

Gabr

The aim of the present note is to throw light on a “Persian” word *gabr*, applied by the Muslims to the Parsis. A western linguist¹, who seems to have consulted a Persian dictionary, gives, in his book, the Persian meaning of the word *gabr* thus: ‘ass; arse-hole’². The Persian dictionaries indeed give under گبر */gabr/*, گور */gōr/* at least three different terms:

1° */gaβr/* ‘the fire-worshippers who belong to the religion of Zaratūštra; they are also named *moy*’.³

2° */gōr/* ‘grave, tomb’.⁴

3° */gōr/* ‘wild ass, zebra, onager’.⁵

The second term is possibly cognate with Aramaic qbr */qabr/* ‘grave’ from qbr ‘to bury, inter’, Arabic قبر */qabr/*. Syriac ܩܒܪ */qabrā/* is rendered by Sogd. frwrtqty */fravart-katē/* ‘burial place, tomb’.

¹ . Jean Kellens, Professeur au Collège de France, titulaire de la chaire de “Langues et religions indo-iraniennes”.

² . J. Kellens, *La quatrième naissance de Zarathushtra*, Paris, 2006, 5-6 : «... l’existence de communautés religieuses iraniennes que les musulmans appelaient « guèbres » (persan *gaur*, « âne », compris au sens approximatif de « trou du cul ») ...»

³ . «گور: آتشپرستانی را گویند که در دین زردشت بودند و آنها را مغ نیز خوانند.» فرهنگ جهانگیری

⁴ . «گور: به معنی قبر باشد، و آن جایی است که مردهء آدمی را در آن به گذارند.» برهان قاطع

⁵ . «گور: به معنی خر دشتی هم آمده است که گور خر باشد و آن را به عربی حمارالوحش خوانند.»

The third term corresponds to Pārsīg *gōr* ‘wild ass, onager’.⁶ It is cognate with Skt. *gaurá-* adj. ‘white, yellowish, reddish’, m. ‘a kind of buffalo, *Bos gaurus*’, Buddh. Skt. *gaura-khara-* ‘a kind of ass’, Ardhamāgadhī *gora-khara-* ‘white ass’ (= Pers. *گورخر* /*gōrxar*/), Bal. *gōray* ‘grey, white’.

We have to mention two other Pārsīg words:

𐬀𐬎𐬎𐬌, 𐬀𐬎𐬎𐬌 /¹*gabr*/ ‘womb’⁷ is cognate with Av. *garāβa-* m. ‘womb’, Skt. *gárbha-* m. ‘womb; inside’, Khot. *garba-* ‘womb, belly’, Parth. *grāb* ‘id.’, Fars *گور* /*gawr*/ rendering Arabic *صدر* /*šadr*/ ‘chest, bust’.

𐬀𐬎𐬎𐬌, 𐬀𐬎𐬎𐬌 /²*gabr*/ ‘deep’ = *zafr*.⁸ It is cognate with Av. *jaiβi°*, *jafra-* adj. ‘deep’, Skt. *gabhīrā-* adj. ‘deep, profound’, *gambhīrā-* (> Parth. *gambīr*).

What about the first term? The Persian dictionaries do not give its derivation. A number of etymologies have been proposed for this term.⁹ *gabr* is, very likely, the Aramaic word *gbr* /*g^ebar*/ meaning ‘man’. It was used, in the early (Achaemenian) period, as an heterogram for Old Persian *martiya-* m. ‘man’ (Av. *mašya-*, Gr. ἀνήρ), and later, in the form

⁶ . Cf. Bd 109 *xar ud gōr*, HKR 30 *gōr ud gavazn*.

⁷ . Cf. Dk viii M 697 *andar gabr pus be ōzamed*.

⁸ . Cf. Bd 121.

⁹ . See J.J. Modi, “An Avesta Amulet for contracting friendship” (1900) *Anthropological Papers*, Bombay, 1924, 137-39.

۱. پورداود، “پیشگفتار”، فرهنگ بهدینان، جمشید سروش سروشیان، تهران، ۱۳۷۰.

of 𐭪𐭥 GBR' for Pers. word *mard* 'man'.¹⁰ A Parsi priest was called *mo_g-mard* 'Magian man' (Gr. μάγος ἀνὴρ¹¹). This word is a compound: Its first member is *mo_g* 'Magian' from OPers. *maga-/ magu-*, magus (Av. *moγu-*, Sogd. *muγ*, and also Skt. *maga-/ magu-* 'priest of the Sun'), and its second member *mard* 'man' from OPers. *martiya-*, written in the Semitic form ("heterogram"): 𐭪𐭥𐭪𐭥 mgw-GBR'¹². The Aramaic (/ Syriac) writers, in the Sasanian period, did not know that the second member is an "arameogram". They translated the word as *gabrā magūšā*¹³ (Aram. mgwš/ *maguš*/ < OPers. *maguš*), and they employed *gabr(y)ā* as being equivalent to *magušā*¹⁴. Afterwards, the Muslims also called the Mazdayasnians *majūs* (Arabic form of *maguš*) and or *gabr/ gawr*.

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¹⁰ . Cf. FP 11 𐭪𐭥 𐭪𐭥𐭪𐭥.

¹¹ . Cf. Herodotus, 1.132. Cf. also DB I.36 *aṣva martiya maguš* 'one man, a Magian'.

¹² . Cf. Kirdīr 2.6.

¹³ . For example : ܘܢܘܨܘܢܐ ܕܘܨܘܢܐ ܕܘܨܘܢܐ ܕܘܨܘܢܐ ܕܘܨܘܢܐ

❖ ܘܢܘܨܘܢܐ ܕܘܨܘܢܐ (Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum, ed. P. Bedjan, ii, 31).

¹⁴ . ܘܢܘܨܘܢܐ ܕܘܨܘܢܐ 'Magians or gabrāyē' (Cf. Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum, ed. P. Bedjan, ii, 576, 559, n. 5).