Detail from above the entrance of Tehran’s fire temple, 1286/1917–18. Photo by © Shervin Farridnejad
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Reviews


Obituary

There is ample evidence that during the Sasanian period, dancers and entertainers achieved some sort of official recognition.¹ The best known episode is the coming of the gypsies as entertainers captured in the Šāhnāme of Ferdowsi and Perso-Arabic sources.² The Umayyads appear to have continued the practice if we are to view the frescos from Qusayr ‘Amra in Syria,³ where the new religion of Islam was not a hindrance for dancing and was influenced by the Sasanian tradition. But more information on dancers and dancing in the Iranian world comes from the Greater Khorāsān, Central Asia and all the way to China. (fig.1&2)

In honor of Professor Amouzegar, we would like to contribute a note on the occurrence of the word for dancing in the Middle Persian and its continuance in the Classical Persian. In the fifth century CE,

¹- Masʿudi, 1374, p.240
²- Jahiz, p.492 & Hedayat, M. 1393, p.41
the great Sasanian ruler, Wahrām Gūr is associated with dance and entertainment. We have both literary sources as well as material culture demonstrating that dancing was part of life and that there were no prohibitions against it. (fig.3)

The Shāhnāmeh deals with Bahrām Gūr and his visit to a dehqān named Borzin and his three daughters. Each daughter is described as being able to entertain the king of kings in the following manner:4

All three went to the king, having placed jeweled hats on their head.
one was dancer and the other was harpist
and third one was a good singer and lute player

The term also appears in Tārikh-e Bayhaqi when Baihaqi describes Sultan Mahmud Ghazni’s fest in Jayhūn:5

On the river bank, the entertainers on Termez, dancing women and drummers more than three hundreds participated, foot stomped, and played.

A century later, Naser Khosrow employed the same word for dancing in his poetry which suggests pāy-kūb as the earliest recorded word for dance:6

Expelled with sorrow I am, when in my presence are
Players of the tambour, dancers and masters of lute

Thus, in the early Classical Persian one finds pāy-kūb “foot pounding” or in American parlance, “foot stomping” for dancing. Of course we do have another word for dancing in Persian, namely yer (Farhang-e Nezām, Dehkhoda). However, it is not certain how old yer-dādan is. The term yer meaning to turn, return as well as returned to the place might have entered from Khwarezmian into Persian.7

4- Ferdowsi,2005,vol. 6, p. 480
5- Baihaqi, 1383, p.248
6- Al-Qubadiani, 1374, Qasīde-ye 199
7- Henning, 1971, p.39
We also have the notions of dancing among the eastern Iranian people according to Chinese literary and material sources. An ancient poem offers a detailed description of an Iranian dancer:

Iranian whirling girl, Iranian whirling girl, At the sound of the string and drums, she raises her arms...

In another example, Sogdian tomb doors and tomb decorations also depict some scenes from dancers and entertainers who perform the popular Sogdian whirl. (figs. 3 & 4)

But what is the Middle Persian word for dancing? MacKenzie in his Pahlavi dictionary does not mention the word for dance, and neither does Nyberg in his glossary. But indeed the word does exist in the Middle Persian. There is a list of court performers in the Middle Persian text, *Husrav i Kawādān ud Rēdag-ē* (Khusro and a Page), edited and translated, followed by copious notation by Samra Azarnouche. Among these arts one finds a passage where the young man recounts his musical and recitation skills, where the last skill is mentioned as the following:

\[ W\ p'w'cyk\ krtn' 'wst't GBRA HWEM \]
\[ ud\ pā-wāzīg\ kardan awestād mard hēm \]
“and in dancing I am masterly accomplished”

Thus, one finds the Middle Persian for dancing as *pā-wāzīg* “foot-playing,” or better, “foot-moving.” Does this word continue to survive or was simply replaced by Persian *pāy-kūbi*? In fact, this must be the case except for one text that still offers *pāy-bāzī*, the eleventh century Persian romance *Vis o Rāmin*.

The passage is about Shah Mobad Monikan, king Marv’s Nowruz celebration, where one of the activities is described as follows:

گروهی در سباع و بازی
گروهی در شاط و اسب‌تازی

A group in mirth and horse riding
A group in whirling and dancing

The question is as to why the Middle Persian form of the word for dancing only appears in *Vis o Rāmin*. One can suggest that the text itself is a product of late antique Iranian literary tradition. Long ago, V. Minorsky had suggested that based on the occurrence of archaic Middle Iranian (Parthian) words in the *Vis o Rāmin*, the text is much older and Fakhruddin ‘as’ad Gurgāni might have used an older source. Hence we would like to suggest that the inclusion of this Middle Persian term in a Clas-
Fig 1. A silver-gilt ewer with female figures, Sixth or Seventh century, Taken by T. Daryaee, Tehran: National Museum of Iran

Fig 2. A dancer with Phrygian cap on a lotus petal base, Central Asia (after Juliano & Lerner 2001, p.255)

Fig 3. The tomb door of a family Cemetery at Yanchi, Ningxia (after Juliano & Lerner 2001, p.250, fig. A)

Fig 4. A tomb decoration with Central Asian musicians and a dancer (after Juliano & Lerner 2001, p.252, fig. C)
Consequently, one can state that the older word for dancing is \( pā-wāzīg / pāy-bāzī \), only continued in the Classical Persian in *Vīs o Rāmīn* because of the archaic textual tradition. It is only the archaism of *Vīs o Rāmīn* that preserved *pāy-bāzī*, while eventually it was replaced by the term *Pāy kūbi* in the Classical Persian literature.
Bibliography


