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### Title

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### Journal

Berkeley Working Papers in Middle Iranian Philology, 1(1)

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### Publication Date

2023-05-24



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Berkeley Working Papers in Middle Iranian Philology  
No. 1, May 2023

Department of Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures  
University of California, Berkeley  
[https://escholarship.org/uc/bwp\\_mip](https://escholarship.org/uc/bwp_mip)



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# A newly discovered Middle Persian funerary inscription from Mount Zaneh

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2023

## Abstract

Mount Zaneh is among the mountains of Marvdasht located in the current municipality of Abarj. The mountain has long attracted scholarly attention for housing a rich variety of scattered archeological remnants from the Elamite up to the Sasanian eras. In particular, there are two ancient ossuaries whose patterns resemble the ossuaries in Naqsh-e Rostam. This study introduces and deciphers a newly-discovered six-line Middle Persian inscription in the skirts of Mount Zaneh. The inscription is comparable with other funerary inscriptions in Middle Persian.

## 1 Introduction

Mount Zaneh (Map 1) is one of the mountains in the Province of Fars that are located, from an archeological perspective, in the settled area around the Kor River.<sup>1</sup> This mountain is surrounded by numerous villages and suburbs of the Beyza City and Dasht-e Marvdasht. The so-called Tall-e Malyan (Ancient Anshan) is located in the vicinity of this mountain and reaches the skirts of Mount Zaneh on the north.

A range of geographical names ending in *-zan* have been preserved in the Elamite Persepolis Fortification Tablets (PFT), such as (*AŠ pár-mi-iz-za-an*),<sup>2</sup> (*AŠ ku-un-tar-tur-ri-iz-za-an*),<sup>3</sup> (*AŠ da-da-ti-za-an*),<sup>4</sup> and (*AŠ ru-ti-nu-iz-za-an*),<sup>5</sup> while Henkelman

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\*The initial reading of the inscription was provided by Mojtaba Doroodi, a modified reading and the commentary in its present form by Arash Zeini. The article was translated from Persian by Fateme Montazeri. Some references were consulted by Mojtaba Doroodi in Persian translation, but we have given the original where possible. This study was conducted in line with the activities of the Center for the Study of Inscriptions in Persepolis. The authors wish to thank Dr Hamid Fadei for his gracious support. They also wish to acknowledge Soheil Delshad for reading this article and for his insights regarding the Elamite words, Mohammad Ali Mosallanezhad for his continuous help and particularly for providing desired photos of the inscription. Finally, they wish to thank Mr Mahdi Zare<sup>c</sup> who accompanied and helped through frequent visits to the location.

<sup>1</sup>For more on the so-called civilizations of the area of Kor River, see Henkelman (2008:46), Doroodi (1395) and Doroodi, Askari Chaverdi & Hajiani (1396).

<sup>2</sup>See PF 892, 1107 and 1834 in Hallock (1969:257, 321–322, 504).

<sup>3</sup>See PF 943 and 944 in Hallock (1969:271–272).

<sup>4</sup>See PF 1122 in Hallock (1969:326).

<sup>5</sup>See PF 317, 990 and 1122 in Hallock (1969:146–147, 285, 326).



Map 1: The location of Mount Zaneh in relationship to Dorudzan and Banesh/Malyan (by the authors)

(2008:486, n. 1113) ascribes the location of ‘Zanana’ mentioned in the Elamite tablet NN 2040 to a branch of the network of royal routes. Likewise, the name of the village of Dorudzan, located on the slopes of Mount Zaneh and pronounced ‘Durzan’ in the colloquial language of the area, might suggest a relationship to Elamite, particularly if we consider the geographical proximity of Mount Zaneh to ‘Anzan’ (Anshan). In older maps, this mountain is named ‘zanj’ (Map 2).<sup>6</sup> In addition to Tall-e Malyan that has preserved many Elamite tablets,<sup>7</sup> we also find Achaemenid constructions among the remnants that survived around this mountain such as, Band-e Dokhtaran, Bardeh Borideh and numerous other evidence of ancient burials that will be discussed in the following.<sup>8</sup>



Map 2: Mountainous distance between Mount Zaneh, Dena, and the Fahlian Area (by the authors)

## 2 Evidence regarding the ancient burials in Mount Zaneh

One of the first scholars who documented existent remnants in the Fars Province and particularly in the areas around Kor River was Louis vanden Berghe, who embarked

<sup>6</sup>On this, see the map of Kazeroun in Farhang (1330).

<sup>7</sup>For an examination of parts of the Elamite tablets of Tall-e Malyan, see Stolper (1984).

<sup>8</sup>For more on the remnants from this mountainous area, see (Tilia 1997:332), Bergner (1937), Nicol (1970:245–284) and Sumner (1986).

on the first expansive archeological study of the area in the years between 1954 and 1959. He took photos from two ossuaries in the southern skirt of Mount Zaneh that overlook the Kushkak Area. These pictures are significant in the present study because the newly discovered inscription is located close to those ossuaries (Fig. 1).



Figure 1: Berghe was the first to document the ossuaries in Mount Zaneh (Stronach 1966:Fig. 21).

Berghe (1969:4, Tablet 62), however, named the mountain on which these ossuaries are carved as ‘Zagheh’, while Stronach (1966:Fig. 21) and Nicol (1970:248) registered the name of the mountain (Fig. 2) as Kūh-i Zakah. These names are undoubtedly incorrect. Nicol (1970:283) also informs us of a stone tomb in the nearby Mountain of Shahrak-e Abarj (Fig. 3) which unfortunately does not survive. Stronach (1966) too accounted for a fire altar (آتشدان) and provided an image of it in the skirts of Mountain of Shahrak-e Abarj. Doroodi (1395:136), likewise, observed and documented two funeral sarcophagi in the skirts of Mount Zaneh in Southern Bizgun Village (see also Fig. 4). An example of similar sarcophagi on the Mountain of Shahrak-e Abarj is documented by Stronach (Fig. 5). This evidence coupled with ossuaries and the newly found inscription in the skirts of Mount Zaneh, which is discussed in the present article, are illustrative of the numerous burial elements in the area and call for further investigation.

### 3 Ossuaries and the Newly Found Inscription of Mount Zaneh

In Shahrivar 1396 (August/September of 2017) Mr. Noor-Allah Kamali, a villager from Barezabad of Beyza, revealed in a conversation with Mojtaba Doroodi that he knew of two holes engraved on a rock on the side of the road going from Kushkak to Beyza near the village (Fig. 6). Visiting the rock, Doroodi noticed on the bottom corner a Middle Persian inscription that was not known to him from any of the sources on the area (Figs. 7 & 8). As mentioned, these ossuaries and the inscription are located on

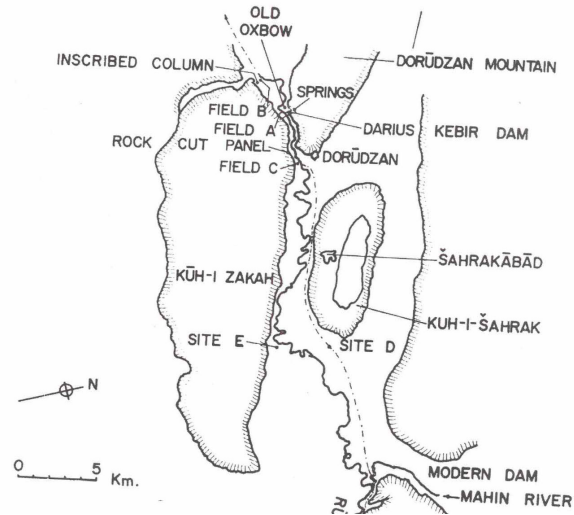


Figure 2: In his map, Nicol (1970:248) registers Mount Zaneh as 'Küh-i Zakah'. This name is also used by Stronach (1966:226), which appears to be a mistake.



Figure 3: A stone sarcophagus from the Sasanian period in vicinity of Mount Zaneh (Nicol 1970:283 & Fig. 30).

the road that connects Abarj to Beyza. The intersection at which this road begins is known as 'the snout of Kushkak' by the locals of Dasht-e Marvdasht and particularly the Abarj area. The ossuaries of Mount Zaneh, mentioned above (Fig. 1), are located at the beginning of the same route. Almost two kilometers away from the ossuaries, Imamzadeh Shah-Nur is located in the present asphalt road. A big rock sits near the road in the skirts of Mount Zaneh in the vicinity of the Imamzadeh and the village Barezabad, with the dimensions of 5.70 m length, 2.80 m width, and 2.70 m height. On its upper surface are two ossuaries or rectangular stone-holes with the dimensions of 50 cm length and 30 cm width. A coloured sign that seems to have been marked by



Figure 4: Two stone sarcophagi in Mount Zaneh, along with an overview of Mount Shahrak-e Abarj (Doroodi 1395:136).



Figure 5: Stone sarcophagus of Mount Shahrak-e Abarj documented by Stronach (1966:Fig. 22).

the road administration is visible in between the two ossuaries (Fig. 6). The Middle Persian inscription is written vertically in a cursive script akin to the so-called Book Pahlavi, in six lines with dimensions of 40 cm by 40 cm on the lower surface of the rock adjacent to the present-day road (Fig. 7). This rock is not dissimilar to what Stronach had documented in the same area and in the skirts of Mount Shahrak (Fig. 9). Finally, it should be mentioned that the road extends to Banesh area in Dasht-e Beyza from one end, which reaches Dasht-e Kamfiruz on its route, and on the other end meets the present-day city of Beyza from the left side of the road.



Figure 6: Two stone-holes in Mount Zaneh, to which the newly found inscription belongs. (Photo by Mohammad-Ali Mosallanezhad)



Figure 7: The newly discovered inscription in Mount Zaneh. The inscription is written vertically. (Photo by Mohammad-Ali Mosallanezhad)

#### 4 Text and Translation

Funeral inscriptions are often scratched on the face of the rock by means of superficial strokes which make these inscriptions more susceptible to damage and erosion. The multivalence of the Pahlavi script adds to the difficulties of deciphering these inscriptions, particularly if they are not in a good state of preservation. In this section, we provide the most likely readings by taking into account context and other private and funerary inscriptions. Figure 10 reflects our tentative reading of this inscription but is not a faithful one-to-one reproduction of the text of the inscription.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup>The authors welcome suggestions and improved readings.





Figure 8: How the inscription should be read. (Photo by Mohammad-Ali Mosal-lanezhad)

PLATE XIX



FIG. 4.—NORTHERN AND EASTERN SIDES OF THE ALTAR



FIG. 5.—FIRE BOWL OF THE KŪH-I-SHAHRĀK ALTAR

Figure 9: Carved stone in the skirts of Mount Shahrak-e Abarj documented by Stronach (1966:Fig. 4 & 5), which is not far from the inscribed rock of Mount Zaneh.

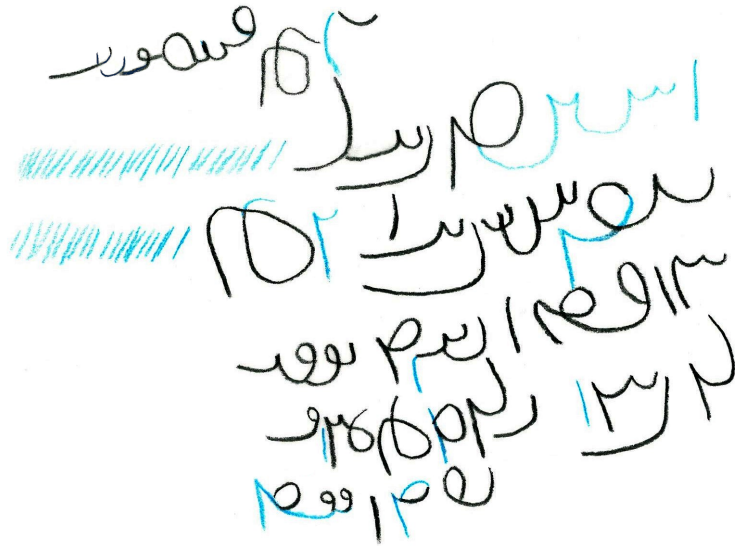


Figure 10: Line-drawing of the inscription by M. Doroodi. Blue color indicates restoration of eroded or damaged strokes.

## 4.1 Transliteration

1. [ZN]H dhmk' Y
2. [whš]tbhl [/////////]
3. 'thšb'n YWM [//// BYRḤ]
4. hwrđt' ŠNT Y 60
5. lwb'n' Y LWTH m[ynw]d
6. p[twst']

## 4.2 Transcription

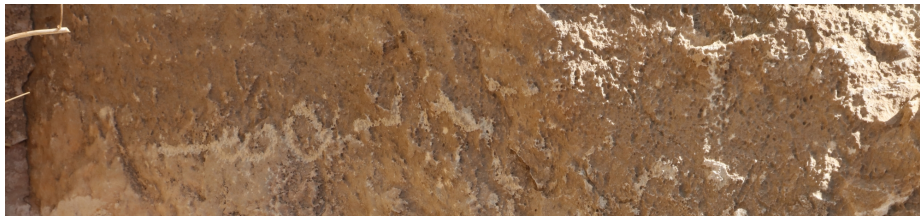
1. \*ēn \*daxmag ī
2. \*wabišt bahr [/////////]
3. ātaxš-\*bān rōz [/// māb]
4. hordād sāl ī 60
5. ruwān ī abāg m[ēnō]y
6. p[aywast]

## 4.3 Translation

This is the tomb of ..., the keeper of the fire, whose lot is paradise, [whose] soul joined the *mēnōy* on day ... [of the month] Hordād of the year 60.

## 4.4 Commentary

### First line



The first line of the inscription most likely starts with the heterogram of the near-deictic demonstrative pronoun  $\overline{Z}NH$  *ēn* 'this', a word frequently encountered in funerary inscriptions. Here, the only visible portion of the word is the final -H. In the inscription of Eqlid, Gropp (1969:241) supplies the obliterated pronoun, expecting it to precede the word *daxmag* 'tomb', lending support to the reconstruction here. Based on surviving traces, the second word, although heavily damaged, can tentatively be read as *daxmag*, followed by the visible *ezāfe* *ī*. Nasrollahzadeh (2019:69) notes a number of funerary inscriptions that attest *ēn daxmag* or *ēn daxmag ī*. A reconstruction of the first line as *ēn daxmag ān ī*, based on the model of Kazeroun 1, where the phrase

*ēn astōdān ān ī wabišt babr* is followed by the personal name *ābāndān*, is unlikely (see Nasrollahzadeh 2019:141). The *ezāfē* at the end of the line resembles an elongated *ʾāleḫ*.

### Second line



Of the second line only one word, most likely the first, can be reconstructed. It is heavily obliterated, but traces of *-tbhl* are still visible. Based on phrases attested in other tomb inscriptions (Nasrollahzadeh 2019:69), we can read this word with a relatively high degree of certainty as *[whš]tbhl \*wabišt babr*. The evidence gathered by Nasrollahzadeh (2019:69 & 74–75) suggests that in most cases *ēn daxmag* is followed by a date or similar and *ēn daxmag ī* by a personal name. However, Kazeroun 17 supports the position of a personal name after *wabišt babr*: *ēn daxmag wabišt babr mihrbōzīd ...* (see Nasrollahzadeh 2019:161). Be that as it may, the Middle Persian syntax and phraseology permits the phrase *ēn daxmag ī wabišt babr* to be followed by a personal name. In a strictly grammatical case, it is the missing relative pronoun *kē* that is problematic.

The collocation *wabišt babr* is often used in Middle Persian colophons to refer to a deceased person and is also recommended in the Middle Persian manual for letter writing, known as *abar ēwēnag nāmag nibēsišnīh*, for use in condolence letters:

21<sup>10</sup> *ōy-iz anōšag-ruwān hu-kunišn ud wuzurg nām ud wuzurg sūd bawēd  
ud wabišt babr ud garōdmān pāddāšn bawād*

That immortal soul, too, was upright, of great fame, and great benefit.  
May paradise be his lot and *Garōdmān* his reward.

It should be noted that the expected spelling of *babr* in Zoroastrian Middle Persian (Book Pahlavi) is not *bʾl* or *bhl* as in this inscription but *bʾhl* with an *ʾāleḫ* added before the *ḫēt* to avoid reading the word as *bʾl bār* (Zeini 2020:182). However, the spelling *bhl* for *babr* ‘part, portion, share, lot’ seems to be common in late Middle Persian funerary inscriptions, on which see Gropp (1969:259–260) and Nasrollahzadeh (2019:69) with references to the inscriptions that attest this word. A personal name must have followed this collocation, but is obliterated.

### Third line

The first word of the third line can tentatively be read as *ātaxš-bān* or *ātaxšān-bān* ‘keeper of the fire(s)’. Of the first part of the word *ʾthš*, *-hš* are preserved more securely

<sup>10</sup>For this excerpt, the transcriptions provided by Jamasp-Asana (1913:136) and Zaehner (1937:95) have been checked. The text has also been read against the facsimile images of the manuscript MK, kindly made available to Arash Zeini by Almut Hintze. The variant readings provided in Prods Oktor Skjærvø’s transcription of the text have also been taken into account.



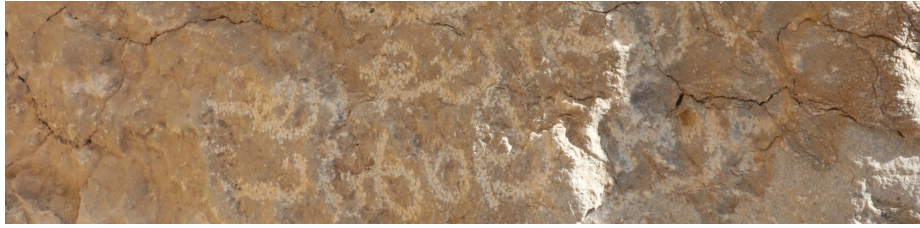
although traces of 't- are visible. If we set the beginning of the word further to the right, we have to consider 't- as obliterated, but could instead read -hš'n for plural of fire. The final -n, however, is hardly visible. The second part of the word is problematic, although it can potentially be read as *ātaxš-bān* 'keeper/guardian of the fire'. While -b'n or -b'n' seem plausible readings, the expected spelling for -bān is -p'n in Middle Persian. However, it is a distinct possibility that the word's pronunciation with -b- could have led to this phonetic and a-historical spelling. Additionally, this reading is opposed by the manner *ruwān* is written in line five, where the 'āleḫ and nūn are joined as is customary in Pahlavi script. Yet, if an alternative reading is not found and our reading is accepted, then we have here a word which is hitherto unattested in tomb inscriptions or Pahlavi texts. This is a significant attestation, potentially pointing to a previously unknown religious title or function.

The word *ātaxš-bān*, is followed by the heterogram YWM for *rōz* 'day'. The rest of the line is obliterated and illegible. However, based on standard formulae for the date we can infer that it must have contained the name of a day followed by the word month BYRH *māb*, which is specified on the next line.

#### Fourth line



The first word of line four is the name of the month: hwrdt' *Hordād*, followed by the heterogram ŠNT *sāl*, the *ezāfe* and the numeral 60: *Hordād sāl ī 60*. This is a standard dating formula found also at Kazeroun 2 in Parishan (see Tafazzoli 1991:198 and Nasrollahzadeh 2019: 143). Most likely, year 60 is based on the Yazdgerdi calendar, which equates to year 692 CE or 73 AH. It would thus have been inscribed during the rule of Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Ṭaqāfi, the Umayyad governor of Fārs, during which time Istakhr was losing its importance while Shiraz, which the latter is said to have founded, was ascending (see Hosseini Fasayi 1388: j1/188 and Sedaqatkish 1389:157).



### Fifth line

The term *lwb'n' ruwān* 'soul' in line five, is frequently found in funerary and private inscriptions, here followed by the *ezāfē* and LWTH *abāg* 'with'. The last word of the line is damaged but is here restored as *m[ynw]d* based on the initial and ultimate letters *m...d* and the context of the expected journey of the soul (*ruwān*) towards the intangible world.

### Sixth line



This line, in most likelihood, consisted of a verb, which is completely damaged and no longer legible. The authors, however, considered it to be the verb *p[twst']* transcribed as *paywast* due to faint traces of *p-* and *-t* as the initial and the final letters of the word.

## 5 Conclusion

The newly-discovered inscription is located in the skirts of Mount Zaneh in Dasht-e Marvdasht on top of which are located two ossuaries cut directly into the rock. This is most likely a private funerary inscription. Unlike many of the known Middle Persian inscriptions it has not been carved into the stone, but rather seems to have been scratched on the surface of the rock. As such, it is comparable with inscriptions no. 1 to 9 of the Naqsh-e Rostam complex 3 (see Nasrollahzadeh 2019:150–167).

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