

A Middle Persian Inscription from Persepolis

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This article deciphers and analyzes a previously unknown Sassanian mint location represented by the inscription WLĀ, based on the analysis of a Middle Persian inscription found in Persepolis, and on the linguistic changes that occurred during the transition to modern Persian. Evidence is presented to show that this previously unknown Sassanian mint designation corresponds to the modern-day city of Borazjan in southwestern Iran. This is one of only a few cases in which the Sassanian recording of known towns is confirmed through archaeological evidence. Previous efforts to identify mint locations through abbreviated inscriptions and mint marks, have achieved good results. The linguistic analysis of official seals and inscriptions, in which the name of a city is either in the center (in abbreviated form) or along the rim (written in full), allows the identification of some mints. This article presents a linguistic analysis of a previously unknown mint location designated WLĀ. Based on a Middle Persian inscription found in Persepolis, and the linguistic changes that occurred during the transition to modern Persian, evidence indicates that WLĀ designates the modern city of Borazjan.

Keywords: *Sassanian; Mint; Coin; Abbreviation; Pahlavi; Inscription; Linguistic changes*

Introduction

There are not a lot of original Sassanian sources relating to the administrative practices of the Iranian provinces. The result is a chronological gap in the sources that can be used to reconstruct such practices. While 3rd century A.D. inscriptions and 6th-7th century A.D. seals and literary sources do exist, only few sources date to the earlier part of this era (Gyselen 2002: 180). This provides a major obstacle to forming a comprehensive picture of the historical geography of the Sassanian Empire (226-651 A.D.). The primary treatise that provides geographical descriptions of Sassanian Iran, *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānshahr* (Provincial Capitals of Iran), was written or rewritten during the Abbasid period (8th century A.D.; Daryaei 2002: 2). These limitations can be minimized by using other Sassanian-era sources that provide information about various settlements, and those in Fars province. These include coins, Pahlavi or Middle Persian and non-Persian texts, Sassanian royal and other Pahlavi inscriptions, rock sculptures, information from seals and bullae, place names and archaeological data. In addition, the corpus of early-middle Islamic historical and geographical descriptions provides additional sources for the study of Sassanian history, culture

and administrative geography.

Few studies explore the mint locations during the Sassanian Empire. Pioneering work by Marquart on the historical geography of the Sassanian Empire dating back to the time of Pseudo (The book of Moses of Chorene) is one of the earliest studies of its kind (Marquart 2004). Later discoveries of coins, official seals, and inscriptions, as well as publications of literary evidence, are also relevant to the study of historical geography and the administrative organization of mints in the Sassanian Empire. In addition to mints with fixed locations, there were also important “travelling” mints that accompanied the king during his travels, and these offer evidence of a high level of organization and centralization during the Sassanian Empire. In the last decades, Gyselen and Gignoux have contributed significantly to the field of Sassanian historical and administrative geography through their publications and their scrutiny of the numismatic and written sources (Gyselen 1988, 1989, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004; Gignoux 1971, 1984a, 1990a, 1990b, 2004).

While identifying the exact number and locations of the mints of Sassanian coins can pose a challenge, a very important standard feature on the reverse of these coins indicates the mint at the right of the coin field, with the regnal year placed

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at the left (Gariboldi 2010: 58). Mintmarks began to be used during the reign of Warhram IV (388-399 A.D.), but only became regularly utilized during the reign of Warhram V (420-438 A.D.). These mintmark characters not only shed light on information not easily available from ancient texts, but also complement these written texts. Some mintmark locations have been identified with certainty, such as LD for Ray, and AHM for Hamedan. However, many others still await identification. Recently, scholars have succeeded in analyzing the official seals and inscriptions, which often carry the name of the city, either in the center (in an abbreviated form) or along the rim (written in full), thus helping with the identification of some mints (Schindel 2004, 3/1: 128-178).

Despite the many provinces during the late empire, the number of mint locations was limited. Therefore, not all provinces had their own mints. An exception to this is the southern region of Iran, where there was a close parallel between provinces and mints (Gyselen 1989: 521-522). This might have been the result of better bureaucratic organization for an extremely important geographic area; in fact, Fars and Kerman are the historical and political heart of the Sassanian kingdom. A hub of theological, political, economic, and business opportunities, the province of Fars was the most important province in the Sassanian Empire. Its proximity to the Persian Gulf made Fars important for land and sea transportation and trade. Its main products, cotton and silk fabrics, carpets, and pearls, were exported to China and other distant locations. In addition, the high volume of coins found in this province demonstrates the importance of its mints.

The historical geography of Fars province during the Sassanian period has been reconstructed using a number of different sources. These include the Pahlavi treatises of *Xusraw ud rēdag*, *Kārnāmag ī Ardašīr ī Pābgān*, *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērān* and *Mādigān ī Hezār Dādīstān*, the Syrian *Acts of the Persian Martyrs*, the Armenian book of *Armenian Geography*, Ammianus Marcellinus' *History*, early Islamic historical accounts such as those of Tabari and Baladhuri, and Shapur I's inscription on the Ka'aba Zartosht. However, the only material evidences that provide information

about the names of cities are the Sassanian coins, sealings, and Middle Persian inscriptions.

This article is significant because it deciphers the previously unknown Sassanian mint location designated as WLČ, based on analysis of a Middle Persian inscription found in Persepolis, and on the linguistic changes that occurred during the transition to modern Persian. The evidence demonstrates that this mint designation corresponds to the modern-day city of Borazjan, in southwestern Iran. This is one of only a few cases in which the Sassanian background of a town known from textual resources has been confirmed by archaeological evidence.

WLČ

The correct interpretation of mint abbreviations poses one of the most important and difficult challenges in Sassanian numismatics. The circulation of Sassanian coins, particularly the silver drachms, was extensive, since it covered a vast area, extending as far as Sweden, China, India, and Sri Lanka (Bopearachchi; Malek 1993: 247-248). Among the well-known Sassanian monogram abbreviations, the *WRČ/WLČ* abbreviation has been seen only on the reverse of some of the coins belonging to the reigns of Khusro I (years 7, 18, 19, 20, 31, 34, 38, 41, 45, 46, 47, 48), Hormazd IV (years 3, 5, 7, 10), Ardashir III (the 2nd year of his reign (Fig. 1; Göbl 1954: Tab. 10-11), and Buran. (Place names consisting of two, three or four letters usually have mint legends of two letters, representing the initial two consonants or long vowels. Three- and four-letter place names sometimes have legends of three letters [Gyselen 1979: 199-206]). However, the legend *WLČ* has not been observed on Sassanian coins (Paruk 1924: 168, 187).

It should be noted that Middle Persian had more consonants than Aramaic, and therefore some letters were used to represent multiple sounds; this creates the possibility of different interpretations. For example, Mochiri identifies the designation *WLČ* as Valāš Apāt or Valāšgerd, whereas Mitchiner identifies the designation *NRČ* or *WRČ* as an unknown mint (Mochiri 1977: 464). The majority of mint signatures pose the same challenge and some older transliterations have been modified in the



light of more recent evidence; further modification may still occur in response to archeological and historical evidence. While some transliterations may be synonyms (for example, *WLC* and *WRC* are different epigraphic forms of the same signature), more than the evidence of synonyms is needed to locate a mint.

According to Göbl, the designation *WRC*/*WLC* is of unknown origin but is presumed to have been located in the northeastern part of the Sassanian Empire (Göbl 1954: 93). Scholars interpreting this abbreviation have analyzed the trilingual inscription of Shapur I, and some have inferred that it may refer to Georgia. This is because in the Middle Persian version of the trilingual inscription of Shapur I, Georgia is found in the form *Wlwč'n* (end of line 29); in the Parthian version, it takes the form *Wyršn* (line 25); in the Greek version, it takes the form *Wlwč'n Mlk'*, referring to the ruler of Iberia (Henning 1977: 229). Because the Middle Persian form can be transcribed as *wrc'n*, some scholars have concluded that this corresponds to the abbreviation *WLC*/*WLR*. For instance, referring to inscriptional evidence, Bivar reads *WLC* for *Wlwc'n*, the Pahlavi name for Georgia (Bivar 1991: 180). In contrast, according to Sears, "the legend *WLC* most probably does not belong to the Caucasus but is otherwise unidentified" (Sears 1997: 180). Sears deduces that the initial letter maybe read as either *N* or *W* and the second letter is either *L* or *R*. The final letter is interpreted as *Č*. The legend is verified as early as Peroz and as late as Buran; Paruk reads the name as *NRČ* (*NLC*) and *VRČ* (*WLC*) (Paruk 1924: 256-257, nos. 143, 232; idem.: 117, 128, nos. 141, 224). Furthermore, in the wake of the successful Byzantine campaign through Armenia to Ctesiphon in 627-628 A.D., it is difficult to believe that the Sassanians maintained control of distant lands in the Caucasus, such as Georgia. In addition, the linguistic evolution of Middle Persian to New Persian, along with ancient archeological and historical evidence, strongly suggests a different origin for the designation *WLC*.

Some scholars have suggested that by studying the Manichean scripts found on fragments from Central Asia and used by the followers of Manicheism, the location of Waruča can be found.

According to Henning, "in the Parthian version of this fragment only a few scraps have survived" (Henning 1977: 225). Two of these manuscripts, which deal with the Tūrān Šāh (M48 and M566) (ZDMG 90, 7), were introduced by F. W. K. Müller (*Handschriftenreste*, ii, 86-88). These fragments (M48 and M566) were similar in content to fragment M216 (Middle Persian version; Mir.Man., ii, 301-304). Fragment M216, which is concerned with Turān –Šāh, is shown below. According to Henning (Henning 1977: 225), this manuscript is distorted.

- 1.....
2. makes .To....
3. praised....
4. and Bag-Ard
5. I asked
6. the wisdom of Bag[-Ard]
7. I took her right hand
8. and [left] her presence.
9. Therafter I went to
10. the city of.....
- 11.....
12. shortly
13. I [went] to.....
14. The brethren.....
15. When I saw.....
16. the improvement of strength
17. I went to [the country of ...] ruč
- 18.....I was glad. There
19. I stood.....
- 20.....

In this manuscript, most of the sentences that had been omitted in the Middle Persian version were restored by comparing the original manuscripts with the other fragments. Unfortunately, the Parthian manuscripts were distorted. According to the Parthian version, line 17, "he went to the city of



X” (name of city missing). Some scholars conclude that these fragments contain the abbreviation *WLC*; however, as the original text presented above shows, no trace of Waruč or Waručān can be seen, meaning that there is no evidence to suggest that these fragments were concerned with the city of Waruč.

In fragment M216, the name of a location (a town or a country) in lines 10 and 17 would have completed what was missing. In line 17, scholars have changed a common Parthian word, *ruč* (day), to *[w]ruč* (Waruč). However, the basis for this change is unclear, because the name of the location is missing both in M216 and in the other fragments. Furthermore, the number of words missing between the “country” (which was inserted by scholars) and the *ruč*, is unclear. It is quite possible that the name of the location did not immediately precede *ruč*. Rather, it is extremely important to ask where the country of Waruč, whose king was called Waručān Šāh, was situated.

Henning provides another possibility for the location of Waruč. According to him, “in the third century, there was a country called Waruč or Waručān, which lay in the Kushan country.” He believes that “the name of this country, in later times seems to have disappeared from history,” but that Waruč was later known as Gharch or Gharchistān (Henning 1977: 228-229).

Yet another possibility is that the legend *WLC* belongs to the inscriptions that were found in Uruzgan, Afghanistan in the summer of 1935. According to Birvar’s report, “Uruzgan is a small town and district headquarters situated about 175 miles to the north-west of Kandahar, on the Tirin



Fig.1: Ardashir III (628-629), Year: 2, Mint: *WLC*, Drachm, 32 mm, gr.4.02 (After: Rezakhani 2011: 383, Fig. 398)

River, and about midway between the upper waters of the Rivers Helmand and Arghandab, in central Afghanistan” (Bivar 1954: 112-118). One of these inscriptions is in the Hephthalite script and the others are in Arabic. The name Worazān is not mentioned in the Uruzgan inscriptions, but, because of the phonetic similarity between Uruzgan and the *WLC* (Worazān) abbreviation, some scholars have concluded that these inscriptions correspond with the *WLC* abbreviation.

Worazan /Gorazan to Borazjan: A Transition to New Persian

In the Middle Persian inscription of Persepolis, which has been translated by Nyberg (Nyberg 2002:127), the name of Worazan is clearly mentioned, as its seventh line indicates (see below). Narseh (Mehr-Narseh) is the priest of Warazan (7.Ut Narseh ī magu Warāzān).

Inscription of Perspolis I

1. māh spandarmat abar sāl dō mazdyasn bag šāpuhr šāhān šāh ērān
2. ut anērān kē čīθr az yazdān pat ān yāwar ka šāpuhr Sakān šāh Hind
3. Sakistān ut Tūristān tā drayāb danb pus mazdyasn bag Ohrmazd šāhān šāh ērān ud anērān
4. kē čīθr az yazdān az dar awēšān bagān namāz burd ut pat ēn rāh ī abar
5. Staxr andar ō Sakistān šud ut pat kirbagīh ēdar ō Sad-Stūn āmad uš
6. nān andar im xāng xward uš Warhrām īnaxw(ē) ōhrmazd Sakistān handarzpāt
7. ut Narsēh ī magu ī “Warāzān” (ut) Wēn ī Rēw-Miθrān ī Zarang šaθrap ut Narsēh ī dipiwar
8. (ut) abarīg pārsāzāt sakāzāt ut Zrangikān ut frēstag az ī pādḡōsān ut sardar abā
9. būd hēnd uš wuzurg šādīh kart uš yazdān kirdagān framāt kardan uš



10. pidar ut niyākān āfrīn kird uš šāpuhr šāhān šāh
āfrīn kirt uš xweš
11. afrīn kirt ōy-iz āfrīn kirt kē ēn mān kirt
12. yazdān.....Nyberg(1381,p. 127)

This evidence demonstrates that Warazan corresponds to a region under Sassanian control and suggests that *WLC* may have been a designation for this region, based upon evolutionary linguistics considerations. In the classification of Iranian languages, Middle Period includes those languages that were common in Iran from the fall of the Achaemenids in the 4th century B.C. until the fall of the Sassanians in the 7th century A.D. The modern descendant of Middle Persian is New Persian. The changes between Late Middle and Early New Persian were very gradual, and in the 10th-11th centuries, Middle Persian texts were still intelligible to speakers of Early New Persian. However, definite differences had taken place already by the 10th century A.D. (Bagheri 1997: 121). These include: 1) dropping unstressed initial vowels; 2) emphasis of vowels in initial consonant clusters; 3) loss of -g at the end of some of the words; and, 4) change of initial w- to either b- or to gw-, and conversion of gw- to go- (Bagheri 1997: 121). The latter change (conversion of initial w- to b- or go-) is the basis of the transformation of the word “Woraz” to “Goraz,” and its subsequent conversion to “Boraz,” thus leading to the creation of the word “Borazjan,” that remains in use today. Interestingly, in support of this conclusion, the father of Mehr-Narseh is called “Borāzan” in the Arabic sources, and it is he who may have owned the territory where Mehr-Narseh was born. (Mehr-Narseh was born in fourth century A.D. in the village of Abrovān, in the district of Dašt-e Barinin Ardašir-Khurrah in southwestern Fars [Tabari 1999, vol.5: 105]). Mehr-Narseh was able to achieve the rank of grand vizier, the highest rank in the administrative hierarchy of the Sassanian Empire in the fifth century.

The modern city of Borazan is located close to the Toz archaeological zone, an ancient region that belonged to the Sassanian Empire and was used mainly for commerce and trade. Some people think that “Borazjan” with the first accent symbol “ ` ” means worthiness, beauty, goodness and wholeness,

postulating that Borazjan received its name because its vast plain was suitable for building a city. The elders of the city believe that Borazjan refers to a vast plain void of trees (Tavakoli Moqadam 1996: 141). They claim that before the modern city of Borazjan was constructed, the big valley was full of trees and wild boar (“Goraz”), and for this reason the valley was called “Gorazdan.” After the new city was built, the name of “Gorazdan” was changed to “Borazjan,” and in the historical literary texts, this city is called “Borazjan.”

Based on the evolution of the modern word “Borazjan” from its Middle Persian roots (as described above), the political and trade importance of the Fars province during the Sassanian period, and also since “Borāzan” was the name of the father of Mehr-Narseh, who had achieved the highest administrative rank of the Sassanian Empire in the fifth century A.D., I conclude that the previously unknown coin designation of “*WLC*” designates the city of “Warazjan/Gorazjan/Borazjan,” indicating that those coins that bear this designation were minted in this city. Although it is not possible to completely rule out alternative interpretations, the theory set forth here seems the most plausible, based on the cumulative available evidence.

Conclusion

Evidence from the inscription of Persepolis clearly demonstrates that the area of Warazan belonged to the Sassanian Empire. Furthermore, evolutionary considerations in the transition from Middle Persian to New Persian provide evidence for the transformation of the word *Waraz* or *Woraz*, to the word *Goraz* and subsequently to *Boraz*, leading to the creation of the name Borazjan, which is currently used to refer to this area. I propose that the previously unidentified Sassanian coin mint designation *WLC* designates the city of “Gorazjan/Borazjan.” This is based, in part, on linguistic considerations by which the initial *W* in *WLC* can correspond to the letter *B* or *GO*, the middle letter *L* to *R*, and the letter *Č* to *Z*. This insight also provides evidence for how the mintmark symbols and abbreviations on ancient Sassanian coins can shed light on information that is not easily deciphered from ancient texts, and it complements



other sources of information about that era.

One of the most important aspects of the designation *WLC* mint is the rarity of the number of coins with this designation. In this regard, the most important point to consider is that, because the interpretation of this designation has been unknown, it is likely that many coins with this designation may not have been catalogued or may simply have been ignored. Furthermore, in consequence of the Arab Muslim conquest in the south of Iran (Daryaee 2003: 193-204), many of these coins may have been melted in order to make new ones. Clearly, to determine the placement of unknown Sassanian mints, finding a large number of coins that carry the particular mint designation, within a given location, is strongly desirable. However, this is challenging since Sassanian coins were circulated freely over a vast area, including distant lands over which the Sassanians did not exert any control. In other words, the coins did not remain near where they were minted. Another point relating to the apparent rarity of *WLC* coins may come from the connection between these coins and Nariseh, who held the rank of grand vizier in the Sassanian Empire, and whose father was called Boraz. In the Sassanian law book *The Madiyan i hazar dadestan* (Perikhanian 1997), Mehr-Narseh (Nariseh) is accused of having committed a sin, the nature of which was not specified. As a result, he became a servant in the fire temple. While the details are uncertain, this may also have had a negative impact on the minting of *WLC* coins.



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