

Two Iranian loanwords in Syriac*

Nicholas Simms-Williams, SOAS University of London

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. *ssgwn*’ [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 *gwn*’ “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 *ssgwn*’, 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

* I would like to thank Agnes Korn, who kindly allowed me to read her article “Arménien *karmir*, sogdien *krm*’yr 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).

¹ Michael Sokoloff, *A Syriac Lexicon. A Translation from the Latin, Correction, Expansion, and Update of C. Brockelmann’s Lexicon Syriacum* (Winona Lake–Piscataway, 2009); Sebastian P. Brock & George A. Kiraz, *Gorgias Concise Syriac-English, English-Syriac dictionary* (Piscataway, 2015).

² J. Payne Smith, *A Compendious Syriac dictionary* (Oxford, 1903).

³ Claudia A. Ciancaglini, *Iranian Loanwords in Syriac* (Wiesbaden, 2008), 224.

⁴ Rubens Duval, *Lexicon syriacum auctore Hassano bar Bahlule*, II (Paris, 1901), col. 1365-6.

⁵ Shaul Shaked, “Iranian loanwords in Middle Aramaic”, in Ehsan Yarshater (ed.), *Encyclopædia Iranica*, II/3, London, 1986, 259-61 (where the Aramaic form is misprinted *šsgwn*’ with initial š-, p. 261a); “Items of dress and other objects in common use: Iranian loanwords in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic”, in Shaul Shaked & Amnon Netzer (eds), *Irano-Judaica, III*, Jerusalem, 1994, 106-17, esp. 112-14.

⁶ 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.⁷

In the Peshitta *sāsgaunā* is used in two contexts. In one group of passages it translates Hebrew *taḥaš*, mainly in the phrase *ʿōr taḥaš* “leather or skin of *taḥaš*” (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 *taḥaš* is a loanword from Akkadian *duḥšu*, a technical term for faience and beadwork,⁸ but its original meaning was forgotten at an early date. Old Testament versions and commentaries therefore interpreted *taḥaš* 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 *taḥaš* was “a creature which existed at the time of Moses and was afterwards hidden”.⁹ The use of Syriac *sāsgaunā* to translate Hebrew *taḥaš* evidently depends on Jewish tradition, since its Aramaic equivalent *sgwn*’ is used for the same purpose in the Targum,¹⁰ explained pseudo-etymologically in the Talmud as “joyful (*śaś*) with several colours (*gōn*)”.¹¹

A different usage is attested by the Peshitta’s version of II Chron. 2:7, 14 (= 2:6, 13 in the Hebrew text). Here *sāsgaunā* translates Hebrew *karmīl* “red”, in both cases as part of a sequence including *təḳēlet* “blue” (Peshitta *tklt*’) and *argāmān* or *argəwān* “purple” (Peshitta *rgwn*’). The last two are dyes produced from certain types of murex shell,¹² while *karmīl* is a red dye produced from the Armenian cochineal (*Porphyrophora hamelii*),¹³ apparently the same colour which is referred to in earlier books of the Hebrew Bible as *tōla* ‘at *šānī*.

It is strange that those who have tried to explain the meaning and etymology of Syriac and Aramaic *sāsgaunā* have generally focused on its use as a translation of the obscure Hebrew *taḥaš* 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 *zḥwryt*’ “scarlet”. As has long been

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 *ṭass* “plate”, Arabic *ṭass* “cup” < Middle Persian *tašt* (or perhaps rather from its expected by-form **tast*); Middle Persian *tis* “someone” beside Parthian *čiš*, both ultimately from Old Iranian **čisčit*. Sogdian has several examples of *s* assimilating to *š* (Ilya Gershevitch, *A Grammar of Manichean Sogdian* (Oxford, 1954), §450), but not of the reverse.

⁸ Stephanie Dalley, “Hebrew *taḥaš*, Akkadian *duḥšu*, faience and beadwork”, *Journal of Semitic Studies* 45, 2000, 1-19.

⁹ Jehuda Feliks, “Taḥaš”, in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (Farmington Hills–Detroit, 2007), XIX, 435. See also Dalley, “Hebrew *taḥaš*”, 2.

¹⁰ Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine period*, 2nd ed. (Ramat-Gan–Baltimore, 2002), 384.

¹¹ Shaked, “Items of dress”, 112 n. 57.

¹² On the former see Jehuda Feliks, “Tekhelet”, in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., XIX, 586-7, and in particular I.I. Ziderman, “First identification of authentic Tēkēlet”, *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research (BASOR)* 265, 1987, 25-33, though it should be noted that Ziderman’s claims gave rise to considerable debate: see P.E. McGovern et al., “Has authentic Tēkēlet been identified?”, *BASOR*, 269, 1988, 81-90.

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 *zḥwryt*’ (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 “wurmfarbig”, i.e. “scharlachroth”, and derived it from a Persian compound **sūsgūn*. 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 **sūsgūn* with a Middle Persian **sāsgōn*, 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 **sūsgūn* as the source of Syriac *sāsgaunā*, it is probable that such a form did eventually come into existence as a modification of the older **sāsgōn*. Thus, the Syriac-Arabic lexicon of Jirjis al-Karmsaddānī (George Karmsedinoyo), composed in 1619,¹⁸ gives the spelling *swsjwn*, vocalized *sūsgaunā*, beside *sāsgaunā* and *šāsgaunā*, 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 *swnjrd* “needle-work”,¹⁹ which may be a corruption of **swsjwn* = Persian **sūsgūn*.

2. *synq*’ [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 e Basque *sats*, *sits*.

¹⁶ S. Haïm, *The One-volume Persian-English Dictionary* (Tehran, 1961), 431.

¹⁷ D.N. MacKenzie, *A Concise Pahlavi Dictionary* (London, 1971), 74; A.V. Williams, *The Pahlavi Rivāyat Accompanying the Dādestān ī Dēnīg* (Copenhagen, 1990), I, 114-15, 333; II, 46 (where *s*’s, 21a17, is an emendation for *s*’š).

¹⁸ Cited in R. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus*, col. 2682.

¹⁹ This form is cited by Guilielmus (Wilhelm) Gesenius, *De Bar Alio et Bar Bahlulo, lexicographis syro-arabieis ineditis commentatio*, II (Leipzig, 1839), 23, but with an erroneous explanation (“lily-coloured”, from Persian *sūsan* “lily” and *-čarda* “coloured”). On Arabic *sūsanjird* for Persian *sōzankard* “needle-work”, Niya Kharoštī *su inakirta*, see Heinrich Lüders, *Textilien im alten Turkistan* (Abhandlungen der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Phil.-hist. Klasse, 1936, Nr. 3), 31-2.

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 Barba'shmin, the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, with a golden cup containing "a thousand *syānqe* of gold".²⁰ It so happens that this passage is also attested in a Sogdian version, which has "a thousand *kēsarakān*", i.e. "(coins) of Caesar",²¹ using a term which elsewhere translates *dinārā* "denarius".²²

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 *niṣf dirham* "half of a dirham",²³ while Bar Bahlul has both *niṣf dirham* and *dānaq*,²⁴ 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 (*rub' dirham*)" to "one sixth of a dirham (*suds dirham*), *dānaq*".²⁵

What is evidently the same coin is also referred to in Talmudic Aramaic as *syynq'*, pl. *sy'nqy*, *zy'nqy*,²⁶ and in Mandaic as *sianqa*, pl. *sianqia*.²⁷ 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,²⁸ 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.²⁹ 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

²⁰ Paulus Bedjan, *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum*, II (Paris, 1891), 299, line 20.

²¹ E27 (formerly C2), f. 69v, line 14, ed. Nicholas Sims-Williams, *The Christian Sogdian Manuscript C 2* (Berliner Turfantexte, XII, Berlin, 1985), 146.

²² Luke 10.35, ed. F.W.K. Müller, *Soghdische Texte I* (Abhandlungen der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Phil.-hist. Klasse, 1912, Nr. 2), 36.

²³ P. de Lagarde, *Praetermissorum Libri Duo* (Göttingen, 1879), 58.

²⁴ Duval, *Lexicon syriacum auctore Hassano bar Bahlule*, II, col. 1344.

²⁵ R.J.H. Gottheil, *The Syriac-Arabic Glosses of Īshō' Bar 'Alī*, Part II (Rome, 1908), 163.

²⁶ Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic periods* (Ramat-Gan-Baltimore, 2002), 802.

²⁷ E.S. Drower & R. Macuch, *A Mandaic Dictionary* (Oxford, 1963), 324.

²⁸ In Albrecht Jacob Arnoldi et al., *Museum für biblische und orientalische Litteratur*, I/1 (Marburg, 1807), 26-7.

²⁹ 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 2008.³⁰ 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 *syānqā* 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 *syānqā* as unsatisfactory.³¹

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 *syānqā* 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 **θri-dānaka*-, Old Persian **çi-dānaka*- "three *dānaks*".

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,³² the king who is supposed to have offered "a thousand *syānqe* of gold" to Barba'shmin. 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 *dānaks*", i.e. "a whole drachm", came to be used for "six sixths whether of a dirham or a *dīnār-miθqāl*"³³ and later still of anything complete or perfect, e.g. *šaš dāng-e jahān* "the whole world", cf. also Sogdian *xwšd'nc mry'rt* "a perfect pearl".³⁴ Mandaic has *šar danqa* < Persian *čahār dāng*, which looks as if it should mean "four sixths", i.e. "two thirds".³⁵ 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 Barba'shmin to "*syānqe* of gold" cannot therefore be regarded as historically accurate.

³⁰ Carl Brockelmann, *Lexicon Syriacum*, 2nd ed. (Halle, 1928), 472; Ciancaglini, *Iranian Loanwords*, 221-2.

³¹ S. Telegdi, "Essai sur la phonétique des emprunts iraniens en araméen talmudique", *Journal Asiatique*, 226, 1935, 177-256, esp. p. 197; Bernhard Geiger in Samuel Krauss et al., *Additamenta ad librum Aruch Completum*, Vienna, 1937, 171 [*non vidi*].

³² Robert Göbl, *Sasanian Numismatics* (Braunschweig, 1971), 27; Nikolaus Schindel, *Sylloge Nummorum Sasanidarum 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.

³³ Walther Hinz, *Islamische Masse und Gewichte* (Handbuch der Orientalistik, Ergänzungsband 1, Heft 1, Leiden, 1955), 11.

³⁴ See Yutaka Yoshida, "Sogdian miscellany", *Studia Iranica*, 13, 1984, 145-9, esp. 146 n. 2; Nicholas Sims-Williams, *Biblical and other Christian Sogdian Texts from the Turfan Collection* (Berliner Turfantexte, XXXII, Turnhout, 2014), 103.

³⁵ Rather than "double" with Drower & Macuch, *Mandaic Dictionary*, 100.