

The Wèi-shū and the Persian calendar

The *Wèi-shū*, or the *Annals of the Wèi* (dynasty), was written by Wèi shōu (506-572 A.D.), a high-ranking civil servant of the dynasty of the northern Qi (北齊). The account of Persia in the sixth century is found in chapter 102 of this book.¹ It is almost identical with another Chinese account, the Běi shǐ (北史), or the book of the History of the dynasties of the North, completed by Lǐ yánshòu (李延寿) in 659 A.D., chapter 97.

Wèi shōu gives a few Persian dates, not according to the Persian “royal” calendar, but according to the Chinese lunar calendar. If we try to use his information by searching in the possible range of years to find one in which the 1st day of the 12th Chinese month was the 16th day of the Persian month Mihr (i.e., the feast day of Mihragān), and the 20th day of the 1st lunar month was one of the five additional days of the Persian year, we notice that these two dates correspond best to the fifteenth year of the reign of Xusrō Anōšervān (≈ 545-546 A.D.) –note that Wèi shōu completed his annals in 554 A.D.

1. He states that: “Every year, in the 4th lunar month, the Persian king leaves the capital and goes to a summering palace.” Day 1 of month 4 of the metal-ox year² (in cycle 55) corresponds to the 19th day of the 10th month Day, i.e., A.D. 545, April 27. In the middle of the sixth century, the month Day marked the start of “hot season” in Babylon (*dil ī ērānšahr* ‘the heart of Persia’), the time of going to summer quarters.
2. He states that: “The 6th lunar month is considered as the beginning of the year.” Wèi shōu does not speak of a specific day of the 6th moon. Indeed, the Nōg.rōz, or the first day of the 15th year of king Xusrō corresponds to the

¹. 魏收, 魏書, 8, 佩金, 2011. The passage on Persia has been translated twice : Kentok Hori, « A Chinese account of Persia in the sixth century », *Spiegel Memorial Volume : Papers on Iranian Subjects*, Bombay, 1908, 246-55 ; François Thierry, “À propos des monographies du Weishu (554) et du Beishi (659) sur le royaume de Perse”, *Des Indo-Grecs aux Sassanides: données pour l’histoire et la géographie historique*, Res Orientales, XVII, 2007, 141-56. See also Berthold Laufer, *Sino-Iranica : Chinese Contributions to the History of Civilization in Ancient Iran*, Chicago, 1919.

². Mod. *yǐ-chōu*, wood-ox year.

- 14th day of the 6th lunar Chinese month, i.e., A.D. 545, July 8, Saturday.
3. He states that: “The Persians especially celebrate the 7th day of the 7th lunar month.” The 7th day of the 7th Chinese moon corresponds to the 24th day, *Dēn rōz*, of the first Persian month, *Fravardīn māh*, i.e., A.D. 545, July 31, Monday. On the 19th day, or *Fravardīn rōz*, of the same month, there was a feast called *Fravardīnagān* –not to be confounded with *Fravardagān*. After the doubled intercalation during the reign of Pērōz (about A.D. 482), five additional days were deleted from the religious calendar; however, the Persians, for religious purposes, followed the ancient calendar for a long time. Hence, a five-day difference in some religious ceremonies appeared. The 19th day of Fravardīn in the ancient religious calendar corresponds to the 24th day of Fravardīn in this “reformed” calendar. Thus Wèi shōu speaks of the feast of *Fravardīnagān* of the year 545.
 4. He states that: “Every year, in the 10th lunar month, the Persian king comes back to the capital.” Day 1 of month 10 corresponds to the 17th day of the month Tīr, or A.D. 545, October 22, Sunday. For the Persians, *Tīr māh* was the name of the fourth month, and at the same time that of the season of fall.³ It marked the start of “cold season” in Ērānšahr, the time of going to winter quarters.
 5. He states that: “The Persians especially celebrate the 1st day of the 12th month. On these days, all the people wish a long life, they organize banquets in which music is played, and all join in gay amusement.” The first day of the twelfth moon corresponds to the 16th day, Mihr rōz, of the 7th month, *Mihr māh*, i.e., A.D. 546, January 18, Thursday. Wèi shōu refers here to the feast day of *Mihragān*, second in importance to Nōgrōz in the royal calendar of the Persians.
 6. He finally states that: “On the 20th day of the 1st lunar month the Persians bring offering to the departed soul of their ancestors.” Day 20 of month 1 of the fire-tiger year (*bīng-yín*) corresponds to day 3 of Panzag, i.e., A.D. 546, March 7, Wednesday. After the calendar “reform”, the five additional days (*Panzag*) were placed at the end of

³ . Šuynī : *tīramā* ‘autumn’.

«هوای بهار گاه گرم و تر است؛ و به تابستان همی گرم و خشک شود؛ و به تیرماه همی سرد و خشک شود؛ و به زمستان همی سرد و تر شود.» ناصر خسرو، جامع الحکمتین، تهران، ۱۳۳۲، ۳۰۲.

the month Ābān. The last five days of Ābān and the five Epagomenæ were called *Fravardagān*, the feast of the departed souls. According to Bērōnī, the second *Fravardagān* (*Panzag*) was more important than the first *Fravardagān* (the last five days of Ābān).⁴ Wèi shōu refers here to the third day of the second *Fravardagān*.

Text

波斯国，都宿利城，在忸密西，古条支国也。去代二万四千二百二十八里。城方十里、户十余万、河经其城中南流。

土地平正、出金、银、鎗石、珊瑚、琥珀、车渠、马脑、多大真珠、颇梨、瑠璃、水精、瑟瑟、金刚、火齐、镔铁、铜、锡、朱砂、水银、绫、锦、叠、氍毹、毼毼、赤麋皮、及薰陆、郁金、苏合、青木等香，胡椒、毕拔、石蜜、千年枣、香附子、诃梨勒、无食子、盐绿、雌黄等物。

气候暑热、家自藏冰。地多沙磧、引水溉灌。其五谷及鸟兽等与中夏略同、唯无稻及黍、稷。土出名马、大驴及驼、往往有日行七百里者。富室至有数千头。又出白象、师子、大鸟卵。有鸟形如橐驼、有两翼、飞而不能高、食草与肉、亦能啖火。

其王姓波氏、名斯。坐金羊床、戴金花冠、衣锦袍、织成帔、饰以真珠宝物。

其俗：丈夫剪发、戴白皮帽、贯头衫、两厢近下开之、亦有巾帔、缘以织成、妇女服大衫、披大帔、其发前为髻、后披之、饰以金银花、仍贯五色珠、落之于膊。王于其国内，别有小牙十余所，犹中国之离宫也。每年四月出游处之，十月乃还。王即位以后，择诸子内贤者，密书其名，封之于库，诸子及大臣皆莫之知也。王死，众乃发书视之，其封内有名者，即立以为王，余子出各就边任，兄弟更不相见也。

国人号王曰“医赞”，妃曰“防步率”，王之诸子曰“杀野”。大官有摸胡坛，掌国内狱讼；泥忽汗，掌库藏开

⁴. الآثار الباقية، ٩:٤٥.

禁；地早⁵，掌文书及众务；次有遏罗诃地，掌王之内事；恭⁶波勃，掌四方兵马。其下皆有属官，分统其事。

兵有甲槊圆排剑弩弓箭，战兼乘象，百人随之。

其刑法：重罪悬诸竿上，射杀之；次则系狱，新王立乃释之；轻罪则鼻刖若髡，或剪半鬓，及系牌于项，以为耻辱；犯强盗，系之终身；奸贵人妻者，男子流，妇人割其耳鼻。

赋税则准地输银钱。

俗事火神、天神。

文字与胡书异。

多以姊妹为妻妾，自余婚合，亦不择尊卑，诸夷之中最为丑秽矣。

百姓女年十岁以上有姿貌者，王收养之，有功勋人即以分赐。

死者多弃尸于山，一月著服。城外有人别居，唯知丧葬之事，号为不净人，若入城市，摇铃自别。

以六月为岁首，尤重七月七日、十二月一日，其日人重庶以上各相命召，设会作乐，以极欢娱。又每年正月二十日，各祭其先死者。

神龟中，其国遣使上书贡物，云：“大国天子，天之所生，愿日出处常为汉中天子。波斯国王居和多千万敬拜。”朝廷嘉纳。自此每使朝献。

Translation

Ērān-šahr⁷ has its capital at the city of Sùlì⁸. It is situated west of Buxārā (/ Bukhara)⁹, and is the ancient kingdom of Tiáozhī¹⁰. Its distance from Dài¹¹ is 24 228 li¹². The city has a

⁵. 早.

⁶. 恭.

⁷. 波斯国 /*Bōsī guó*/ 'kingdom of Bōsī, Persia'.

⁸. 宿利 (possibly from Pers. *asūr* / OPers. *aθurā*) near ancient Babylon.

⁹. 忸密 /*Niǔmì*/ 'new seat' (**naṣaka-mita*).

¹⁰. 条支 the region about the mouth of the Tigris River.

¹¹. 代 (or 平城 /*Píngchéng*/) the ancient name of the present Dàtóng.

¹². 里 /*lǐ*/ a unit of distance equal to about a third of a Persian *hāsr*.

surface area of 10 li square, with over 100 000 households. A river¹³ runs south through the city.

The land of the country is flat, and produces gold, silver, *tōu*-stone¹⁴, coral¹⁵, amber¹⁶, *chēqú*¹⁷, agate¹⁸, many big pearls, (colourless) transparent glass¹⁹ and (coloured) opaque glass²⁰, crystal²¹, turquoise²², diamonds, asbestos²³, wrought iron (a steel like that of Damascus)²⁴, copper, tin, cinnabar²⁵, mercury, damask²⁶, brocade²⁷, silk brocade²⁸, 毳²⁹, rugs³⁰ and carpets, hide of red deer, and incense³¹, turmeric (or, saffron)³², storax³³, agar-wood (incense)³⁴, and other fragrant substances, (black)

¹³. the river Tigris (OPers. *tigrā*).

¹⁴. 鑠石 /*tōushí*/. “The Chinese accounts of t’ou or t’ou-*ši* agree with what the Persians and Arabs report about tūtiya. It was in Persia that zinc was first mined, and utilized for a new copper alloy, brass.” Laufer, 512. Thierry: l’orichalque.

¹⁵. See Laufer, 525.

¹⁶. See Xie Zhufan, ..., *Dictionary of Traditional Chinese Medicine*, Hong-Kong, 1984, 200.

¹⁷. 车渠 /*chē-qú* / Hori : ch’ō-k’ü a kind of shell ; Thierry : la nacre. See Thomas Watter: “For the “nacre” of my rendering the Chinese is Ch’ê-ch’ü which Julien wrongly translates “amber”. The word, which is evidently of foreign origin, denotes not only mother of pearl, but also a white precious stone imported into China from India.” *On Yuan Chwang’s Travels in India*, vol. II, London, 1905, 131. (車渠 mother-of-pearl)

¹⁸. 马脑 /*mǎ nǎo*/ ‘cornelian (mineral), agate’.

¹⁹. 颇梨 /*pō-lí*/ (Modern Chinese 玻璃 /*bō-lí*/ ‘glass’).

²⁰. 琉璃 /*liú-lí*/ rendered by Sogd. (B) ’’pkyn ‘crystal’ (璃 ‘colored glaze; glass’). Thierry : la pâte de verre.

²¹. 水精 /*shuǐ-jīng*/ (水 ‘water’, 精 ‘essence; extract’ see Pers. *āb-gēnag* ‘crystal, glass’).

²². 瑟瑟 /*sè-sè*/. See Laufer, 516-518. See also B. Laufer, “Notes on Turquois in the East”, *Publications of Field Museum of natural History. Anthropological series*, vol. xiii, Chicago, 1913-14, 1-72.

²³. 火齐 /*huǒ qí*/. Hori : huo-ts’i said to be a kind of lapis-lazuli; Thierry: l’amiante. Berthold Laufer, “Asbestos and Salamander, an Essay in Chinese and Hellenistic Folk-Lore”, *T’oung Pao*, Second Series, 16/3, 1915, 299-373.

²⁴. 镔铁 /*bīn tiě*/. See Laufer, 515.

²⁵. 朱砂 /*zhū-shā*/. Hori : permillion.

²⁶. 绫 /*líng*/ ‘damask ; thin silk’. Thierry : la mousseline de soie.

²⁷. 锦 /*jǐn* / ‘brocade; embroidered work’.

²⁸. 叠 /*dié* / (Pers. *dēbāg*). See Laufer, 489.

²⁹. 毳 /*qú*/ ‘woolen rug; mat’?) Hori : cotton textures ; Thierry : des tapis.

³⁰. 毳毼 /*tà dēng*/ ‘woolen rug’(cf. Pers. *tabast* ‘carpet’). See Laufer, 492-93.

³¹. 薰陆 /*xūn-lù*/ (≈ Pers. *bōy*). Hori : gum olibanum ; Thierry : des essences d’oliban.

³². 郁金 /*yù jīn*/ (Pers. *kurkum*). See Laufer, 312.

³³. 苏合 /*sū hé*/. See Laufer 456-60 ; Xie Zhufan, 199.

³⁴. 青木 /*qīng-mù*/ (青 ‘nature’s color; green or blue; greenish black’, 木 ‘tree; wood’).

pepper³⁵, long pepper³⁶, sugar-cane³⁷, dates³⁸, purple nutsedge seeds³⁹, myrobalans⁴⁰, oak-galls⁴¹, “the green of salt” (copper-oxide)⁴², orpiment⁴³, and other items.

The climate is hot; and families have their own ice-houses. The country contains a lot of sandy regions, they supply land with water by irrigation. Their flora and fauna are grosso modo like those of China, save that rice⁴⁴ and glutinous millet⁴⁵ and millet⁴⁶ are lacking (in Persia). The land produces famous horses, large donkeys, and camels, some of which often travel 700 li in a day. Rich families possess as many as several thousand head (of cattle). Furthermore, it produces white elephants⁴⁷, lions, and eggs of large birds. There is a bird that is in shape like a camel (i.e., the ostrich)⁴⁸; it has two wings and flies, but cannot fly high up; it grazes and (at the same time) eats flesh; it can also eat fire.

The family name of their king is Bō⁴⁹, and his personal name is Sī⁵⁰. He sits on a throne (ornamented with) golden ram(s), wears a golden crown⁵¹, puts on a (court) dress of brocade with a woven cape, and adorned with real pearls and jewels.

Their customs: The men shave their hair short, and wear white fur hats, and shirts [open at the top] so that the head passes through and the two sides of them close down but open.

³⁵ . 胡椒 /*hú jiāo*/ Piper nigrum. See Laufer, 374-75.

³⁶ . 毕拔 / *bì bō*/ Piper longum (cf. Skt. *pippalam*). See Laufer, 375.

³⁷ . 石蜜 /*shí mì*/ (石 ‘stone, rock’; 蜜 ‘honey’). See Laufer, 376-77.

³⁸ . 千年枣 /*qiān nián zǎo*/ lit. ‘one thousand year jujubes’ (枣 ‘jujube; dates’). See Laufer, 385.

³⁹ . 香附子 /*xiāng fù zǐ*/ (香附 ‘Cyperus Tuber, Flatsedge Tuber, Cperus rotundus’. See Xie Zhufan, 186; 子 ‘seed; child’).

⁴⁰ . 河梨勒 /*hē lí lēi*/ ‘Terminalia chebula’ (Skt. *haritaka*-; Pers. *halīlag*). See Laufer, 378.

⁴¹ . 无食子 /*wú shí zǐ*/. See Laufer, 367-69.

⁴² . 盐绿 /*yán lǜ*/. See Laufer, 510.

⁴³ . 雌黄 /*cí huáng*/ ‘orpiment; arsenic trisulfide’. Hori : hartel.

⁴⁴ . 稻 /*dào*/ ‘paddy; rice, Oryza sativa’ (≈ Pers. *brinj*).

⁴⁵ . 黍 /*shǔ*/ ‘broomcorn millet, glutinous millet’, cf. Pers. شوشو.

⁴⁶ . 稷 /*jì*/ ‘millet, god of cereals’ (≈ Pers. *arzan/ alun/ alum*).

⁴⁷ . 白象 /*bái xiàng*/. Persian historians mention a white elephant, *Kadēzād* (lit. ‘home-born’), belonging to Husrō Abarvēz. See مجمل التواريخ

۷۹، والقصص،

⁴⁸ . Pers. *uštarmurv* lit. ‘camel-bird’.

⁴⁹ . 波.

⁵⁰ . 斯. Popular etymology.

⁵¹ . 戴金花冠 or, wearing a crown with golden flowers.

They have also head-coverings and capes with finely woven border.

The women's clothes consist of big shirts, and they drape over their shoulders a large cape. Their hair is rolled up in a bun in front, but their hair is left loose behind. They adorn themselves with gold and silver flowers. They also wear strings of variegated pearls hanging down on their shoulders.

The king has in his realm a dozen or more small (royal) residences just like the (travel) imperial palaces in China. Every year in the fourth month (of the lunar year) he leaves (the capital) and goes on a tour, and in the tenth month he comes back (to the capital).

The king after succeeding to the throne chooses among his sons the most virtuous one, enters secretly his name on a letter (or, a book)⁵², and seals it; it is kept in the (royal) treasury. His sons and the ministers all ignore what (he has written). When the king dies, then all (assemble and) open the letter to see what (has been written in it); he, whose name is in the sealed letter, is to be enthroned as king. The other sons leave (the capital, and) are appointed to border posts. The brothers thus do no longer meet each other.

The fellow countrymen call the king *ixšan* (or, *išxan*)⁵³; his consort *bāmbišn*⁵⁴; and the sons of the king *šāh*⁵⁵.

Among the high officials there are the *mubedān* <*mubed*>⁵⁶, who has charge of the criminal and judicial affairs; the *niyān* <*gāhbed*>⁵⁷, who has charge of the opening and closing of the treasury; and the *dibīr*<*bed*>⁵⁸, who has charge of the archives and many (public) affairs. Next (in rank), there are the [×]*darīgbed*⁵⁹, who is in charge of the inner affairs of the king; and

⁵². 书 /*shū*/.

⁵³. 医赞 /*yī-zàn*/ (< **xšāna*-). Cf. Sogd. *axšāvan* 'king', Armen. *išxan* 'prince, ruler', mec *išxan* 'great ruler'. Hori: I-tsa [old sound according to K'ang-hi: i-tsat, i. e., the Persian *izad*, 'god']. Laufer: The Chinese name apparently represents a transcription of *Ixšeδ*. See Laufer, 530-31.

⁵⁴. 防步率 /*fáng bù shuài*/ (Pers. *bāmbišn*, Sogd. *βāmbuš*, Armen. *bambišn*).

⁵⁵. 杀野 /*shā-yě*/ (Pers. *šāh*, Bactr. *𐎱𐎠𐎺*).

⁵⁶. 摸胡坛 /*mō-hú-tán*/.

⁵⁷. 泥忽汗 /*ní-hū-hàn*/ (Pers. *niyān* 'treasure', Khot. *nyanei*).

⁵⁸. 地卑 /*dì-bēi*/.

⁵⁹. 遏罗河地 /*è-luō-hē-dì*/ Laufer : *argabeδ*. See Laufer, 532-33.

the *spāhbed*⁶⁰, in charge of military forces (infantry and cavalry) of the four quarters. They all have under them subordinates who share the management of affairs.

Soldiers are provided with (mail) armor⁶¹, long lances⁶², round shield⁶³, (double-edged) swords⁶⁴, cross-bows⁶⁵, bows and arrows⁶⁶. In battlefield, they also mount elephants (each) in company with a hundred men.

Their criminal law(s): Those who have committed a grievous crime (worthy of death) are hung up on a pole and shot to death. Next in degree is incarceration. When a new king succeeds the throne, he orders to release them. As for lighter crimes, they cut off the nose or amputate one foot (or both feet), or they shave the head or shave the hair on one of their temples, or they fasten a brand on the back of neck to humiliate them. Those who are guilty of brigandage are incarcerated for life. As for adultery with the wife of a person of high rank (or, noble), the male (adulterer) is sent into exile and the married woman has her ears and nose cut off.

Taxation is imposed in accordance with the situation of the payee (or, the area owned by him), and is paid in silver money.

It is their custom to worship the god of fire⁶⁷ and the god of heaven⁶⁸.

Their writing style is different from that of the Hu⁶⁹.

Many of them take their own sisters to lawful wife or (simply) concubine; and there are more (other) marriages without any distinction between seniors and juniors (or, nobles and humbles). (In this respect,) among all non-Han nations, they are the most ignominious and nasty.

If, among the girls of common people over the age of ten years, there is some of particular disposition or appearance, the

⁶⁰. 薛波勃 /*xuē-bō-bó*/.

⁶¹. 甲 /*jiǎ*/ ≈ Pers. *zreh* (Armen. *zrah* ‘cuirass; coat of mail’).

⁶². 槊 /*shuò*/ ≈ Pers. *nēzag*.

⁶³. 圆排 /*yuán pái*/ ≈ Pers. *maginn* (Syr. 𐩣𐩪𐩠 ‘round shield’).

⁶⁴. 剑 /*jiàn*/ ≈ Pers. *šafšēr*/ *šamšēr*.

⁶⁵. 弩 /*nǔ*/ ≈ Pers. *sanvar*.

⁶⁶. 弓箭 /*gōng jiàn*/ ≈ Pers. *tigr ud kamān*.

⁶⁷. 火神 /*huǒ shén*/, Pers. *ādur yazd*.

⁶⁸. 天神 /*tiān shén*/, Pers. *ohrmazd* (Av. *ahura mazdā*) ≈ the sky-god Zeus (see Herodotus, 1, 131-132).

⁶⁹. 胡 /*hú*/ non-Han people. Here it possibly refers to Sogdians or Indians.

king takes her and brings her up, and gives her (in marriage) as recompense to a man who has done some particular meritorious deed.

The corpses of the dead are mostly abandoned on the hills; they wear mourning clothes for a month. There are some who live away, out of town areas; they know well the funeral rituals, and (are known) as “unclean people”⁷⁰. When they enter a town, they shake a (small) bell to distinguish them from other people.

The sixth month (of the lunar year) is taken as the beginning of the year⁷¹; they especially feast in the seventh day of the seventh month (of the lunar year) and the first day of the twelfth month. On these days, the common people wish long life to each other, organize banquets that music is played, and they have a very good time. Moreover, every year, on the twelfth day of the first month (of the lunar year), every one offers sacrifice to his deceased ancestors.

In (the era) Shén-guī⁷², this country dispatched an emissary (to the

Chinese court), who presented tribute, and offered a message, saying:

“To Son of Heaven of the Great Kingdom, whom Heaven has given birth, and has desired for him (the land) where the sun rises, so that he be forever the Son of Heaven of the Han, Kavād⁷³, king of Ērānšahr⁷⁴, presents his respectful homages and wishes him a very long life.”

The court accepted the present. Since then tribute was sent to the royal court every year.

(Raham Asha)

⁷⁰. 不净人 /bù jìng rén /.

⁷¹. 岁首 /suì shǒu/ ‘start of the year’.

⁷². 神龟. Shén-guī is the name of a period (518-520 A. D.) of the reign of the emperor Xiào-míng-dì (孝明帝, 516-528 A. D.) over the Northern Wei.

⁷³. 居和多 /Jū-hé-duō/.

⁷⁴. 波斯国王 /Bōsī guówáng/ king of Persia.