Two Iranian loanwords in Syriac*

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Abstract
This article discusses two Syriac words which have been understood in many different ways by both ancient and modern scholars. The translations and etymologies previously proposed are evaluated and new explanations are offered, according to which both words, sāsgaunā “red” and syānqā “hemi-drachm”, are loanwords from Middle Persian, though unattested in that language.

Keywords: Syriac lexicography, Syriac etymology, Iranian loanwords in Syriac, Syriac sāsgaunā “red”, Syriac syānqā “hemi-drachm”.

1. ssgwnʾ [sāsgaunā]

The two most recent Syriac-English dictionaries¹ agree in translating sāsgaunā as “purple”, although it should be noted that the Peshitta contrasts sāsgaunā with argāwānā, for which the meaning “purple” is well-established. Other dictionaries translate sāsgaunā with a wide variety of colour terms including “vermilion, sky-blue or blue-black”² or “purple red, vermilion, scarlet”.³ Many of these definitions go back to the Syriac-Arabic lexicon of Bar Bahlul.⁴ As Claudia Ciancaglini says, it would seem that the only certainty is that the word refers to a colour, or more precisely a dye-stuff, and that it is a compound containing gwnʾ “colour” as its second element. Since Syriac gaunā “colour” is an Iranian loanword, it is possible though not inevitable that the word as a whole is Iranian. On the basis of yet another translation of the compound as “multicoloured, variegated”, which is the most commonly accepted interpretation of the identically spelt Hebrew and Aramaic word ssgwnʾ, several scholars have suggested that its first part is a Persian numeral, either šast “sixty”⁵ or šaš “six”.⁶ However, the correspondence of Syr. s- to

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¹ I would like to thank Agnes Korn, who kindly allowed me to read her article “Arménien karmir, sogdien krmʾyr et hébreu karmīl «rouge»”, BSOAS 79/1, 2016, 1-22, in advance of publication and thus provided the impetus for the first of these notes, and who also provided valuable comments on its first draft. See also Agnes Korn & Georg Warning, “Armenian karmir, Sogdian karmīr ‘red’, Hebrew karmīl and the Armenian scale insect dye in antiquity”, in: Marie Louise Nosch, Cécile Michel et al. (eds), Textile Terminologies – from the Orient to the Mediterranean 1000 BC – AD 1000 (forthcoming).
⁴ Claudia A. Ciancaglini, Iranian Loanwords in Syriac (Wiesbaden, 2008), 224.
⁵ Rubens Duval, Lexicon syriacum auctore Hassano bar Bahlule, II (Paris, 1901), col. 1365-6.
⁷ Thus Philippe Gignoux apud Ciancaglini, Iranian Loanwords, 224.
Pers. š- would be quite exceptional. It is not impossible to imagine an assimilation of š...s to s...s, as Shaul Shaked seems to suggest, but he does not cite any close parallel.  

In the Peshitta sâsgaunâ is used in two contexts. In one group of passages it translates Hebrew tahaš, mainly in the phrase ḥt or tahaš “leather or skin of tahaš” (Num. 4:6, 8; plural in Ex. 25:5, 26:14, 35:7, 23, 36:19, 39:34), a material used for the covering of the Tabernacle or placed over a table of offerings. It has recently been suggested that Hebrew tahaš is a loanword from Akkadian duhšu, a technical term for faience and beadwork, but its original meaning was forgotten at an early date. Old Testament versions and commentaries therefore interpreted tahaš from context, as a term either for a particular animal or for a colour. The Septuagint, for example, has ὑακίνθινος, whence hyacinthinus in the Vulgate, while the second-century Jewish scholar Rabbi Meir maintained that tahaš was “a creature which existed at the time of Moses and was afterwards hidden”. The use of Syriac sâsgaunâ to translate Hebrew tahaš evidently depends on Jewish tradition, since its Aramaic equivalent ssrw n is used for the same purpose in the Targum, explained pseudo-etymologically in the Talmud as “joyful (šaš) with several colours (gōn)”.  

A different usage is attested by the Peshitta’s version of II Chron. 2:7, 14 (= 2:6, 13 in the Hebrew text). Here sâsgaunâ translates Hebrew karmīl “red”, in both cases as part of a sequence including ṭkēlet “blue” (Peshitta tklt’) and argāmān or argwān “purple” (Peshitta ārgwn’). The last two are dyes produced from certain types of murex shell, while karmīl is a red dye produced from the Armenian cochineal (Porphyrophora hamelii), apparently the same colour which is referred to in earlier books of the Hebrew Bible as tōlaʿat šānī. It is strange that those who have tried to explain the meaning and etymology of Syriac and Aramaic sâsgaunâ have generally focused on its use as a translation of the obscure Hebrew tahaš rather than its use as a translation of Hebrew karmīl, a word whose meaning was surely known to the translator of II Chronicles—note that in the very next chapter, II Chron. 3:14, karmīl is translated as žhwrytʿ “scarlet”. As has long been

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7 Shaked, “Items of dress”, 114, refers rather vaguely to the “assimilation and dissimilation of consonants involving sibilants” but it is hard to see the relevance of the words he cites in this connection: Aramaic tás “plate”, Arabic ṭass “cup” < Middle Persian tašt (or perhaps rather from its expected by-form *tašt); Middle Persian tīs “someone” beside Parthian čišt, both ultimately from Old Iranian *čiščit. Sogdian has several examples of š assimilating to š (Ilya Gershevitch, A Grammar of Manichean Sogdian (Oxford, 1954), §450), but not of the reverse.
11 Shaked, “Items of dress”, 112 n. 57.
13 See Korn, “Arménien karmir”.

recognized, karmīl, which is not attested in any other book of the Hebrew bible, is ultimately an Iranian loanword derived from a cognate of Persian kirm “worm”, just as the earlier Hebrew term tōla at šānī, also translated in the Peshitta as ṣhwriy (Ex. 39:1 etc.), derives from the word tōlē ā, tōlā “worm, maggot”. Consequently, if sāsgaunā is an accurate translation of karmīl, it seems evident that its first element should be cognate with Syriac and Aramaic sās, sāsā “moth, grub, worm”.

An apparent difficulty with this hypothesis is of course the fact that sās-gaunā “worm-colour” would represent a type of compound which is well-attested in Iranian (and in Indo-European languages in general) but quite foreign to Semitic. The obvious solution is that the compound was not formed in Syriac or Aramaic but in an Iranian language. It is a pleasure to find that this was recognized as long ago as 1794 by Georg Wilhelm Lorsbach,14 who defined the meaning of Syriac sāsgaunā as “Wurmfarbe” and “wurmfärbig”, i.e. “scharlachroth”, and derived it from a Persian compound *sāsgūn. In view of the discrepancy in the vocalism of the first syllable, this explanation is not wholly acceptable as formulated by Lorsbach; moreover, Persian sūs “moth, grub, etc.” is almost certainly a borrowing from Arabic.15 However, the problem disappears if we replace Lorsbach’s Persian *sāsgūn with a Middle Persian *sāsgūn, assuming an earlier borrowing direct from Aramaic sās, or even from Akkadian sāsu. In fact, sās is attested both in New Persian, where its modern meaning is “bed-bug”,16 and in Middle Persian, where sās is mentioned beside kayk “flea” as a noxious insect.17

Although Lorsbach was hardly correct in postulating a Persian *sāsgūn as the source of Syriac sāsgaunā, it is probable that such a form did eventually come into existence as a modification of the older *sāsgūn. Thus, the Syriac-Arabic lexicon of Jirjis al-Karmsaddānī (George Karmsedinoyo), composed in 1619,18 gives the spelling swsgwnʾ, vocalized sūsgaunā, beside sāsgaunā and sāsgaunā, together with a variety of definitions which largely derive from Bar Bahlul. In this connection it is also worth noting the Arabic interpretation of sāsgaunā in II Chronicles 2 as swsnjrd “needle-work”,19 which may be a corruption of *swsjwn = Persian *sāsgūn.

2. synqʾ [syānqā]

14 Georg Wilhelm Lorsbach, Archiv für die Biblische und Morgenländische Literatur, II (Marburg, 1794), 304-6, which is cited by R. Payne Smith, Thesaurus Syriacus (Oxford, 1879-1901), col. 2682, with an incorrect page reference.

15 It is perhaps an open question what connections there may be between such superficially similar terms for “worm, grub, moth” as Akkadian sāsu, Aramaic sās, Arabic sūs, Greek σής, Armenian եկեբան, Basque sats, sīts.


This word seems to be attested in a single passage from the Acts of the Persian martyrs under Shapur II, where the king tries to bribe Barbaʿshmin, the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, with a golden cup containing “a thousand syānge of gold”. It so happens that this passage is also attested in a Sogdian version, which has “a thousand kēsarākān”, i.e. “(coins) of Caesar”, using a term which elsewhere translates dinārā “denarius”.

The meaning most commonly given for syānqā in Syriac dictionaries, both ancient and modern, is “hemi-drachm”. This interpretation goes back to Elias of Nisibis, who gives the Arabic translation nisf dirham “half of a dirham”, while Bar Bahlul has both nisf dirham and dānaq, the latter being the Persian term for “one sixth of a drachm”, i.e. “obol”. The various manuscripts of Bar Ali’s dictionary give even more alternatives, ranging from “half of a dirham” via “quarter of a dirham (rubʿ dirham)” to “one sixth of a dirham (suds dirham), dānaq”.

What is evidently the same coin is also referred to in Talmudic Aramaic as syynqʾ, pl. syʾnqy, zyʾnqy, and in Mandaic as sianqa, pl. sianqia. In Mandaic sianqa contrasts with danqa “obol”, which would seem to rule out the interpretation of Syriac syānqā as being identical with the dānaq. Of the various translations suggested by the dictionaries, there remain the quarter and half drachm, the latter explanation being the one preferred by most authorities, no doubt rightly so, since the Sasanians never minted a quarter drachm.

Though it does not seem to be attested in any Persian text, the fact that syānqā is a Persian word is likely from the context in which it appears and has in fact never been doubted. Two different Persian etymologies have been proposed. The first goes back once again to G.W. Lorsbach, who suggested a Persian sih yakkah “one third”, with replacement of [kk] by [nk]. In order to explain the discrepancy between this meaning and the “hemi-drachm” indicated by the dictionaries he ingeniously, but anachronistically, proposed that half of a drachm was equivalent to one third of the Arabic mitqāl and was named accordingly. Lorsbach’s etymology held sway throughout the nineteenth century, being accepted (with some modifications and with various degrees of hesitation) by a number of scholars including Spiegel, de Lagarde and Hübschmann. A new etymology from Persian sih (better: Middle Persian s[)”three” plus the distributive suffix -ānak was proposed by Brockelmann in 1928 and adopted by

23 P. de Lagarde, Praetermissorum Libri Duo (Göttingen, 1879), 58.
27 In Albrecht Jacob Arnoldi et al., Museum für biblische und orientalische Litteratur, I/1 (Marburg, 1807), 26-7.
28 Fr. Spiegel, Grammatik der Huzvâresch-Sprache (Vienna, 1856), 77-8; Paul de Lagarde, Gesammelte Abhandlungen (Leipzig, 1866), 71; Heinrich Hübschmann, Armenische Grammatik, I (Leipzig, 1897), 237.
Ciancaglini in 2008. While this is in some ways an improvement on Lorsbach’s explanation, the expected meaning of such a formation would be “three by three” rather than “a third part” as assumed by Brockelmann; moreover, the problem remains that our sources suggest that the syāṅqā is a half, or possibly a quarter, not a third of the drachm. It seems therefore that Telegdi and Geiger were fully justified in regarding all attempts so far at a Persian etymology of syāṅqā as unsatisfactory.

As mentioned above, the drachm, the main unit of currency in Sasanian Iran, was equivalent to six smaller units known in Greek as obolos but in Persian as dānak, later dāng. If syāṅqā is a hemi-drachm it should be equivalent to three obols. In my opinion that is exactly what its name indicates: *siyānak from Old Iranian *θrī-dānaka-, Old Persian *št-dānaka- “three dānak(s).

Phonologically this derivation presents no problems, as an intervocalic *d regularly gives y in Middle Persian. Two historical problems need to be addressed, however. In the first place, the hemi-drachm, which had been minted under the earliest Sasanians, had already fallen out of use by the time of Shapur II, the king who is supposed to have offered “a thousand syāṅqe of gold” to Barbaʿshmin. Secondly, both the drachm and the hemi-drachm were coins of silver, not gold.

These two problems may have a common solution. We may start from the assumption that *siyānak was originally a hemi-drachm as its name implies. Once the silver hemi-drachm was no longer minted, the name would lose its specific application and could simply function as a “half” of any unit. Similarly, the Persian term šaš dāng, originally “six dānak(s”, i.e. “a whole drachm”, came to be used for “six sixths whether of a dirham or a dinār-mīqūl” and later still of anything complete or perfect, e.g. šaš dāng-e jahān “the whole world”, cf. also Sogdian xwšdʾnc mryʾrt “a perfect pearl”. Mandaic has šar danqa < Persian čahār dāng, which looks as if it should mean “four sixths”, i.e. “two thirds”. The fact remains that the standard Sasanian gold coin (in so far as such a thing existed, since gold was generally used only for special “festive” issues) was the dinar, and that neither Shapur II nor any other Sasanian king minted a half dinar. The reference in the martyrdom of Barbaʿshmin to “syāṅqe of gold” cannot therefore be regarded as historically accurate.

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32 Robert Göbl, *Sasanian Numismatics* (Braunschweig, 1971), 27; Nikolaus Schindel, *Sylloge Nummorum Sasasidarum Paris – Berlin – Wien*, III/1 (Vienna, 2004), 103. Göbl’s statement (op. cit., 29) that “the name of the half-drachm piece was ... unknown” can now be revised.