

The scribe class and the third function

The Perso-Aryan scribe descended from the third function of the Aryan society –the Indian writer caste, *kāyastha*, was born, like the *Kūdra*, from the feet of *puruṣa*. The scribe of the older times was not held in high esteem, nor was his status hereditary. *Viśākhadatta* despised a *kāyastha* by describing him as “an insignificant degree” (*laghvī-mātrā*)¹. However, the scribes by making accounts², handling tax affairs³, recording judicial decisions and cases⁴, compiling registers, writing the orders and other words of the king and magnates, etc., played a significant role in the exercise of the power, and enjoyed high status superior to the farmers and artisans⁵.

They wore special dress in the presence of the king, except when accompanying him in expedition⁶ –their dress was of two colours, distinct from the white garment⁷ of the priests.⁸ They were riding, like the judges⁹ who were from the priest class, on ambling horses.¹⁰

They were, like the (teaching) priests, exempt from taxation.¹¹
Given the position and role of the scribes, particularly, in royal

¹ . Cf. *Mudrārākṣasa*, 43.

² . Pers. *āmārgar* ‘bookkeeper’ < **hmāra-kara-*, Aram. *hmrkr*, Armen. *hamarakar*.

³ . Pers. *šahr-āmār-dibīr* ‘scribe of the accounts of the country’, Parth. inscr. *hštr-’hmr SPR’*.

«شهرهار ديفره اى كناية البلد للخراج.» خوارزمى، مفاتيح العلوم، ١، ٦.

⁴ . Pers. *dād-dibīrīh** ‘script used for judicial decisions’.

⁵ . Av. *vāstrya-fšuyant-*, Pers. *vāstryōš* ‘farmer & cattle tender; husbandman’, *vāstryōš(ān)-bed/ -sālār* ‘chief of the husbandmen’.

Av. *hūiti-*, Pers. *huduxš* ‘artisan’, *huduxšbed** ‘chief of the artisans’, cf. Mas‘ūdī مسعودى، التنبيه والإشراف، لندن، ١٨٩٣، ١٠٤. «هوتخشه بذ تفسيره حافظ كل من يكذ بيديه كالمهنة والفلاحين والتجار وغيرهم و رئيسهم و منهم من يستقيه واسترئوش [بد].»

⁶ . Cf. *Jahišyārī*

«وكان رسم ملوك الفرس أن يلبس أهل كل طبقة، ممن في خدمتهم، لبسة لا يلبسها أحد ممن في غير تلك الطبقة. فإذا وصل الرجل إلى الملك عرف بلبسته صناعته، والطبقة التي هوفيا. فكان الكتاب جميعا في الحضرة يلبسون لبسهم المعهودة، فإذا سافر الملك تزوا [بزي] القاتاة.» همشيارى، ٣.

⁷ . Pers. *jāmag ī spēd*.

⁸ . Cf. *Vēs u Rāmēn*

فخرالدین اسعد گرگانی، ویس و رامین، م. روشن، تهران، ١٣٧٧، ٥٠.

چو بیند جامه های سخت نیکو به گوید هر یکی را چند آهو ...

سپید است این سزای گنده پیران دورنگ است آن سزاوار دبیران.

⁹ . Pers. *dāvar* < **dāta-bara-*, Aram. *dtbr* ‘law officer’.

¹⁰ . Cf. *Jahišyārī*, *ibid.* 9

«ولم يكن يركب الهالج في أيام الفرس إلا الملك والکاتب والقاضي.»

¹¹ . Cf. *Miskawayh* (= *Mušköya*)

مسکویه الرازی، تجارب الأم، ١. امامی، الجزء الأول، طهران، ١٩٨٧/١٣٦٦، ٩٩

administration, they tended to form a hereditary social group who enjoyed privileges, and sometimes misused the dominant position which they had to oppress the “corvéables”. Ādurbād who was a teaching priest exhorted his son, Zardušt, not to come into challenge with a scribe.¹²

The Yajñavalkyasmṛti advised the king to protect his subjects against the swindlers, violent men, magicians, thieves, and especially against the kāyastha.¹³ The Persian high priest, Vehšābuhr, advised the king Xusrō son of Kavād to punish the official agents¹⁴ and confidants¹⁵, and especially the scribes(-clerks) who were accused of social injustice and oppression.¹⁶

According to the Avesta and Zand, the religion has established in the world two laws: that of lordship of the lands, given to Haošyaṅha Parađāta as king of the world; and that of land-lordship, given to his brother *Vahyas-kṛta as cultivator of the world. The order of the scribes was under the care and authority of Vahyaskṛta. The fact that the Book of kings (the Persian *Šāhnāma*) was restored, by a few learned priests and scribes, and with the help of a landlord is quite natural.¹⁷

Dk viii, M 688 (from the Cihrdād):

«والزمو الناس الجزية ما خلا أهل البيوتات (vāspuhragān) ، والعتطاء (vazurgān) ، والمقاتلة (arsēštārān) ، والهربادة (hērbedān) ، والكتاب (dibīrān) ، و من كان في خدمة الملك (espasagān ī dar)»

¹² . Cf. HAM 34 *abāg dibīr mard hamemāl mā bās!*

We find the same advice in a book attributed to Xusrō son of Kavād, *راحة الانسان*, cf. *Chrestomatie persane*, Ch. Schfer, 1, 223.

با دبیران لجاج مه کنید	مه کن با دبیران ستیز و لجاج
توانند کردن بسی بیش و کم	دبیران که دانند رسمِ قلم
ز نوکِ قلم تیغ گیرد گریغ	قلم گر چه تیزی نه دارد چو تیغ
هنرها بسی در قلم آفرید.	قلم گردبندِ جهان را کلید

¹³ . Cf. Yajñavalkyasmṛti, I, 336.

¹⁴ . Pers. *kirdār*.

¹⁵ . Pers. *avistvār*.

¹⁶ . He ordered to hang eighty of them, among them there were fifty scribes. Cf.

Jahišyārī, 9

«وحكى أن الجور كثر أيام الملك أنوشروان. فقال له موبدان موبد:
أيا الملك، إني سمعت فقهاء نا يقولون: إنه متى لم يعمر العدل الجور في بلدة، ابتلى أهلها بعدو يغزوم، وخيف تتابع الآفات عليهم. وقد خفنا ذلك بشيء
قدفشا من جور اسبابك.
فنظر أنوشروان في ذلك. فاستقر عنده أن ظلمها وجوراً قد جرى. فصلب ثمانين رجلاً منهم، من الكتاب خمسون رجلاً، و من العمال والأمناء ثلاثون رجلاً.»

¹⁷ . Cf. *Šāhnāma*, 1, 135-137:

دلیبر و بزرگ و خردمند و راد	یکی پهلوان بود دهقان نژاد
گذشته سخنها همه باز جست	بزوهنده، روزگارِ نخست
بیاورد کاین نامه را گرد کرد.	ز هر کشوری موبدی سالخورد

*bun nihišn ī dād ud ēvēnag: hān ī dahyugānīh ped varzīdārīh
<ud> parvardārīh ī gēhān abar vahegird pēšdād; hān ī dahyubedīh
ped pānagīh ud rāyēnīdārīh ī dām abar hōšang ī pēšdād.*

‘The foundation of laws and customs: that of land-lordship, for the cultivation and nourishment of the world, [given] to Vahyaskrta Paraḍāta; that of lordship, for the protection and administration of the creatures, [given] to Haošyaṅha Paraḍāta.’

Dk vii, M 594

*ped anI hangām mad ō vahegird ud hōšang ī pēšdād abar
vinārdan ī andar gēhān dād ī dahegānīh [gēhān-varzīdārīh] ud
dahyubedīh [gēhān-pānagīh]. u-šā ped hamxāgīh ud dēn dād ham-
nirōgīh vinārd dahyubedīh varzīdārīh gēhān ped ravāgīh ud vinārišn
peyvannišnīh ī ohrmazd dāmān dēn dād ī ohrmazd.*

‘At another era it (Daēnā) came to Vahyaskrta and Haošyaṅha Paraḍāta (for them) to establish in the world the laws of land-lordship [the cultivation of the world] and of lordship [the protection of the world]. They established, through their friendship and with the help of Religion and Law, the lordship and cultivation of the world, for propagating the religion and law of Ahura Mazdā and establishing their connection (with) the creatures of Ahura Mazdā.’

Dk v, M 438

*hān and vehīh ud x^varrah did ped cīdagīh az bun gumēzišnīg<īh>
dā abar madan ī nōg nōg āhōgumandīh ī az dēvān andar fraزندān ī
fravāg ō hōšang ud vahegird, cōn hōšang ped abardar-x^varrahīh
gēhān x^vadāy ud vahegird ped dahyugānīh gēhān varzīdār ud
parvardār būd, u-šān peyvannān āvādagān vaxšēnīd hān ī
dahyubedān tōhmag andar hān ī dahyugānān zahag.*

‘Again, the same goodness (/ wisdom, Av. *vaṅhuθβa-*) and Fortune (Av. *x^varənah-*), from the original mixture until the coming on of always new defilements from the Daēva, [were given] by choice to the children of Fravāka, (i.e.) Haošyaṅha and Vahyaskrta, as Haošyaṅha through supreme fortune was king of the world, and Vahyaskrta through land-lordship was the cultivator and nourisher of the world. Their lineages and descendants made grow the race of the rulers of the lands (Av. *daṅhu.paiti-*) among the offspring of the landlords (Pers. *dahyugān*).’

Bērōnī quotes, from the books of the Magi, about the feast Tīragān, the following statement:

أَنَّ الدهوفذية التي معناها حفظ الدنيا وحراستها والتأمر فيها. والدهقنة التي معناها عمارة الدنيا وزراعتها وقسمتها. هما توأمان محبا
يعمر الدنيا ويدوم قواهما ويصلح فسادها. والكتابة تلويها مقترنة محبا. فأما الدهوفذية فقد صدرت عن اوشهنيج، وأما الدهقنة فصدرت عن
أخيه ويكرد. واسم هذا اليوم تير، وهو عطارذ نجم الكتاب، وفيه توه اوشهنيج باسم أخيه في ذلك الوقت، وقسمت له الدهقنة وهي

والكتابة شيء واحد. فصيّروا هذا اليوم عميدا إجلالاً له واعظاما. وفيه أوعز الى اهل الدنيا، بأن يتربوا بزى الكتاب والدهاقين. فبقي الملوك والدهاقنة والموايزة وغيرهم، يتربون بلباس الكتاب الى ايام بشتاسف، أجالاً للكتابة وأعضاما للدهقنة.

‘The dahyubedīh, ‘lordship of the land’, which means “the protection and shielding of the world (Pers. *gēhān-pānagīh*) and the ruling over it” (*rāyēnīdārīh*), and the land-lordship (*dahyugānīh*) which means “the cultivation of the world, the farm-working in it and the distribution (of the product)” are twins on whom rest the civilization of the world, its duration, and the correction of any defect in it. The office of a scribe (الكتابة : *dibīrīh*) follows next to them and is connected with both of them. The lordship was founded by Haošyaṇha, the land-lordship by his brother Vahyaskṛta. The name of this day (of the feast Tīragān) is Tīra that is Mercury the star of the scribes. On this same day Haošyaṇha praised his brother by name, and bestowed on him the land-lordship which is identical with the office of a scribe. Therefore people made this day a feast in praise and honour of him (Vahyaskṛta). On this day he (Haošyaṇha) ordered the worldlings (اهل الدنيا : *gēhānīgān*) to dress in the dress of the scribes and landlords. Therefore the kings, landlords, high-priests, etc., continued to wear the dress of the scribes until the time of Vištāspa, in praise and honour of both the office of a scribe and land-lordship.’

The order of scribes (or « administrators »¹⁸) included men of wide range of skills and knowledge¹⁹ with characteristic names (according to Tōsar²⁰) :

dibīr ‘scribe’: official correspondent²¹; accountant²²; recorder of sentences, documents, and covenants²³; chronicler and or historian of the past²⁴; etc.

¹⁸ . Arab. أصحاب التدبير ≈ Pers. *kār-framānān*. Cf. the Testament of Ardašēr son of Pābag (عهد أردشير بن بابک):

أبو علي مسكويه الرازي، تجارب الأمم، ١. امامي، الجزء الأول، ١٣٦٦ / ١٩٨٧، (٥٦-٦٩)، ٦١.

¹⁹ . According to the Testament of Ardašēr the class of administrators comprises the scribes, astrologers, and physicians. Ibid., 61:

الكتاب والمنجمون والأطباء

Cf. also Pseudo-Jāhīz:

كتاب التاج في أخلاق الملوك للجاحظ، بيروت، ١٩٧٠، ٣٣: القسم الثالث الأطباء والكتاب والمنجمون.

According to Bērōnī, when Ardašēr restored the Persian kingdom, he also restored the classes (الطبقات). The third class: the physicians, astronomers, and other men of science. See Alberuni’s India, E. Sachau, London, 1887, 48:

والأطباء والمنجمين واصحاب العلوم في ثالثها. (بيروني، تحقيق ماللهند، ٤٨)

²⁰ . Cf. The Letter of Tansar (+Tōsar):

مردم دردین چهار اعضا اند ... که آن را اعضا اربعه می گویند. سر آن اعضا پادشاه است. عضو اول اصحاب دین، و این عضو دیگر باره بر اصناف است حکام وعباد و زهاد و سندن و معلمان. عضو دوم مقاتل، یعنی مردان کارزار. و ایشان بر دو قسم اند: سواره و پیاده، بعد از آن به مراتب و اعمال متفاوت. عضو سوم کتاب، و ایشان نیز بر طبقات و انواع، کتاب رسایل، کتاب محاسبات، کتاب اقصیه و سجلات و شروط، و کتاب سیر، و اطبا و شعرا و منجمان داخل طبقات ایشان. و عضو چهارم را مهنه خوانند، و ایشان برزیگران و راعیان و تجار و سایر محترفه اند. (نامه تنسر هیربذان هیربذ اردشیر بابکان به جشنساف شاه و شاهزاده پدشخوارگر، م. مینوی، تهران، ١٣١١،

bizešk ‘physician, healer’, *drustbed* ‘physician; therapist’.

gōsān ‘minstrel-poet, (court-)bard’.

axtarmār ‘astronomer’ and or ‘astrologer’.

And so on.

The close relationship between this class and the third “function” of the Aryan society (agriculture, cattle-breeding, the profession of artisans, and trade) was known to the Magian, and backed by mythological justification. This is against the generally accepted idea that: “Iranian scribes were priests, drawn from what was the Iranian learned class, and coming to form a hereditary group within it.”²⁵

Raham Asha

²¹ . Pers. *fravadag-dibIr*.

²² . Pers. *AmArgar* or (*Sahr/ kadag/ etc.*)-*AmAr-dibIr*.

²³ . Pers. *dAd-dibIr** ‘scribe of judicial decisions and cases’; *dib* ‘document’, *muhr-dib* ‘document with a seal’; *peymAn(ag)* ‘contract; condition’, *peymAnag I kadag-XadAyIh* ‘the (written) contract of marriage’; *paSt* ‘agreement, contract’; *dAdestAn* ‘court decision, judgement’; *pAymAr* ‘judicial decision, sentence’; *WizIr* ‘(judicial) decision, document (contractual or judicial)’.

²⁴ . Arab. سير الملوك corresponds to Pers. **kArAn-dibIr*. Arab. سير الملوك is the title of the Arabic rendering of the Pers. *XadAy-nAmag* ‘Book of kings’. Pers. *kArnAmag* ‘records, book of the acts’, *kArnAmag I ardaSEr I pAbagAn*, سير انوشروان ≈ Pers. *kArnAmag I <husrO> anOSerWAn*. In the Hymn of the Pearl contained in the Syriac Acts of St. Thomas it is said that, the Parthian kings had a *ܩܘܼܬܼܬܼܝܼܢܼܐ* ‘Book of the valiant’ (≈ Pers. **pahlaWAn-nAmag*) rendered by Gr. βιβλίον ζωῆς ‘Book of Life’ (47b).

²⁵ . M. Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, vol. two: under the Achaemenians, Leiden, 1982, 178.