

## PARTHIANS JOKING\*

To the memory of Ahmad Tafazzoli

In April of 1992 Iranian scholars — archaeologists, students of local lore and linguists working in the Department of cultural heritage of the province (*ostan*) of Khorasan investigated rock inscriptions and petroglyphs in the gorges known as Lākh-Mazār, not far from the settlement of Kūch (29 km to the south-east of Bīrjand). The results of their work have been published in two articles in Persian in the report entitled “A Series of Scholarly Works. Rock Images of Lākh-Mazār” [1]. The outstanding Iranian scholar, late professor Ahmad Tafazzoli kindly supplied me with a copy of this publication; some inscriptions seemed to me a bit amusing.

Through the gorges of Lākh-Mazār runs the road from Khorasan to Kerman. Travellers have left on the rocks numerous inscriptions — Arabic (Kufic and later, 35 inscriptions in all, some of them with dates of the lunar Hijra calendar — 847/1443—44, 891/1486, 902/1496—97, 972/1564—65, 985/1577—78, 1115/1703—04) [2], New Persian (8 inscriptions), all of them very brief, containing personal names and Qur’ānic formulas (only in Arabic) [3], and Parthian, more lengthy [4], which are probably the latest Parthian texts found within the Iranian territory [5].

The authors of the report date the Lākh-Mazār Parthian inscriptions to the fifth century. This date, in their opinion, is confirmed by the finds of the coins of king Kavad I (488—531) in the gorges and by the presence of an engraved image representing a man's head in a crown in which Khānīkī sees the portrait of this king [6].

In the “Report” the Parthian inscriptions are reproduced on 6 photographs and 5 plates of tracings [7]; it is rather difficult to use and read them, because many characters are doubtless distorted. It can be noticed, however, that in the tracings among other inscriptions one can distinguish variants (“drafts”) of the same Parthian texts, which are very carefully (even calligraphically, if we can apply the term here) executed on other rocks by the same hand with a clear difference between *r* and *d* (the last one with a diacritic below the character) and a distinct form of *h*.

Rasūl Bashshāsh, who published the transliteration, transcription and translation into Persian of the six most clearly distinguishable Parthian inscriptions of Lākh-Mazār, made a conclusion that they were ritual, telling about religious ceremonies in honour of the Zoroastrian deities

of Truth and Righteousness. The word *drwdšt* ‘firm, righteous’, which is present in some of the inscriptions, Bashshāsh associated with the Middle Persian name of the religious sect of *drist-dēnān*, lit. ‘(with) the right faith’, connected with the Mazdakite movement. Bashshāsh [8] in this connection cites the well-known passage from the Byzantine historian John Malala [9] about the arrival in Rome in the reign of Diocletian of Bundos the Manichaeon, whose teaching contradicted the doctrine of Mani, and who then moved to Iran where his teaching, according to Malala, became known under the name of (*tōn*) *Laristhenōn* — the rendering of the Middle Persian *drist-dēnān* [10].

The second subject, which, in the opinion of Bashshāsh, is considered in the Parthian inscriptions of Lākh-Mazār, is the improvement of the Zoroastrian ritual of *nōk-nawār* (variants: *nāyewar*, *nāwar*) connected with the coming of age (15 years) when a boy received his sacred belt (*kustī-bandī*), and the performance of the rites through which faithful Zoroastrians attain the priestly rank of *hērbed* [11].

The reading of the Parthian inscriptions from Lākh-Mazār led me to the conclusion that they have nothing to do with Zoroastrian ritual practices as well as with the Mazdakite *drist-dēnān* sect. The Lākh-Mazār inscriptions present an example of humorous texts, which rarely occur in Iranian epigraphics. Their humour, one has to admit, is rather primitive, but let us be lenient towards the fifth-century Parthian jokes. The authors of these inscriptions were six Parthian lads working as guides on the mountain road running through the gorges. Their names were Mihrbān (*Mtrybn*, lit. ‘possessing the brilliance of Mithra’), Wišādewēnēn (*Wyštywynyn*, ‘with open gaze’) [12], Ardaxšīr (*rīhštr*, ‘having the favour of [the deity of] Righteousness and Power’) [13], Girdāzād (*Grt z’t*, ‘having the free [celestial] orb’), Paryōž-naw (*Prgwz-nw* ‘new victor’) and Wahrām (*Wrhr’m*, ‘[created by] Veretragn’). Their “visiting card” is the inscription in which their names are enumerated [14]. These lads were not remarkable for their modesty, which is testified by their statement [15]: (1) *mtrybn* (2) *wyštywynyn W mtrybn* (3) *MNW n’yt drwdšt* (4) *drysyd sr HWYt | Mihrbān Wišādewēnēn ud Mihrbān kē nāyēd dru(w)dišt ud drisīd sar ahēd |* (“[Says] Mihrbān: if Wišādewēnēn and Mihrbān take anyone across [the

\* This article was prepared with the financial support of the Russian Humanitarian Scientific Fund, project No. 02-0100080 A.