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The Frontier Pushes Back: From Local Languages to Imperial Substrate(s) in Scribal Practices in 8th-century Central Asia*

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Abstract

This article draws on documentary texts from multilingual archives of early Islamic Central Asia to illustrate connections between the Arabic and Middle Iranian scribal world. Here, I contend that some lesser-known evidence from Sogdia contributes new elements to current debates on the contact between Arabic and Middle Iranian scribal traditions and provides a measure of "intensity" of Arab rule in the region more generally. In particular, ostraca from various Transoxanian administrative centers provide documentary confirmation that a class of biliterate Arabic-Sogdian scribes was active in the local bureaucracy as early as the mid-8th century. When viewed in dialogue with archives from coeval Iran and Iraq, the Transoxanian evidence helps lead to a more nuanced understanding of the so-called "Pahlavi diplomatic substrate" model.

Keywords: Umayyad and Abbasid empires; Middle Iranian substrates; Sogdian-Arabic contacts; scribal practices

Introduction

In 1932, local shepherds stumbled across a strange piece of paper while roaming the ruins of a fortress on Mount Mugh to the east of Panjikent. The script on the paper was deemed to be Arabic (it was Sogdian, in fact) and rumors spread that the mysterious document was a map to a hidden treasure. When competent authorities heard of this curious recovery, proper archaeological excavations were organized at the site. The excavations led to the discovery of an entire archive of some 90 documents, mostly written in Sogdian on paper, with one in Arabic and another in Turkic runic script written on parchment.[1] It was soon recognized that the texts had belonged to the archive of Dēwāshtīch, the ruler of Panjikent and self-proclaimed king of Samarkand and Sogdia, who had taken refuge in the fortress in 722 with fellow Sogdian nobles before being besieged and eventually executed by Arab governor Saʿīd b. ʿAmr al-Ḥarashī.[2]

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[1] On the finding and publication history of the documents, see Ilya Yakubovich, "Mugh 1.I. Revisited," *Studia Iranica* 31 (2002): 232–33; and Vladimir A. Livshits, *Sogdian Epigraphy of Central Asia and Semirech'e,* trans. Tom Stableford (London: SOAS, 2015), 15–16.

[2] For a discussion of the political backdrop of the Mugh archive, see in particular Frantz Grenet and Étienne de la Vaissière, "The Last Days of Panjikent," *Silk Road Art and Archaeology* 8 (2002): 155–96.

The archive of Mount Mugh marked the first discovery of original documents from the early Islamic period in the easternmost regions of the Umayyad and early Abbasid empires. From the 1940s to the present day, a handful of further Sogdian and Arabic texts from the same period have continued to surface sporadically in the region. These include a dozen mid-8th-century Arabic and Sogdian ostraca and ink-inscriptions found at several administrative centers in the region, as well as three Arabic letters discovered at the fortress of Sanjar Shāh datable to the 720s–780s.[3]

The evidence from early Islamic Sogdia has only partially been the subject of historians' and Arabists' booming interest in documents from the early Islamic period. The number of documentary texts from 7th and 8th-century Central Asia pales in comparison with the thousands of Arabic, Greek, and Coptic papyri surviving from contemporary Egypt or even the hundreds of Arabic, Greek, Aramaic, and Middle Persian texts from coeval Syria-Palestine and Iran. This, along with the comparative peripherality of Transoxiana in the field of Late Antique studies, has severely limited the scope of research focused on this source. While some of these discoveries (notably, the Sanjar Shāh letters and the Mount Mugh documents) have been examined by specialists of the early Islamic period (Marina Rustow's 2020 *The Lost Archive* most notably), others (especially ostracta) have been thoroughly ignored by Arabists.[4]

In this article, I argue that these understudied texts, while not providing a detailed picture of administrative routines, can nonetheless give us a sense of the "intensity" of the Arab presence in the Central Asian theater while also shedding light on the historical development of Arabic clerical practices more generally.[5] More specifically, I explore the contribution of these documentary materials to current debates on the contact between Arabic and Middle Iranian scribal traditions and the question of the so-called "Pahlavi diplomatic substrate."

The Pahlavi substrate

Documentary discoveries of the last three decades have spiked new interest in the interrelation between Middle Iranian and Arabic scribal worlds. In the early 1990s, a large cache of 180 Bactrian and Arabic documents emerged in the Pakistani antiquities market to be subsequently acquired by the Khalili Collection. The documents were reportedly discovered in Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion of the country.

Upon closer examination, it could be determined that about 40 of the documents in this corpus – 33 in Arabic dated between 755 and 777 and seven in Bactrian dated between 700 and 771 – belonged to the archive of the descendent of one Bēk, whose family was located in Bamiyān.[6] In the field of Arabic studies, the significance of the discovery related to not only

[3] Ofir, Haim, Sharov Kurbanov, and Michael Shenkar, "The Earliest Arabic Documents Written on Paper: Three Letters from Sanjar-Shah (Tajikistan)," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 43 (2016): 141–73. For an overview of ostraca findings in Tranoxania, see Aleksander Nikitin, "Middle Persian Ostraca from South Turkmenistan," *East and West* 42 (1992): 103–29. Cf. also Eugenio Garosi, *Projecting a New Empire: Formats, Social Meaning, and Mediality of Imperial Arabic in the Umayyad and Early Abbasid Periods* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), 101–05.

[4] A partial exception to Arabists' overlooking these discoveries is Khodadad Rezakhani, "Navigating Persian: The Travels and Tribulations of Middle Iranian Languages," in *Navigating Language in the Early Islamic World Multilingualism and Language Change in the First Centuries of Islam*, eds. Antoine Borrut, Manuela Caballos, and Alison M. Vacca (Turnhout: Brepols, 2024), 347–49. Among other recent contributions from early Islamic period specialists, see also Said Reza Huseini, "Thinking in Arabic, Writing in Sogdian: Arabic-Sogdian Diplomatic Relations in the Early Eighth Century," in *From Samarqand to Toledo: Greek, Sogdian and Arabic Documents and Manuscripts from the Islamicate World and Beyond*, eds. Andreas Kaplony and Matt Malczycki (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 67–87.

[5] In the framework of this article, I speak of "intensity" in relation to the mediation between Arabic and local milieus and understand intensity heuristically to be inversely proportional to the need for language mediation.

[6] On the scant information on the discovery of the archive of the family of Bēk, see Nicholas Sims-Williams, "From the Kushan-Shahs to the Arabs: New Bactrian Documents Dated in the Era of the Tochi Inscriptions," in *Coins, Art and Chronology: Essays on the Pre-IslamicHistory of the IndoIranian Borderlands, Wien*, ed. Michael Alram and

what administrative information the texts could provide but also their formal peculiarities. In his edition of the texts and a series of subsequent articles, Khan noted that the Arabic documents exhibited peculiar scriptic features and technical terminology when compared to their counterparts from the coeval Islamic West. In particular, the Arabic documents exhibited a comparatively cursive writing style that finds comparison in documents from Iraq and Egypt only from the 9th century onward.[7] Khan proposed that tendencies towards cursiveness in Arabic texts from 8th-century Khurasan were the result of close contact between the Arabic writing milieu and the scribal traditions of the highly cursive Pahlavi script of the Persianate world, which he dubbed a "Pahlavi paleographic substrate."[8] In other words, he argued that the integration of Iranian scribes familiar with Pahlavi scribal conventions and literate in Arabic led them to transplant paleographic idiosyncrasies of the highly cursive Pahlavi script into Arabic, thus giving rise to cursive style scripts that later came to influence scribal practices in the western provinces. According to Khan's model, the spread of Persianized scriptic features should be traced back to the Abbasid central administration's reliance on officials of Iranian origin.[9] This supposition finds confirmation in onomastic, formulaic, and lexical evidence. The onomasticon of the tax officials in the Bēk family archive, in particular, shows that the families of former Sasanian clerks were among the recruiting pools for administrative personnel in early Abbasid Khurasan.[10] At the opposite end of the early Islamic world, the prosopography of 9th-century administration in Egypt likewise registers an increase in clerks of Iranian and Turkic descent, some of whom can be identified as the descendants of post-Sassanian administrator families, such as that of Abū ʿAmr al-Qahramān (< MP *kārframān*, 'superintendent') mentioned in a late-8th-century official letter (*P.YounesGovernors* 3).[11] This coincides with an increasing

Deborah E. Klimburg-Salter (Vienna: ÖAW, 1999), 244–58, *id.*, "Ancient Afghanistan and Its Invaders: Linguistic Evidence from the Bactrian Documents and Inscriptions," in *Indo-Iranian Languages and Peoples*, ed. Nicholas Sims-Williams (Oxford: OUP, 2002), 225–26, François de Blois and Nicholas Sims-Williams *Studies in the Chronology of the Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan* (Vienna: ÖAW, 2018), 7–13 and Geoffrey Khan, *Arabic Documents from Early Islamic Khurasan* (London: The Nour Foundation, 2007), 14–20. The Bactrian texts in the archive are edited by Nicholas Sims-Williams *Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan*, I: *Legal and Economic Documents* (London: The Nour Foundation, 2001) (see *BD* I T, U, V, W, Y) with another text possibly belonging to the same archive edited by *id.*, *Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan*, II: *Letters and Buddhist Texts* (London: The Nour Foundation, 2007) (see *BD* II je). The Arabic texts in the archive are edited by Khan, *Arabic Documents* (*P.Khurasan* 1–32). Another unedited text belonging to the same archive is discussed by Geoffrey Khan, "Remarks on the Historical Background and Development of the Early Arabic Documentary Formulae," in *Documentary Letters from the Middle East: The Evidence in Greek, Coptic, South Arabian, Pehlevi, and Arabic (1st 15th c CE)*, ed. Eva M. Grob and Andreas Kaplony (Bern *et al.*: Peter Lang, 2008), 890 with n8 and fig. 7.2. Editions of Arabic papyri are quoted according to the abbreviations of Petra M. Sijpesteijn, John Oates, and Aandreas Kaplony, "Checklist of Arabic Papyri," *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 42 (2005): 127–66. The up-to-date electronic version is accessible at http://www.naher-osten.uni-muenchen.de/forschung/papyrologie/apb/index.html (accessed 5 May 2024).

[7] On the use of the term 'cursive' and alternative terms possibly more suitable for medieval Arabic scripts, see in particular Eva M. Grob, *Documentary Arabic Private and Business Letters on Papyrus: Form and Function, Content and Context* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 159–65 and Marina Rustow *The Lost Archive: Traces of a Caliphate in a Cairo Synagogue* (Princeton: PUP, 2020), 159–72.

[8] Geoffrey Khan, "The Historical Development of Early Arabic Documentary Formulae," in *Scribes as Agents of Language Change*, eds. Esther-Miriam Wagner, Ben Outhwaite, and Bettina Beinhoff (Boston: De Gruyter, 2013), esp. 211–12. See also Rustow *Lost Archive*, 162–68.

[9] For example, Geoffrey Khan, "The Development of Early Arabic Documentary Script," in *Writings and Writing from Another World and Another Era*, eds. Robert M. Kerr and Thomas Milo (Cambridge: Archetype, 2013), 229–47.

[10] See, for instance, the *amīr* Abū Ghālib b. al-Iṣbahbadh (< Middle Persian *spāhbed*). See also the case of Kamird-far s. of Bēk (II), who features in documents from the later phase of the archive as Saʿīd (a partial translation of his Bacrian name) and whose progeny by the emancipated slave Zērān bear exclusively Muslim names. See Khan, *Arabic Documents*, 19; De Blois and Sims-Williams, *Studies*, 37–38.

[11] Lucian Reinfandt, "Iranians in 9th Century Egypt," in *Migration Histories of the Medieval Afroeurasian Transition Zone: Aspects of Mobility between Africa, Asia and Europe, 300-1500 C.E.*, eds. Johannes Preiser-Kapeller, Lucian Reinfandt, and Yannis Stouraitis (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2020), 225–46 and Eugenio Garosi, "'Those Who Follow the Guidance': Cross-Cultural Junctures in Early Islamic Documentary Conventions," in *Towards a Theory of Cultural*

use of technical loanwords from Middle Persian and Eastern Middle Aramaic dialects in 9th and 10th-century papyri.[12] To further cement his argument, Khan also pointed at originally Middle Iranian documentary practices appearing in the western provinces of the Abbasid empire from the late 8th century onward – such as the use of astral symbols of Iranian ascendancy in documents from Egypt.[13]

More generally, Arabic epistolary formulae and etiquette undergo substantial changes throughout the 9th century, which, while not being specifically Iranian-coded, certainly point to the influence of the Abbasid court in Baghdad and Sāmarrāʾ as a setter of bureaucratic fashions. In particular, the epistolary prescript characteristic of Umayyad-period letters gradually disappears from the record. In its stead, letters from the early 9th century onward begin *in medias res* and simulate a dialogue between the sender and addressee.[14] Characteristic of this new style is the use of a benediction for the addressee. Khan convincingly argued that these expressions of reverence – and the benediction *aṭāla allāh baqāʾaka* in particular – were adapted from Abbasid court ceremonies, specifically from benedictions used in official addresses during caliphal audiences. According to Khan's model, the formula subsequently became part of Abbasid official epistolary politesse and trickled down into the epistolary templates of progressively broader strata of the Arabic writing population.[15]

Throughout the years, Khan's "Pahlavi substrate" theory has gained wide recognition among Arabic papyrologists. While there is hardly any doubt that Khan's argument is compelling, the limited evidence at Khan's disposal left argumentative gaps in his model. The first and most evident of these is that the central piece of evidence from early Islamic Khurasan originated in a region in which the language of everyday writing prior and immediately following the Arab conquest was not Middle Persian in Pahlavi script, but rather Bactrian written in the Greek alphabet. Khan, in fact, hypothesized that the rise of cursive Arabic scripts in Khurasan was the result of the Abbasid administration employing bureaucratic personnel trained in Iran (see Figure 1).[16] The second missing link is that the theory presupposes the agency of biliterate scribes familiar with writing documents in both Pahlavi and Arabic. Yet, to the best of my knowledge, there is no direct evidence for a biliterate scribe in the Mīr b. Bēk family archive or among the caches of Middle Persian documents surviving from early Islamic Iran referenced by Khan.[17] Finally, the third gap in Khan's

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Brokerage in the Pre-Modern Islamic World, 600-1600, eds. Luke Yarbrough and Uriel Simonsohn (Edinburgh: EUP, in press).

[12] Khan, *Arabic Documents*, 43–49; Garosi, *New Empire*, 314–21; Eugenio Garosi, "Regional Diversity in the Use of Administrative Loanwords in Early Islamic Arabic Documentary Sources (632–800): A Preliminary Survey," in *Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean World: From Constantinople to Baghdad, 500–1000 CE*, eds. Jelle Bruning, Janneke de Jong, and Petra M. Sijpesteijn (Cambridge: CUP, 2022), 408–45.

[13] Khan, *Arabic Documents*, 87–88.

[14] Especially Grob, *Private Letters*, 41–42.

[15] Khan, "Remarks," 895; Khan, "Historical Development," 207; and Lucian Reinfandt, "Empireness in Arabic Letter Formulae," in *Official Epistolography and the Language(s) of Power. Proceedings of the First International Conference of the Research Network imperium & officium: Comparative Studies in Ancient Bureaucracy and Officialdom, University of Vienna, 10–12 November 2010*, eds. Stephan Procházka, Lucian Reinfandt, and Sven Tost (Vienna: ÖAW, 2015), 284–85. See also Rustow, *Lost Archive*, 173–206 for a discussion of the role of the Abbasid court in the propagation of script styles.

[16] Khan, "Historical Development," 211.

[17] A handful of Arabic documents on paper housed at Berkeley (*P.KhanBerkeley*) stems from the same cache of documents as hundreds of 6th to early 8th-century Pahlavi texts often referred to as the Pahlavi Archive. The material and scriptic features of these texts suggest a hiatus of a few generations between the latest Pahlavi items and the Arabic evidence. For the date of the Pahlavi Archive, see, in particular, Dieter Weber, "New Arguments for Dating the Documents from the 'Pahlavi Archive'," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 19 (2008): 215–22; and Dieter Weber, "Arabic Activities Reflected in the Documents of the 'Pahlavi Archive'," in *Documents, argenterie et monnaies de tradition sassanide*, ed. Ryka Gyselen (Bures sur Yvette: Groupe pour l'étude de la civilisation du Moyen Orient), 179–89. For the Arabic documents, see Geoffrey Khan, "The Arabic Paper Fragments from Berkeley," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 17 (2003): 31–34; Guitty Azarpay et al., "New Information on the Date and Function of the Berkeley MP Archive," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 17 (2003): 17–29. For the provenance of the archive, see Dieter Weber, "Villages and Estates in the Documents from the Pahlavi Archive: The Geographical Background," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 24
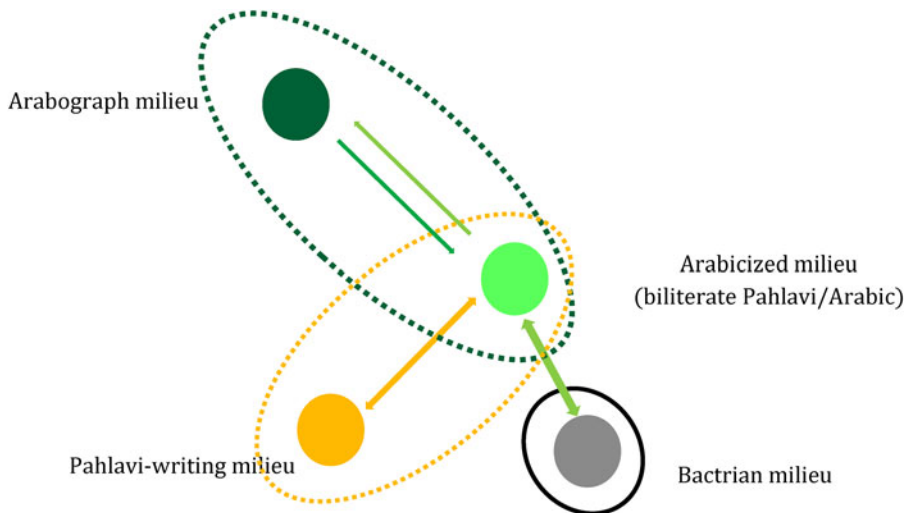
Figure 1. Language contact situation in early Islamic Bactria (according to Khan).

model of a so-to-speak *Persia capta ferum victorem coepit* is that it fails to provide any detail on the intermediary steps of the diffusion of the eastern writing style to the west of the Abbasid Empire. I argue that the comparatively understudied texts from 8th-century Sogdia are in fact instrumental to expanding the scope of Khan's model and filling some of its gaps.

Arabic-Sogdian bigraphism

The first piece that ostraca findings from Central Asia add to our knowledge of Arabic-Middle Iranian contacts is direct evidence of scribes skilled in both Arabic and Sogdian.

Several ostraca in both languages have been excavated in the citadel and lower city of Panjikent. The city and its ruler Dēwāshtīch played a key role in the revolt of the Sogdian aristocracy, which, with the assistance of the Turkic Türgesh, shook Transoxiana in the early 720s and was only completely quelled by the end of the following decade. Archaeological evidence shows that Panjikent was devastated by the Arabs in the summer 722, in the wake of Dēwāshtīch's defeat and eventual execution.[18] Thereafter, the area of the citadel was repurposed to house army barracks to quarter Arab troopers while the city appears to have been largely deserted.[19] Several areas of the city were restored throughout the 740s. This restoration was likely a result of the policy of appeasement pursued by the governor Naṣr b. Sayyār (in office 738–48) and the treaty of 741, which allowed Sogdians who

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(2010): 37–65. A handful of documents related to the Pahlavi Archive have recently surfaced in a cave near the village of Hastijan, this being the possible origin of the entire archive, see Nima Asefi, "A New Middle Persian Document from Hastijan belonging to the Farroxzād Family," *Berkeley Working Papers in Middle Iranian Philology* 1, no. 3 (2023), 1. For other archival contexts in which Arabic and Pahlavi evidence (arguably) overlaps chronologically, see the discussion of early Islamic ostraca from Merv and Chāl Tarkhān Eshqaband below in this article.

[18] For a reconstruction of the chronology of the Sogdian revolt and Dēwāshtīch's role in it based on the Mugh documents, see Grenet and de la Vaissière, "Last Days of Panjikent."

[19] The city of Panjikent has been the subject of extensive archaeological research since the 1930s. Archaeological reports and larger works of historical synthesis on the early Islamic history of the city are mostly written in Russian. For English-language synoptic accounts, summarizing the main findings of earlier scholarship, see Boris I. Marshak and Valentina I. Raspopova, "Panjikent and the Arab Conquest," *Journal of Inner Asian Art and Art and Archaeology* 7 (2016): 255–275 and Michael Shenkar, "The Arab Conquest and the Collapse of the Sogdian Civilization," in *The History and Culture of Iran and Central Asia From the Pre-Islamic to the Islamic Period*, ed. Deborah Tor and Minoru Inaba (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022), 95–125.

had fled to the Türgesh to return to their homes.[20] From the middle of the century onwards, the archaeological record once more shows signs of gradual urban decline. This is possibly connected to Abū Muslim's purges of Sogdian aristocracy in the early 750s, in the wake of the affirmation of Abbasid authority in the region. By the late 770s/early 780s, the city was permanently deserted.[21] The establishment of an Arab garrison in Panjikent and the city's eventual abandonment a few generations later thus offer an exceptionally precise chronological framework for the Arabic textual evidence found at the site.[22]

An ink-inscribed shard, found in a dwelling close to the eastern wall of the city, opens with the invocation *bi-sm allāh al-raḥm*[*ān al-raḥīm*] (In the name of God the Merciful the Compassionate; *basmala*) in Arabic before the scribe turns to Sogdian for the main body of the text.[23] The text is phrased as a report addressed to a person of obvious high standing.[24] If the latter was an Arab official, the inclusion of the *basmala* was probably intended as a sign of respect.[25] The house in which the bilingual shard was found, as well as an adjacent one, also yielded several other ostraca with writing exercises in Sogdian, possibly hinting at a scribal school.[26] Regardless of the specific situation, the use of Arabic for the formulaic part of the text indicates not only the scribe's Arabic literacy but also his awareness of Arabic documentary conventions, whereby Arabic was clearly perceived as the more formal language.

Further evidence for the progressive assimilation of local clerical personnel into the Arab administration is prosopographical. Another 8th-century Arabic ostracon discovered in the courtyard of the Panjikent citadel, likely connected with the administration of the military units stationed there, contains a list of names. In particular, the shard features one [ʿAbd] ar-Raḥmān b. *ad-Dibīr* (< MP *dbyr* = Sog. *δpyr,* "scribe"), suggesting that the person – much like some of the tax officials of the Mīr b. Bēk archive – was descended from a family of local bureaucrats, more specifically a family with a scribal background.[27] Three other persons mentioned in the same list all carry the title *mawlā* and one might speculate that

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[20] Marshak and Raspopova, "Panjikent," 256–58.

[21] Ibid., 259–61.

[22] More occasional visits by Arabs to the city prior to or immediately following the conquest of 722 are suggested by an Arabic ink-inscription on the fresco decoration of a house. The fresco is covered by a layer of plaster added as part of a restoration of the house after ca. 740. The Arabic inscription preserves the three letters *lʾ ʾ,* and was possibly intended as the beginning of the Muslim testimony of faith *lā i*[*lāh illā allāh* (there is no other god but God). See Shenkar, "Arab Conquest," n16 with further references. Early contact between Arab and Sogdian administrative personnel is also hinted at by the mention of a certain Marwān (possibly a convert) among the agents in service to the already mentioned Dēwāshtīch (Mugh A 14, l. 31) – though it is not stated whether he was involved in the writing of Arabic or Sogdian documents. On the origin and history of the, etymologically Persian, name Marwān, see Pavel Lurje, "*Khamir* and Other Arabic Words in Sogdian Texts," in *Islamisation de l'Asie centrale. Processus locaux d'acculturation du VIIe au XIe siecle,* ed. Étienne de La Vaissière (Paris: Association pour l'Avancement des Etudes Iraniennes, 2008), 42.

[23] Vladimir A. Livshits and Valentina I. Raspopova, "Sogdian Epigraphy from Panjikent," in *Academic Oriental Studies in Russia and the Neighboring Countries (2007–2015),* ed. Valerii P. Nikonorov and Vadim A. Alyokshin (St. Petersburg: Contrast, 2015), 327–43; Garosi, *New Empire,* 104.

[24] The address line reads *ʾt bgy* (to the lord...) before breaking up. The editors suggested that the complete address might have *ʾt bgy* [*khwbw*] (to the lord, the *khūw*), a typical address in the letters from Mount Mugh addressed to Dēwāshtīch. On the title *khūw,* see Étienne de la Vaissière, *Samarcande et Samarra: Elites d'Asie centrale dans l'empire Abbasside* (Paris: Association pour l'Avancement des Études Iraniennes, 2007), 38–39.

[25] On the use of non-Arabic titles of rank and honorifics by early Islamic Arab officials, see Arietta Papaconstantinou, "'What Remains behind: Hellenism and *Romanitas* in Christian Egypt after the Arab Conquest," in *From Hellenism to Islam: Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East,* eds. Hannah M. Cotton, Robert Hoyland, Jonathan J. Price, and David Wasserstein (Cambridge/New York: CUP, 2009), 447–66; Garosi, "'Those who follow the Guidance,'" Appendix II. On the adoption of the *basmala* (and *basmala*-like) formulae in non-Arabic documentary writings, see Garosi, *New Empire,* 217–60.

[26] Marshak and Raspopova, "Panjikent," 257 with further literature.

[27] Alexandr M. Belenitsky and Abdullo Isakov, "An Early Arabic Inscription on a Shard from Panjikent," *Epigrafika Vostoka* 19 (1969): 38–41 [in Russian].

these individuals were also locals who joined the ranks of the Arabs – though this is by no means a foregone conclusion.[28]

The appearance of administrative documents in Arabic and the evidence for multilingual scribal practices in 8th-century Panjikent suggests an increase in the Arab presence around the 740s.[29] Archaeological finds across Sogdia provide corroborating evidence that scribes were being trained bilingually at different administrative centers by the mid to late 8th century and document increasing investments in scribal infrastructure. Already during the governorate of Naṣr b. Sayyār, a *Dār al-imāra* was erected in Afrasiab/Samarkand and later expanded in the early Abbasid period.[30] Two of the several Arabic inscriptions found at the site were scribal exercises, suggesting that the building hosted a scribal school.[31] The earlier of the two – archaeologically datable to the third quarter of the 8th century and written in a blocky hand – is rather elementary, featuring only an Arabic alphabet preceded by a *basmala*.[32] Conversely, the later one – datable to the early 9th century – shows an Arabic epistolographic exercise executed in a well-versed chancery hand, flanked by a Sogdian exercise penned in a similar ductus and using a pen of similar thickness.[33] This strongly suggests that the Arabic and Sogdian texts were written by the same person, who was quite proficient in both languages. Evidence for advanced Arabic scribal training also comes from an ostracon from 790 found in a complex situated between the first and second *shahristān* in Paykend. The text on the shard shows the well-known official dating formula *wa-kutiba* ("it was written" + date) being practiced.[34] While none of these texts are demonstrably bilingual in the same vein as the Panjikent ostracon, they clearly show that Arabic was practiced in close

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[28] A similar ostracon, listing several *mawālī* with Iranian names, has been found in Paykend. See Abdulakhad R. Mukhamedjanov, Shukhrat T. Adylov, Djamul K. Mirzaakhmedov, and Grigoriĭ L. Semenov, *Paykend City-site. On the Problem of Studying a Medieval City of Central Asia* (Leningrad and Tashkent: FAN, 1988), 64 [in Russian]. See also the discussion of this text below in this section.

[29] Incidentally, the early 740s are also the timeframe in which Muslim narrative sources locate the translation of the *dīwān* into Arabic in Khurasan. On the translation narratives, see Marie Legendre, "The Translation of the Dīwān and the Making of the Marwanid 'Language Reform'," in *Navigating Language in the Early Islamic World: Multilingualism and Language Change in the First Centuries of Islam*, eds. Antoine Borrut, Manuela Ceballos, and Alison M. Vacca (Turnholt: Brepols, 2024), 89–166, for Khurasan, see 103–4 and 140–41.

[30] Frantz Grenet, "Le palais de Nasr ibn Sayyar à Samarkand (années 740)," in *Islamisation de l'Asie centrale. Processus locaux d'acculturation du VIIe au XIe siecle*, ed. Étienne de La Vaissière (Paris: Association pour l'Avancement des Études Iraniennes, 2008), 11–28.

[31] The restructuring of scribal institutions in 8th-century Transoxiana might have been catalyzed by the concurrent rapid collapse of the pre-conquest oligarchic civic communities (sogd. *nāf*). See Shenkar, "Arab Conquest," which underscores the role of Arab direct rule and that of the establishment of complicit local dynasties with authority on fiscal responsibilities previously shouldered by the *nāf*, in the dissolution of the civic communities.

[32] Grenet, "Palais de Nasr ibn Sayyar," 27 and fig. 12 (left).

[33] Ibid., 27 and fig. 12 (right).

[34] Grigoriĭ L. Semenov, "An Ostracon from the late 8th c. from Paykend," *Epigrafika Vostoka* 23 (1985): 25–26 [in Russian]. N.b. the upper part of the text was misinterpreted by Semenov. Read: (1) *wa-kutiba* (Semenov: *wly*); (2) *li-niṣf* (Semenov: *al-niṣf*) *min;* (3) *ṣafar wa-kutiba* (Semenov: *rkhb*); (4) *yawm as-sabt;* (5) *sanat arbaʿ;* (6) *wa-sabaʿīn wa-miʾa* (and it was written in the middle [= on the 15th] of Ṣafar of the year 174). Semenov's remark that the date corresponds to "June 30th 790, which really was a Saturday" is also wrong on account of both the day of the week (as June 30, 790 fell on a Wednesday) and of the overall conversion of the Arab date, corresponding in fact to July 3, 790 which was, incidentally, *actually* a Saturday. Based on the presence of several ceramic and glass vessels in the same room, the ostracon was interpreted by Semenov to be the log of a chemical/medical workshop. See Abdulakhad R. Mukhamedjanov and Grigoriĭ L. Semenov, "A Chemical Laboratory of 8th-century Paykend," *Social Sciences in Uzbekistan* 3 (1984): 35–39 [in Russian]. This supposition – reiterated in subsequent scholarship – finds no support in the textual evidence found in the room, which – apart from the dated text discussed above – includes another Arabic ostracon with a list of names, which points to a bureaucratic rather than scientific context. For other Sogdian and Arabic texts found in Paykend, see Andrey V. Omel'chenko, "Researches of the Bukhara Archaeological Expedition in Paykend," *Vostok* 6 (2019): 88 and 96 [in Russian]. I thank Gleb Schmidt for the reference and for assisting me with the Russian text. On the phrasing of early Islamic dating formulae and the factors that influenced them, see Eugenio Garosi, "The Time of the Chancery: Normative and Discretionary Dating in 7th–8th-century Arabic Epistolography," *Der Islam* 101 (2024): 383–408.

contact with Sogdian at several urban centers in the region. Finally, some additional contextual evidence for Arabic-Sogdian connections comes in the form of local bilingual Arabic-Sogdian coinage of Arab tributaries, such as the *ikhshīd*s of Ishtikhān and the *dehqān*s of Keshsh in the second half of the 8th century.[35]

In other terms, evidence of Arabic and Sogdian co-occurrences suggests a relative high-intensity contact compared to the Bactrian context examined by Khan – where direct contact between the Arabic and Bactrian scribal milieus appears to have been mediated by a (possibly) Pahlavi buffer zone.[36] In short, when looking at Sogdia, we do have our smoking gun: a class of biliterate (Middle Iranian-Arabic) scribes did arise in the region around the time of the Abbasid revolution (something only postulated by Khan for the evidence from Bactria). Furthermore, it appears that, at least in mid-8th-century Transoxiana, the mediation between Arabic and Iranian scribal milieus relied on bilingual clerks drawn from the local population, without necessarily presupposing a Pahlavi intermediary – i.e., unlike what Khan hypothesized for coeval Bactria (see Figure 2).

The language contact situation in mid to late 8th-century Sogdia appears to be roughly comparable with that of coeval Egypt. Here, as well, documentary records from the mid-8th century onward attest to the progressive blurring of previously well-established boundaries between the Arabic, Greek, and Coptic scribal worlds, as indicated by the emergence of Arabicized Christians within the ranks of the Arabs (and Arabic writing administration) and the appearance of multilingual exercises penned by the same person.[37]

The interplay between Arabic and local languages was highly dependent on the region, as suggested by evidence from Khurasan. Pahlavi as well as Arabic and Sogdian ostraca paleographically or archaeologically datable to the late Sasanian and early Islamic period have surfaced at several locations on the western side of the Amū Darya. The excavations in "Old Merv," in particular, have yielded a handful of scribal exercises on ostraca in Sogdian, Arabic, *and* Middle Persian datable to the late 7th/early 8th century, which are possibly the remnants of the archive of a scribal school (*dabīristān*).[38] Thus, it appears that, at least in the provincial capital of Merv, all three languages were practiced in contact with each other – though not necessarily at the same level. Two Arabic ostraca from this archive are simple alphabets, suggesting the trainee was taking their first steps towards learning to write in Arabic.[39] By contrast, the Sogdian scribal exercises are practices of epistolary formulae and numerals, indicating a type of training not directed at learning the language/script per se, but rather mastering a chancery skillset.[40] This possibly indicates that Sogdian was the mother tongue of local bureaucrats and the more "utilitarian" language

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[35] Aleksandr Naymark and Luke Treadwell, "An Arab-Sogdian Coin of AH 160: An Ikhshid in Ishtihan?," *The Numismatic Chronicle* 171 (2011): 359–66; Ol'ga. I. Smirnova, *Catalogue of Coins from the Citadel of Panjikent: Materials from the years 1949-1956* (Moskow: Izd-vo vostočnoǐ lit-ry, 1963), ns. 797 and 798 [in Russian]; Ol'ga. I. Smirnova, *Combined Catalogue of Sogdian Coins. Bronze* (Moskow: Izd-vo vostočnoǐ lit-ry, 1981), ns. 1660–81 [in Russian].

[36] It should be stressed that all the relevant evidence from early Islamic Bactria stems from a single rural setting and thus is not the most indicative term of comparison for evidence produced in urban administrative centers, such as the ostraca found in coeval Sogdia.

[37] Lucian Reinfandt, "Petosiris the Scribe," in *Living the End of Antiquity – Individual Histories from Byzantine to Islamic Egypt*, eds. Sabine R. Huebner et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 141–52; Garosi, "'Those who follow the Guidance'." For published examples of multilingual scribal exercises, see Lajos Berkes and Khaled Younes, "A Trilingual Scribe from Abbasid Egypt? A Note on CPR XXII 17," *Archiv für Papyrusforschung* 58 (2012): 97–100.

[38] Livshits, *Sogdian Epigraphy*, 54–55; Rezakhani, "Navigating Persian," 348. For the Sogdian ostraca found in Merv, see Alexander A. Frejman, "A Sogdian Inscription from Ancient Merv," *Notes of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the USSR Academy of Sciences* 7 (1939): 296–302 [in Russian]. For the Arabic ostraca, see Sergey B. Pevzner, "On Two Arabic Alphabets from Excavations in Merv," *Epigraphika Vostoka* 9 (1954): 24–37 [in Russian]. Other texts from the Merv excavations are discussed by A. A. Marushčenko in an unpublished report; for an overview, see Nikitin, "Middle Persian Ostraca," 103.

[39] Pevzner, "Two Arabic Alphabets."

[40] For the Sogdian scribal exercises, see Frejman, "Sogdian Inscription"; Livshits, *Sogdian Epigraphy*, 54–55. On different stages of learning underscored by different types of scribal exercises of the early Islamic period, see Naïm
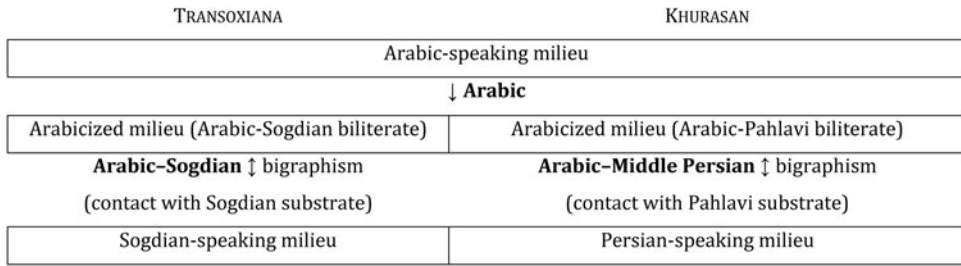
TRANSOXIANA	KHURASAN
Arabic-speaking milieu	
↓ **Arabic**	
Arabicized milieu (Arabic-Sogdian biliterate)	Arabicized milieu (Arabic-Pahlavi biliterate)
Arabic–Sogdian ↕ bigraphism	**Arabic–Middle Persian** ↕ bigraphism
(contact with Sogdian substrate)	(contact with Pahlavi substrate)
Sogdian-speaking milieu	Persian-speaking milieu

Figure 2. Language contact situation in early Islamic Central Asia.

of local administration, with Arabic being used in a supplementary function – a picture that resonates well with the language dynamics of the bilingual ostracon from Panjikent. It is unfortunate that Pahlavi material from the same archive remains unpublished. Regardless of the local differences, ostraca on both sides of the Amū Darya clearly point to the progressive intensification of the Arabic administrative presence in the region through the assimilation of local clerks into the Arabic writing bureaucracy.

From Samarkand to Sāmarrāʾ

This brings us to the last leap in Khan's model: the westward dissemination of eastern script features through the agency of the Abbasid administration. The task of filling this gap has been hitherto aggravated by the fact that virtually no documents from the late 8th and 9th centuries survive in the central Islamic lands. There is, however, one particularly significant exception.

In 1913, German excavations directed by Ernst Herzfeld in Sāmarrāʾ discovered a handful of Arabic administrative texts on papyrus and paper in the complex known as Dār al-khilāfa.[41] These documents were subsequently only partially edited by Herzfeld in his posthumous 1948 *Geschichte der Stadt Samarra*.[42] It is there that anther half-forgotten piece of evidence comes to the surface: Document 5 (=*P.HerzfeldSamarra* 6), a small paper fragment preserving traces of writing on both sides.[43] In his partial edition, Herzfeld read only the indication of "10 *mithqals*" appearing on the last line on the reverse side of the document, deeming the rest illegible.

Vanthieghem, "Un exercice épistolaire arabe adressé au gouverneur Ğābir ibn al-ʾAšʿaṯ," *Archiv für Papyrusforschung und verwandte Gebiete* 62 (2014): 402–05; Garosi, *New Empire*, 187–91.

[41] Ernst Herzfeld, *Geschichte der Stadt Samarra* (Hamburg: Eckardt und Messtorf, 1948), 271–81; for the content of documents on papyrus and paper, in particular, see Ibid., 271–74 (ns. 2–7). For the identification of the building with the Dār al-khalīfa (wrongly identified by Herzfeld as the Jawsaq al-Khāqānī), see Alastair Northedge, "An Interpretation of the Palace of the Caliph at Samarra (Dar al-Khilafa or Jawsaq al-Khaqani)," *Ars Orientalis* 23 (1993): 143–70. The complex in which the papyri were found, in particular, was identified by Herzfeld as the harem, but has convincingly been shown to have been part of the public portion of the palace (*dār al-ʿāmma*) by Northedge, "Interpretation," 146. The room of the discoveries, in particular, might be identified with the *qubbat al-maẓālīm* (lit. "dome of complaints," i.e., the hall in which petitions were heard) built by al-Muhtadī; see Alastair Northedge, *The Historical Topography of Samarra* (London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 2008), 141 and 137, fig. 56.

[42] On the dispersal of the Sāmarrāʾ finds across different museums and institutions, and their progressive publication in the 1920s and 30s, see Alexander Nagel and Rachael Woody, "Excavations in the Archive. An Update on the Ernst Herzfeld Online Resources at the Freer|Sackler in Washington DC," in *Beiträge zur islamischen Kunst und Archäologie* 4, ed. Julia Gonnella (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2014), 18–23. For the Arabic textual material, see in particular Lucian Reinfandt, "Administrative Papyri from the Abbasid Court in Samarra (AD 836–892): a First Report," in *Actes du 26e Congres international de papyrology*, ed. Paul Schubert (Geneva: Droz, 2012), 639–45.

[43] Here and in the rest of the article, I follow the document numbers as given by Reinfandt, "Administrative Papyri."

After examining the document, I was able not only to make progress on Herzfeld's reading of the Arabic text, but was also able to determine that the front side is in fact not Arabic, as Herzfeld had assumed.[44] As kindly confirmed by Desmond Durkin Meisterernst and Michael Shenkar, the side opposite the Arabic text contains the remains of three words in Sogdian.[45] By the first quarter of the 9th century, members of the Transoxiana nobility and their retainers were a cornerstone of the Abbasid military in Sāmarrāʾ.[46] I have argued elsewhere that Document 5 was likely connected to the milieu of the Sogdian regiments stationed in the Abbasid capital and possibly entered the palace as scrap paper.[47]

As for the point at hand, the identification of Sogdian writing in Sāmarrāʾ is relevant in several regards. Firstly, it provides proof that direct interaction between Sogdian and Arabic was not limited to the eastern frontier. Secondly, unlike earlier attestations of Middle Iranian languages in the early Islamic Empire, which typically stem from frontier zones (such as Mount Mugh) or from rural contexts (such as the sc. "Pahlavi archive"), Document 5 places actual Iranian scribes at the Abbasid court. This suggests that as late as the mid-9th century, Middle Iranian cursive scripts were to some degree not just a vestigial substrate but a living tradition practiced in the vicinity or even within the halls of Abbasid central power.[48]

These considerations raise the question of whether we should continue to view the emergence of Arabic curvilinear scripts to be the result of contact with a Pahlavi paleographic substrate *par excellence* or, rather, should we view the intertwining of Arabic and Middle Iranian scribal worlds as emerging from different sources spanning several languages and scripts – Sogdian included. Like Pahlavi, Sogdian cursive script is a distant derivate of Official Achemenidian Aramaic chancery script. Much like their Pahlavi counterparts, early Islamic Sogdian documentary texts are characterized by strong cursiveness. Some influences of Central Asian (and specifically Sogdian) origin on Arabic scribal practices are in fact attested. In her previously mentioned monograph *The Lost Archive*, Marina Rustow embarks on a detailed examination of the introduction of paper into the Islamic world.[49] Expanding on Jonathan Bloom's work, she concludes that Sogdian mercantile networks functioned as a conduit for paper (rag-paper in particular) to enter wider use in the early Islamic world.[50] Refuting the "Chinese etiology" of Islamic paper, Rustow points out that Arab officials along the Transoxiana border zone knew of and actively used paper decades before the battle of Talas, as is attested by the Arabic-Sogdian-Turkic archive of Dēwāshtīch (*rg.* 706–722), and the Arabic paper fragments from Sanjar Shah – a fact familiar to Arabic papyrologists but

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[44] The Arabic text can be reconstructed to *mā fī kull wāḥid min-hā | ʿashar mathāqil* (and each of them contains 10 *mithqāls*).

[45] Personal communication with Desmond Durkin Meisterernst, July 30, 2020; Personal communication with Michael Shenkar, February 25, 2021.

[46] For a detailed account of the enlistment of Sogdian nobility into the caliphal armies and its impact on Abbasid military practices, see de la Vaissière, *Samarcande et Samarra*.

[47] I have discussed preliminary conclusions on the wider social and archival context of Document 5 in the papers "Forging a new link: P.HerzfeldSamarra 6 Revisited" (ISAP VIII online conference, March 16, 2021), "The Frontier pushes back: From Local Languages to Imperial Substrate(s) in Scribal Practices in 8th-century Central Asia" (34. DOT, Berlin September 12, 2022), and "An Imperial Crossroad: Sāmarrāʾ as a 'Relay Zone' for Scribal Traditions" (Late Antiquity Forum, Israel Academy of Science, Jerusalem, May 28, 2023). A detailed edition and discussion of the text and its archival context is being prepared by Desmond Durkin Meisterernst and myself.

[48] The bilingual ostracon from the *dār al-imāra* of Afrasiab/Samarkand mentioned above is dated by Grenet ("Palais de Nasr ibn Sayyar," 27) to the first quarter of the 9th century based on contextual archaeological evidence. This would indicate that, in a period roughly contemporaneous with the Sāmarrāʾ dossier, Sogdian was still practiced alongside Arabic in the main seats of the Arab administration in Transoxiana. A 9th-century dating for the bilingual ostracon seems, however, at odds with the "long" epistolary prescript used in the Arabic part of the texts, which are typical of pre-800 documents (see Garosi, *New Empire*, 188, n. 110).

[49] For the detailed discussion, see Rustow, *Lost Archive*, 113–37.

[50] Jonathan Bloom, *Paper before Print: The History and Impact of Paper in the Islamic World* (New Haven (CT): YUP, 2001).

still fairly unknown beyond these circles.[51] In addition, Rustow further points out how the type of paper most widely spread in the Islamic world (rag-paper) corresponded to Sogdian rather than Chinese (typically mulberry paper) formulas. Documentary proof that Sogdian was, even if to a marginal extent, a language practiced in writing in the general vicinity of the Abbasid chancery substantiates Rustow's reconstruction. Furthermore, the active use of Sogdian in the Sāmarrāʾn environment opens the possibility that Middle Iranian scribes' role in fostering the Abbasid chancery's adoption of the use of (rag) paper might have been more direct than previously assumed.[52]

Now, does this mean we should do away with the notion of a Pahlavi substrate in favor of a Sogdian one? Once again, it is more prudent to avoid generalization. Firstly, the evidence from the *dabīristān* discussed above suggests that Khurasan possibly functioned as a relay zone between Sogdian and Pahlavi within Islamic chanceries. Furthermore, there is at least one (yet again, forgotten) documented instance of Arabic and Pahlavi appearing together in an 8th-century archival context from the central Iranian lands. In 1936, the excavations conducted by the so-called Rayy expedition in Chāl Tarkhān Eshqaband near Rayy discovered two late Sasanian palatial complexes that had been heavily renovated and expanded in the early Islamic period.[53] The site is most famous for its lavish stucco decorations, which were published in detail by Deborah Thompson.[54] Since then, Arabists have been completely oblivious to the fact that Thompson's book also included pictures of a group of Pahlavi *and* Arabic ostraca found at the site and datable archaeologically to before ca. 820.[55] While further conclusions on the archive will have to await the edition of the entire archive, a preliminary examination by myself and Thomas Benfey revealed consistencies between the content of Arabic and Middle Persian texts, suggesting potential chronological overlap (or close proximity at least) between them.[56] This would be the first instance of

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[51] Use of paper by the Arab chanceries in Khurasan is indicated by Mugh 1.l (720–721) a letter by the *amīr* ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Ṣubḥ. A further Sogdian letter on paper from the same archive (not mentioned by Rustow) was issued by the *amīr* of Khurāsān (in office 720–721) Saʿīd b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (edited by Vladimir A. Livshits *Sogdian Documents from Mount Mugh II: Legal Documents and Letters* (Moskow: Izd. vostoc noj lit, 1962), 221 [in Russian] with emendations by Lurje "*Khamir*," 40 and an English summary by Livshits, *Sogdian Epigraphy*, 203). For the Arabic paper framents from Sanjar Shah, see *P.HaimPaper* 1–3.

[52] Rustow, *Lost Archive*, 129 (cf. also 135–36) raises the question of whether use of paper by the Sogdians for high-end correspondence and its adoption by the Umayyad administration might not have been based on Sassanian use in royal correspondence. To the best of my knowledge, this claim finds no support hitherto in the extant Pahlavi documentary evidence from Iran and other regions, such as Egypt and Tabaristan. While no original document from the Sassanian royal chancery has been discovered, documents issued by Persian army commanders during the Sassanian occupation of Egypt show a preference for parchment over the more abundantly available papyrus, suggesting that the former was considered the medium of choice for prestige correspondence. The fact that paper is only found in the Arabic documents from the so-called Pahlavi archive (likely early-9th century) in discontinuity with the earlier Pahlavi documents (6th to early-8th century) of the same provenance, suggests that paper was in fact a novelty introduced by the Arabs.

[53] Deborah Thompson, *Stucco from Chal Tarkhan-Eshqabad near Rayy Including Illustrations of the Excavated Ostraca from the Same Site* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1976), XII. To the best of my knowledge, no archaeological report on the CT excavation is available. More information on the so-called Rayy expedition will be available following the publication of the results of the *Recovering Rayy Project* directed by Renata Holond. I thank Thomas Benfey for the reference. George C. Miles, *The Numismatic History of Rayy* (New York: The American Numismatic Society, 1938) discusses several numismatic findings from Chāl Tarkhān Eshqaband (marked by the siglum CT). On the Sassanian-early Islamic palace complex in Chāl Tarkhān Eshqaband, see also Michael G. Morony "Social Elites in Iraq and Iran: After the Conquest," in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East VI: Elites Old and New*, eds. John Haldon and Lawrence I. Conrad (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2004), 283–84.

[54] Thompson, *Stucco*.

[55] The latest coins found at CT are dated to the year 206 AH (822/823 CE), see Miles, *Numismatic History*. For an overview of the archive, see Garosi, *New Empire*, 98–99 and ns. 388–389 and Thomas Benfey, "Windādag's Orders: Ten Unpublished Middle Persian Ostraca from Chāl Ṭarkhān-ʿEshqābād," in *Deciphering the Illegible: Festschrift in Honour of Dieter Weber*, ed. Maria Macuch and Arash Zeini (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2024), 15–18 and 26–27.

[56] See, in particular, CT-133/2 = Thompson, *Stucco*, pl. XXXIII fig. 5 in Pahlavi (edited by Dieter Weber, "Die Pahlavi-Ostraca von Čāl Tarxān-Ešqābād," in *Persian Origins: Early Judaeo-Persian and the Emergence of New Persian;*

direct documentary evidence for Arabic and Pahlavi being practiced side by side in the same archival context and time framework. In other words, these texts offer us a window – however small – into the truly bilingual (or even biliterate) scribal routines conducive to the very assimilation of Pahlavi scribal features into Arabic documentary scripts that lies at the core of the Pahlavi substrate theory.[57]

To reiterate, evidence of Arabic-Middle Iranian contacts from the early 8th to the mid-9th century offers hard proof of biliterate actors active in several social settings, ranging from the frontier of the Islamic empire in Transoxiana to the imperial capital of Sāmarrāʾ, passing through rural Iran. In view of the evidence discussed, we can prudently assume that the intertwining of Arabic and Middle Iranian scribal worlds had various sources spanning several languages and scripts. Pahlavi was certainly one, but not necessarily always the only (or, depending on the context, the main), vehicle of such connections.

Conclusion

To summarize, I have argued that, in the absence of larger corpora of documentary evidence, documentary diplomatics can serve as a window into the increasing density of Arab imperial presence in late Umayyad and early Abbasid Sogdia. Multilingual documents from the mid to late 8th century, in particular, show not just the deepening social reach of the Arabic language in local society, but also offer proof that biliterate (not just bilingual) clerks drawn from the ranks of local administrators came to embody a point of synthesis between Arabic and substratal scribal milieus in the region. Finally, the evidence presented in this brief overview both confirms and recalibrates Khan's theory of a Pahlavi substrate: it confirms the theory insofar as it provides hard evidence for the existence of biliterate Iranian scribes both in Central Asia and at the very heart of Abbasid imperial power in Sāmarrāʾ. At the very least, this indicates that Middle Iranian scribal practices not only constituted a formative substrate of Arabic ones, but continued to be actively practiced in close contact with Arabic in the imperial chancery as late as the mid-9th century. At the same time, the little-known ostraca from early Islamic Central Asia indicate that, at least in Transoxiana, Sogdian rather than Pahlavi appears to have functioned as the primary interface between the Middle Iranian and Arabic scribal traditions.

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[57] If we assume a late 8th/early 9th-century date for the CT-ostraca, the Arabic of these texts shows many of the cursive tendencies noted by Khan in his analysis of documents from (roughly) coeval Bactria.

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