

## THE INSCRIPTION OF FIRUZABAD

by W. B. HENNING

### I

The<sup>1</sup> Pahlavi inscription at the ruins of the Sassanian bridge near Firuzabad was discovered by the late Professor Herzfeld in 1924. The bridge and the inscription are quite close to the relief of the divine investiture of Ardashir, on the right bank of the river in the mountain-gorge leading into the plain of Firuzabad. A mile or so below, on the same bank, there is the famous relief of Ardashir which depicts his victory over Ardavan; a mile or so upstream, on the opposite bank, there are the ruins of Qal'è-i Dukhtar, the great fortress which Ardashir built to cover the entry into the plain of Firuzabad, where he had his capital and where the ruins of his palace can still be admired to-day. In short, the whole neighbourhood is a gigantic memorial to the founder of the Sassanian state; Herzfeld's announcement<sup>2</sup> that the inscription at the bridge was by Abursām, the Vuzurgframadār or chief minister of Ardashir, thus caused no surprise.

Herzfeld never published the text of the inscription. We owe its publication to the enterprise of Dr. Ghirshman, who, a few years ago, gave a full report on Firuzabad and included in it his reading of the inscription as well as a photograph of it.<sup>3</sup> In his reading, Dr. Ghirshman gave the name of Abursām in the place where one would expect to find it, that is to say in the middle of the first line after the words "this bridge"; the inscription thus began "This bridge was ordered to be built by Abursām, the Vuzurgframadār . . .". Dr. Ghirshman did not indicate that the reading of the name of Abursām, which had already been claimed by Herzfeld, was in any way subject to doubt.

As mentioned above, Dr. Ghirshman's report carried a photograph of the inscription. This photograph, however good in the circumstances, was not entirely satisfactory in every respect. Far be it from me to blame Dr. Ghirshman for its quality: on the contrary, as one who has inspected the inscription *in situ*, I have nothing but admiration for anyone capable of taking a photograph at all in a situation where one risks breaking one's neck, or being drowned, in equal measure. However, it is a fact that the name of the man who



Fig. 1. Inscription of Firuzabad : latex impression



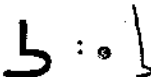
<sup>1</sup> The first part of this article is a paper (unchanged except for trifles) presented to the Twenty-second International Congress of Orientalists (Istanbul, September, 1951).

<sup>2</sup> *ZDMG.* 80 (1926), p. 253.

<sup>3</sup> *Firūzābād.* Extrait du *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale*, t. xlvi, Cairo, 1947.

built the bridge is invisible in Dr. Ghirshman's photograph; owing to a slight overhang in the rock, the place where the name stands is partially in shade.

The photograph, of which Dr. Ghirshman kindly sent me an improved copy, was thus incapable of confirming the presence of the name of Ardashir's chief minister. In studying it, I was able to improve the reading in several points; but most of all was I struck by the shapes of the letters, and gradually it was borne in on me that the attribution of the inscription to Abursām was, for reasons of palæography, impossible, in spite of appearances and in spite of the assurances of two scholars, among them one of the eminence Herzfeld could rightfully claim. The heavy, almost uncouth letters of the inscription bear little resemblance indeed to the elegant and spirited forms familiar from the inscriptions of the third century. Comparison with the legends of the Sassanian coins compels us to attribute the inscription to the fifth century, or to the end of the fourth century at the earliest. Three characteristic letters (*m*, *t*, and *l*) are shown here, together with their earlier counterparts:—

D :       P :       L : 

When, thanks to a generous invitation by the Iranian Government, I was granted the opportunity of a prolonged stay in Southern Persia in 1950, I was determined to do all I could to find out to whom the inscription in fact belonged. At the beginning of my stay I had paid a rapid visit to Firuzabad, chiefly for social purposes, but the second visit, which was to be devoted to serious work, refused to materialize for a long time. In the end I sent a trained man from Persepolis to Firuzabad with instructions to take a latex impression of the inscription, which he duly did. Those who have had experience with latex need not be told that in almost all cases the study of an impression in that material is a great deal more fruitful than even a prolonged inspection of the actual inscription.

It now emerged that owing to weathering only feeble traces remained of the personal name in the first line. The only letters which the impression showed reasonably clearly were two, *Wāw* and *Kāf*, near the middle of the name, and these two, representing something like *-ūk-*, were preceded by a partially preserved letter which was either *Nūn* or *Tāw*. The name thus should have contained either *-nūk-* or *-tūk-*; but, however hard I tried, I could not think of a name that fulfilled this condition and at the same time fitted the weak traces of the remaining letters. The one certain point was that the name was not that of Abursām.

The failure to read the correct name vexed me, and, although the season was too far advanced to permit work in reasonably comfortable conditions, I made up my mind to go again to Firuzabad to see whether face to face the inscription could be persuaded to yield its secret. There is no need for des-

cribing my experiences and the various efforts I made to read the letters of the name; Dr. Ghirshman has alluded, in his report, to the physical discomfort which an inspection of the inscription involves. Suffice it to say that I retired from the scene defeated. It is true, I had now acquired a second latex impression, which was even better than the first, and a truly admirable photograph taken by Mr. Rustami, the photographer of the Archæological Museum in Tehran; but, beyond confirming the results previously reached, the reading of the inscription had not been advanced in even the slightest way.

It was only long after my return to London that one day, looking again at the impressions, I suddenly realized the mistake I had made all through, and suddenly saw the true name as a whole. My mistake lay in taking the letter *Kāf* for granted, without considering that it might in fact be a *Nūn*, as indeed it was; for these two letters are often indistinguishable when their upper parts are not clearly visible. And the whole name was that of Mihr-Narseh, *MTRNRSHY*;<sup>1</sup> that one ought to have expected from the beginning, as soon as one attributed the inscription to the fifth century; for Mihr-Narseh was the *Vuzurgframadār* of the fifth century. The traces in the first line fit perfectly with this reading.

Some time later I noticed, with feelings of consternation mixed with pleasure, that the name of Mihr-Narseh occurred a second time in this brief inscription, at the end of the fourth line, in a passage that previously had not been clear. The sentence in which it is found is this: "Whoever has come on this road, let him give a blessing to Mihr-Narseh and his sons, for that he thus bridged this crossing". Here the reading of the name is absolutely certain, so that no doubt remains that the bridge and the inscription are the work of Mihr-Narseh.

Mihr-Narseh was among the leading statesmen of Sassanian history. As the chief minister to three successive kings, Yazdegerd I, Bahrām Gōr, and Yazdegerd II, he dominated the history of the first half of the fifth century. Abroad he was hated and feared as the arch-enemy of Christendom, but in his own country he was praised as a great benefactor. And nowhere were his public works more numerous and noteworthy than in the district of Firuzabad, where he had been born and where he made his home. The famous fire-temples he built for his own memory and for the memory of his sons,<sup>2</sup> re-discovered and identified by Herzfeld<sup>3</sup> and M. Godard,<sup>4</sup> can still be seen in near-by Gire. Thanks to this inscription, incidentally the only known Sassanian inscription of the fifth century, we can now give him due credit for the bridge, of which he was so proud.

<sup>1</sup> The clearly visible letters, therefore, are *-TRN-* (= *-TWN-*, *W* and *R* being identical in shape).

<sup>2</sup> Who, characteristically, are referred to also in our inscription.

<sup>3</sup> *ZDMG*. 80 (1926), p. 256; *Archæological History of Iran*, pp. 91 sqq.

<sup>4</sup> *Āthār-é Irān*, iii (1938), pp. 169-173.

## II

The inscription has suffered by erosion, especially in the first, sixth, and seventh lines. The whole surface is pitted, which makes it often difficult to recognize the letters. It may be largely due to this circumstance that Dr. Ghirshman's readings<sup>1</sup> differ so considerably from ours.

TEXT<sup>2</sup>

- (1) *ZNH pwhly (m)trn(rshy) (ZY) (L)B'*
- (2) *plmt'l twb'n ZY NPŠH l'dy*
- (3) *MN ŠBW ZY NPŠH plm't bstny*
- (4) *MN(W) PWN ZNH l'sy Y'TWN mt(r)nrsh(y)*
- (5) *'Pš plēndyn 'plyny '(y)w 'BYDWN*
- (6) *'(Y)K(š) [ZNH] (w)tyl KN bsty 'Pš*
- (7) *(')D (y)z(d'n) hā(yb')l musty W KDB' BYN L'YTY*

TRANSLATION<sup>3</sup>

This bridge was built by the order of Mihr-Narseh, the *Vuzurgframadār*, for the benefit of his soul, at his own expense. Whoever has come on this road, let him give a blessing to Mihr-Narseh and his sons for that he thus bridged this crossing. And while God gives help, wrong and deceit there shall be none therein.

## NOTES

Line 3.—The phrase *MN ŠBW ZY NPŠH* equals the earlier *MN NPŠH BYT'* (inser. of Bih-Shabur, see *BSOS*. ix, 825 n.4) or *PWN NPŠH BYT'* (Kartir Ka'beh 15 and 16), which continue Achaemenian usage (cf. *mn byt' zy ly* Aršām Documents, vi 2).

Line 5.—*plēndyn* resembles Manich.-Parth. *frzyndyn* in its ending, Pahl. Psalter *plēndwn* in its spelling.

Line 6.—*KN* "thus" may have been corrected into *K'N* "now", by the insertion of a small 'Ain.

<sup>1</sup> These are probably—for owing to Dr. Ghirshman's method of transcription no certainty is possible—as follows:—

- (1) *ZNH pwhly MNW 'pr'sm LB'*
- (2) *plmt'l twb'n ZY NPŠH l'dy*
- (3) *MN ŠBW ZY NPŠH plm't b'l ZY*
- (4) *MN 'p 'L ZNH l'sy Y'TWN mt (YHMTWN)*
- (5) *'Pš plē dt spl . . . 'BYDWN*
- (6) *'Pš . . . . . (b'ly) 'Pš*
- (7) . . .

<sup>2</sup> (Uncertain or damaged letters), [restored letters].

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Ghirshman gave the following version: ceci est le pont qu' Abharsām vuzurgframādār, pour son âme (et) avec sa propre fortune ordonna (de construire). (Le rocher) de la rive qui de l'eau sortait (?) sur cette route il atteignit (?) et après avoir réalisé son oeuvre rendit le voyage . . . Puis il . . . la rive (?) et après . . .

Line 7.—This line presented serious difficulties. From the beginning, 'Pf . . . WKDB' BYN L'YTY was clear; *i.e.* "and in it (or: in him) there is not . . . and falsehood". The intervening words seemed to read:—

'D ZK 'nhdmwsty,

with dubious word-division and with a doubt about *K*, which, as is always the case in a bad patch, might be *D* in fact.<sup>1</sup> No such words as 'nhdmwsty, 'nhd, or hdmwsty are known. Now *wsty* by itself would make an excellent pair with *KDB* "lie, falsehood, deceit"; for that word, originally "complained of" = "object of complaint", normally means "a deed of violence, an act of tyranny or iniquity"; but this leaves us with 'nhd, which is unaccountable. Only after repeated efforts, extending over several years, did I notice that some letters had been inserted above the line, over *hdmw*.<sup>2</sup> There is a fairly clear *l*, which stands between *mw* and the right-hand loop of the *t* in *wtyl* (line 6); and this is preceded by *b'* (feeble traces) or probably *yb'* (*y* immediately above the beginning of *h*). The whole group, *yb'l*, doubtless forms a word with *hd*, *viz.* *hdyb'l* "helper".<sup>3</sup> The remaining group 'n must then be read together with the apparent *ZK*, recte *zd*, as *zd'n*, which is readily completed as *yzd'n*.<sup>4</sup> The resulting phrase:—

'D yzd'n hdyb'l,

which is idiomatic Pahlavi, means "until/so long as God (is) the helper". The principal "act of iniquity and falsehood" apprehended by Mihr-Narseh is presumably the unlawful levying of a toll. The whole concluding sentence, although formally a statement, is nevertheless a wish or hope in meaning.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *BSOAS*. xiv, 508.

<sup>2</sup> This insertion accounts for the blotchy appearance of the letters beneath it.

<sup>3</sup> Spelt as in the Pahl. Psalter and in Book Pahlavi; if *hdb'l*, cf. *hdb'r*, *BSOS*. ix, 844 n. 2.

<sup>4</sup> A trace of *y-* can still be seen.

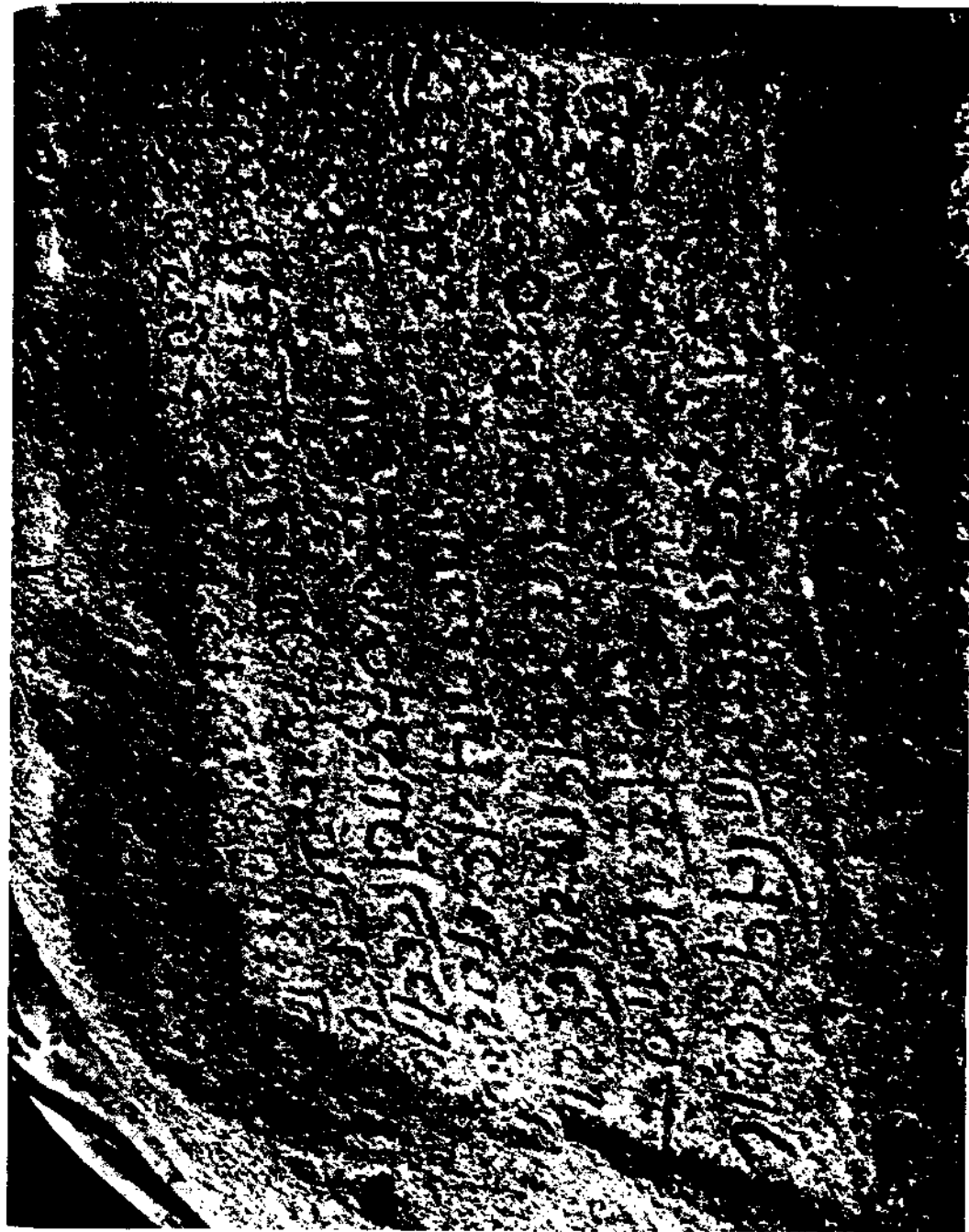


Fig 2. Inscription of Firuzabad : direct photograph