omission of θ or εθ is the most plausible way to resolve this debate. Göbl opts thereby for ἀνήρθη.⁷⁵

The reading ἐπινήρη being assured, one can assume that it is a passive form of the verb ἐπαναίρω.⁷⁶ It should, however, be noted that the Greek form is under debate. According to Kettenhofen it is a stonemason’s mistake for ἀνηρέθη, the regular passive aorist.⁷⁷ Dodgeon and Lieu add the possibility that it is a rare form.⁷⁸ In this sense, one could suggest that ἐπινήρη is a second passive aorist in the third form, which can be translated as: “he was killed.”

In fact, the whole discussion on the “Urform” is superfluous, as more and more so-called “second” passive aorist forms in -η occur in texts from the Hellenistic period onwards, even from verbs of which such forms are not attested in Attic.⁷⁹

68. BRUNNER 1977, p. 196.

69. See RUBIN 2002, p. 267-297, esp. 295 on the exact relation between the three versions. In any case, he agrees with the idea that the Greek text “resembles more closely the Parthian text on the whole.”

70. HENNING 1958, p. 62.

71. Cf. the examples in GIGNOUX 1972; BOYCE 1977; RASTORGUEVA & MOLČANOVA 1981, p. 162 and SKJÆRVØ 2013, p. 202.

72. SPREGLING 1940, p. 361; HONIGMANN & MARICQ 1953, p. 12; MARICQ 1958, p. 307.

73. HOMMEL 1965, p. 334 n. 17.

74. GÖBL 1974, p. 17-18 n. 41.

75. GÖBL 1974, p. 17 n. 41.

76. FELIX 1985, p. 49; DODGEON & LIEU 1991, p. 355 n. 7.

77. KETTENHOFEN 1983, p. 165.

78. DODGEON & LIEU 1991, p. 355 n. 8.

79. MAYSER 1938, p. 161-162; SCHWYZER 1939, p. 759-760; MANDILARAS 1973, p. 146-148; BACK 1978, p. 501 n. 161, GIGNAC 1981, p. 307-319; BLASS, DEBRUNNER & REHKOPF 1984, p. 60; HUYSE 1999, Vol. I, p. 47 and 186.

Parthian QTLt (phonetically ōzad)

This form is absolutely clear. *QTLt* is a passive participle of *QTL* (logogram for Parth. *ōzan*- “to kill”), accordingly meaning “killed.”⁸⁰ Here it is part of a construction with a non-written form of auxiliary verb *(a)h*- “to be.” This construction indicates the passive perfect of transitive verbs,⁸¹ whereby in the third person singular the auxiliary verb is regularly and in the third person plural frequently not expressed, e.g. *grift* “he was seized.”⁸²

Again both forms, Greek and Parthian, correspond with each other. Both are passive preterite forms in the third singular person, meaning “(Gordian) was killed.” They also highlight the fact that Shapur never claims to have killed Gordian during the battle, as in that case certainly a first person plural would have been used by the Iranian scribe.⁸³ Accordingly, there is no proof for the alleged certainty of Gordian being killed in a face-to-face battle, as is the widely accepted interpretation of the *ŠKZ* fragment.⁸⁴

CONCLUSION

As a way of concluding this article, we propose hereby our own translation of the passage:

Greek: “(§ 6) And when at first we were established in the government of the nations, the Emperor Gordian raised an army of Goths and Germans from the entire Roman Empire and marched to Assyria against the nation of the Iranians and against us. And on the frontiers of Assyria, at Meshike, a great battle on the opposite side took place (§ 7) and the Emperor Gordian was killed and we annihilated the army of the Romans and the Romans proclaimed Philip Emperor.”

Parthian: “(§ 6) And when at first we had become established in the empire, the Emperor Gordian raised a force from the entire Empire of Romans, Goths and Germans and marched to Assyria against the land of Iran and against us. On the border of Assyria, at Misikhe, a great battle occurred on the opposite side. (§ 7) The Emperor Gordian was killed and the Roman force was annihilated. And the Romans made Philip the Emperor.”

To conclude, we suggest that if one opts for a meaning “opposite, in front of” for both Greek ἐναντίας and Parthian *ptydymn* in the *ŠKZ* fragment § 6, we can read that during Shapur’s campaign against Gordian III an internal battle had started in the ranks of the opposing party, the Roman legions. From this, we can reconstruct a picture of what happened that gives more credit to the Classical and some Byzantine versions: Gordian was killed by his own soldiers during this military revolt. This is a theory that has been suggested before by Ensslin and Harder.⁸⁵ The use of the passive form of Greek ἐπανάρη and Parthian *QTLt* both in the third person singular strengthens this interpretation.⁸⁶ Accordingly, the widely accepted view that Gordian III must have been killed in a face-to-face battle by Shapur’s troops can be rejected. More likely, Shapur made use of the chaos within the Roman army to attack and annihilate it, as the narrative in his inscription continues. The positive assessment of the version of the Classical and some Byzantine authors does also give more credit to their statement that Philip had been the (in)direct initiator of the soldier’s rebellion against their emperor. Unfortunately, no further evidence can be derived from the *ŠKZ*, and therefore it remains impossible to answer the question whether Philip had been the brain behind the imperial murder.

80. GIGNOUX 1972, p. 62. Note that, according to BRUNNER 1977, p. 137, the passive character of this construction is not certain. DURKIN-MEISTERENRST 2014, p. 252 does not accept a passive meaning for this construction.

81. With intransitive verbs this construction indicates an active perfect, cf. *wyhšt YHWM*, “we have pushed forward” in line 4.

82. GHILAIN 1939, p. 118; HUMBACH & SKJÆRVØ 1983, p. 137-138; SUNDERMANN 1989, p. 128-129; HUYSE 1999, Vol. I, p. 207.

83. KETTENHOFEN 1983, p. 165; DODGEON & LIEU 1991, p. 355 n. 7.

84. See also FARROKH 2005, p. 44.

85. Cf. ENSSLIN 1949, p. 16 and HARDER 1960, p. 281.

86. Cf. epilogue.

EPILOGUE

Verbal forms describing the conflicts in ŠKZ

Campaign	Event	Verb	Tense, person	Translation
Against Gordian (242-244 AD)	Battle of Mesiche	γέγονεν	Act. perf. 3 sg.	It happened
		YHWt	Act. perf. 3 sg.	It happened
	Gordian's death	ἐπνήρη	Pass. aor. 3 sg.	He was killed
		QTLt	Pass. perf. 3 sg.	He was killed
	Destruction of the Roman army	ἀνελώσαμεν	Act. aor. 1 pl.	We destroyed
		HWBDWt	Pass. perf. 3 sg.	It was destroyed
Against Philip (250 AD)	Battle of Barbalissos	ὠρμήσαμεν	Act. aor. 1 pl.	We pushed forward
		whyšt HWYm	Act. perf. 1 pl.	We pushed forward
	Death of 60 000 Romans	ἀνίλαμεν	Act. aor. 1 pl.	We killed
		QTLt	Pass. perf. 3 pl.	They were killed
Against Valerian (257-260 AD)	Battle of Edessa	γέγονεν	Act. perf. 3 sg.	It happened
		YHWt	Act. perf. 3 sg.	It happened
	Capture of Valerian	ἐκρατήσαμεν	Act. aor. 1 pl.	We captured
		dstgrb 'BDt	Pass. perf. 3 sg.	He was put in captivity.

This table clearly shows that the Greek and Parthian versions are mostly in mutual accordance. Only when Roman armies and/or soldiers (including the emperor) are annihilated, killed or captured, both versions are divergent. The Greek version prefers a first plural person, highlighting the excellence of the acts conducted by the Sasanian emperor, whereas the Parthian version opts for a more neutral passive third person.

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