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MORE ABOUT NWT/NŌD AND ADIABENE

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The recent publication of a detailed and thorough study by M. Marciak on Adiabene, in combination with other similar small kingdoms like Sophene and Gordyene, provides a fresh starting point for topographical and linguistic considerations regarding the name of Adiabene in sources from Parthian and Sasanian times. Not only does it cover the political history of Adiabene from the Hellenistic period until the end of the Sasanian empire, but also the historical geography of this area, its cultural landscape with the included onomastics and its archaeological heritage. This study replaces a lot of former work done on Adiabene,¹ including articles by the author himself beginning in 2011.² The relatively abundant Greek and Latin reports of classical writers form, by necessity, the main core of his argument, but they view Adiabene from a Western perspective, mostly during the conflicts between the Roman and later Byzantine emperors, and the Parthian and Sasanian Kings of Kings. The remains from sources of the Near Eastern realm are extremely scanty. Apart from some *Acts of the Martyrs*, we possess almost no longer textual references directly from the area of Adiabene itself. The classical sources refer to the entire region under the Greek designation Ἀδιαβηνή, which was rendered into Aramaic as Bēt Ḥadhyb/Ḥdyb, primarily by Syriac-Aramaic sources, such as the *Synodicon* of the Nestorian Church (from

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¹ Though numerous articles on single subjects exist, Adiabene as whole was never studied before apart from some smaller lexical entries. The latest was written by Harrak 2018 in *Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity Online*. The article Adiabene by Sellwood (1985) seems to be outdated. Also see Luther 2015.

² See Marciak 2011, 179–208 and also Marciak 2013, 160–178. See also Marciak / Wojcikowski 2016, 79–101.

410 CE onward), alongside a few Talmudic expressions. There are also glimpses of ecclesiastical sources until the end of the 9th century, and some titles of certain metropolitan bishops up to the 14th century.³ The etymology of both names is rather unclear: some earlier proposals are not convincing to every scholar, while the rendering of Adiabene from Parthian and Sasanian sources presents even more problems. For Gyselen, who at first followed Gignoux in this point, the Aramaic name for the region was officially changed with Šābuhr I as Nōd-Ardaxšīragān; judging by some Sasanian seals, this designation was used until the 7th century.⁴ Yet, Marciak⁵ argued against it because the version Nōd-Ardaxšīragān for Adiabene must be a later phenomenon, eventually going back to Ardāšir II, when he was king of Adiabene (*malkā d-Hadyab*) before following his brother as ‘King of Kings’ in 379 CE. At least for the Later Sasanian period, we can be sure that it was a province (*šahr*) of the Sasanian Empire in its own right.⁶ Considered by Gyselen as ‘a generic name’, which consists of an unknown Iranian element Nōd plus the name of the reigning king, the translated version in Greek SKZ 30 leaves no doubt that Adiabene is meant here. But what is going on with the Parthian and Sasanian rendering under Šābuhr I in the Ka‘ba-i Zardušt in the Parthian version *ntwšrkn* SKZ 24 and as *nwthštrkn* SKZ 30, cf. also the similar, but only partially preserved inscriptions [*nw*]thštrkn KSM 16 (Sar Mešhad) and [*nw*]th[štrkn] KNRm 35 (Naqš-e Rustam). In her work of the *La géographie administrative de l’Empire Sasanide* from 2019 Gyselen came to the conclusion that in the 3rd century there existed a possible Iranian province Nōdšīragān, eventually transferred about 379 CE to Nōd-Ardašīragān.⁷ Unfortunately she wrote this without any considerations of the articles written by Lipiński and Marciak. Marciak is following the linguistic explanations provided by Lipiński contained in two articles; the first appeared in 1982⁸ and the second in 2015.⁹ Hence there is only one conceivable solution for Marciak that in the later Sasanian period, possibly after 379 CE, name changes took place for the territory of Adiabene, which would guide us to a completely different linguistic field, to an Iranian Nōd combined with an Iranian personal name Arda(x)šīr. Lipiński refers to the Hatra-inscription on a royal statue beginning with (H 21) *šlm’ dy ’tlw mlk’ ntwn’ šry’* ‘statue of Attalos, king of Natūn-Issar’, and with statues of magnates using Natūn-Issar as ancestor (H 113/14) *šlm’ dy ’lkwd br ’stnq br ntwn’ šr*

³ The church province Adiabene/Hadhyb was newly installed as the Eparchy Adiabene by the Catholic Church 2019; see https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eparchie_Adiabene.

⁴ See Gyselen 1989, 56.78–79 and Gignoux 1986, 695.

⁵ Marciak 2017, 414.

⁶ See Gyselen 2019, 166.

⁷ See Gyselen 2019, 165, but the geographical connex between an own small kingdom and the later provincial designation stays unclear.

⁸ Lipiński 1982, 119–20 who turns at that time only to the Hatra references.

⁹ Lipiński 2015, 205.

‘statue of Alkud/r, son of Ustanaq, son of Natūn-Issar.’ According to his interpretation, the name of Adiabene should be rendered as Semitic ‘given by Issar’, even if the first element denotes a more archaic participle with *nat(t)un*. Also the few Greek inscribed bronze coins for the city of Natounissarokerta, dated to the 1st century CE, should be identical with this name, but more often we find the shortened version Natounia.¹⁰ Based on those Hatraean personal names, Lipiński wanted to observe a clear Semitic background also in the versions of the Kirdīr inscriptions under Šābuhr I. For him, *nwthštrkn* SKZ 30 refers to a Natūn-hištar-kana ‘moat of Natūn-Ištar’, in the Parthian version SKZ 24 *ntwšrkn* with the same meaning, only with the different spelling of Issar. To accomplish his idea, he had to intervene twice in the text. The spelling with w should be a scribal mistake for n; he also had to accept a metathesis t/n. He concluded that in the Parthian age this would amount to a new name ‘moat of Natūn-Issar,’ as seat for the government and the name of the whole country.¹¹

To expand the discussion, we can now rely on three further references for *nwt*. Two of them appear in unpublished Mandaean lead rolls, the other in a magic bowl known since 1993, written in Babylonian Aramaic square script. Altogether, they cast doubt on the current interpretation.

A) Nw’t in the Mandaean lead roll 1Ba (BM 132956+)

We may cite a further reference for Nwt found in a lead roll belonging to the archive of Pīr Nukrāya son of Abandūxt. After enrolling, a lead sheet emerged with over 320 lines. The archive is currently housed in the British Museum and is being published by Ch. Müller-Kessler. It is cited in an incantation, which is characterized by a significant number of Mandaean demons, often accompanied by additional details, sometimes including real geographical names, and sometimes by designations taken from the Mandaean magic world. Due to a lack of archaeological data, I can only assume a date range of the 5th to 7th centuries CE for the entire archive. However, many of the demonized gods and their cults are likely much older and were probably often miscopied or completely misunderstood.

¹⁰ The location of the city Natounissarokerta or Natounia is still unknown, though the archaeologists of the ongoing investigation of Rabana-Merquly in the Zagros mountains suspect this as designation of this site; see Brown / Raheem / Abdulla 2022. Personally I would look more for a Parthian fortress, for example Bdīgar (*bdygr*); see Marciak 2017, 304-5. For Natounissarokerta I would rather assume a settlement on the Lesser Zāb between Arbela and Kirkuk, at least lying on a major road. Because of the Greek coin inscriptions one could imagine that Demetrias, probably founded as polis in the 2nd century BC by the Seleukids, was renamed by Natūn-Issar, the ancestor of a new dynasty of Adiabene. But there is no ground for another city than Arbela as seat for the administration of Adiabene. For Demetrias, see Cohen 2013, 122 and Marciak 2017, 317.

¹¹ Lipiński 2015, 205. See Marciak 2017, 315.

1Ba 179–181 ‘syr’ lylyt’ d-’l tyl’ d-nw’t y’tyb’ wqry’ lnpš’ n’n’y
d-qy’ d-nw’t

Bound is the Lilith, who sits on the Tell of Nw’t, and by herself is called Nanay of Nw’t.

Very informative is the appearance of this demonized Lilit-demon in the Great Mandaean Demon List, as not many demons are listed to such a great extent. Remarkable, next to the special topographical scenario, is that the female demon was sitting on a Tell, and also the citation of her cultic name. The topographical designation of the deity Nanay (Nanāia) is even identical with the name of the Tell.

Nw’t here means not Adiabene in general, but equally the city with the temple of the deity Nanay/Nanāia, which was situated on top of the Tell and was also called *nwt*. This could be nothing other than the Tell of Arbela, with its deity Issar, the domicile of the Ištar of Arbela, whose cult of Nanay/Nanāia later served the same religious function as the Ištar/Issar from the 9th to the 6th century BC. For the Aramaic-speaking inhabitants of the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE Ištar was identical with Nanay/Nanāia. In the Mandaean lead rolls, Ištar is mentioned only in a generic sense as a female deity, never acting as a singular goddess.¹² Nanāia was one of the most essential cults in Adiabene and was also deeply rooted in Zoroastrian beliefs. After Strabo (16.1.3/4), the goddess – unfortunately, the textual passage appears to be garbled – could be emended to *Anāhīd* or *Nanāja*.¹³ Probably, the deity of Arbela was also worshipped in a religious centre at the Iranian site. When *Aitīlāhā*, a former priest of the Issar/Nanāia Temple, converted to Christianity, a swift reaction from the Sasanian administration followed, and he was executed by *Tām-Šābuhr*, the magbed of the province. This might also be one of the reasons why, under *Šābuhr II*, a persecution of some leading Christians took place in Arbela and entire Adiabene.

The writing *nw’t* with an aleph in the lead roll is not so unusual; at least a Semitic and softer pronunciation at the end could be explained by the aleph here.

B) Nhw’ty’ in the Mandaean lead roll 2Ba (BM 132956+)

A Mandaean lead roll from the same archive as Pīr Nukrāya shows a similar context and contains partly the same demons as 1Ba, but in a different order.

¹² For Ištar as a generic deity within Mandaean and other texts of the Late Antiquity, see Müller-Kessler 2017–2018, 271–274. See also the short oversight over later syncretisms between Ištar, Nanāja and *Anāhīd* at the appendix by Drewnowska-Rymarz 2008, 159–167.

¹³ See Marciak 2017, 275 who pleads for Nanāja.

2Ba 59/60 ‘*syr’ nn’y d-nhw’ty’*
 Bound is the Nanay of Nhw’ty’

Apart from the different spellings, the text passages 1Ba 179-181 and 2Ba 59/60 indicate the same geography and cult of the deity Nanay. It is evident that in 2Ba 59/60 we have a shortened variant of 1Ba 179-181, here only with the addition of the affix -y’, indicating the current Semitic *nomen gentilicium* for Adiabene. But is the writing Nhw’t in 2Ba 59/60 actually a reflex of the pronunciation of this term, or is it connected to one of the many inconsistencies in the textual transmission of the Great Demon List over the centuries?

C) Nwt/Nōd in a magic bowl inscribed in Babylonian Aramaic script

In the text of a magic bowl, published years ago by Naveh and Shaked,¹⁴ we unexpectedly reencounter our Nwt, which had hitherto been unnoticed in its geographical context within the research. According to the authors’ description, the bowl belonged to the Geoffrey Cope Collection in Herzlia (Israel).¹⁵ The photo of the bowl on plate 29 demonstrates a rather carelessly written text in Babylonian Aramaic letters, including a fairly clumsy attempt at a great inner circle, without any mark or figure of a demon.

Bowl 24 (1) *mzmn hdyn qm’y’ lhmrh lbyswmyh wlmntrnwth dhmrh
 dbwrz bhrm br {dwt’ty} dwt’y {mn} mn rwstq’ dqrbyl* (2) *dbdyzh
 m’th* ... (long insertion of Jewish phrases and magic elements) ...
 (5) *’rq nwt lhmrh bwrz b’hrm br dwt’y nyh’ {bs} bsym hmryh
 bwrz b’hrm br dwt’y dl’ nyzryg wl’ nystpp wl’ nyht* ... [long insertion of standard closing formulas] ...

(1) This amulet is for his wine, for his good taste and for the protection of the wine of Burz Bahrām son of Dutai of
 (2) the Rūstaq Qarbil, which is at Diz, his town/land ...
 (5) The land of Nwt (is) for the wine of Burz Bahrām son of Dutai. May the wine of Burz Bahrām son of Dutai, be sweet. May it not be spilled, nor burned, nor go down ...

The bowl, adorned with a wine charm and interrupted by more prolonged spells of Hebrew characters, has uncommon features. First, it belongs to a relatively

¹⁴ Naveh / Shaked 1993.

¹⁵ The current whereabouts for this bowl are not clear to me.

small lot of bowls, the content of which is not meant for the health of a man or woman, nor his house and cattle, but for the preservation of certain goods of his owners. Also uncommon is the mention of a precise location for the wine trader Burz Bahrām. Unfortunately, the town with the Iranian designation of Diz, which means ‘fortress’, and also the Rūstaq (border district) of Qarbil, cannot be located at this time.¹⁶ The decisive line of this charm is the geographical term *'rq nwt* at the beginning of line 5. Here, the authors rely on the existence of *NWT* from Genesis 4:16, where Cain stayed after the killing of Abel. They combine the Bible verse with the message of the wine charm: ‘Its occurrence here is difficult to explain, unless we assume a certain play on words, so *nwt* means also “wine skin”, and the expression *'rq nwt* may have been jocularly used for the room where wine jars and skins were kept’. This very carefully balanced attempt of the authors to explain this *nwt* as geographical expression on the basis of a single and very remote and insignificant place name somewhere in Palestine is, of course, more than doubtful. Further, this *nwt*, seen as a wine skin, belongs to a Western Talmud with Hebrew passages; it was not used in bowls originating from the East. Much more likely that it alludes to the origin of this wine by the merchant, and therefore, he praises its sound quality. This *nwt* is nothing other than the landscape of Adiabene, here used in the Sasanian version. Besides the new information that Adiabene or *Nwt* was a wine-producing country, this Babylonian bowl also confirms that *Nōd* alone could be in use for the whole region of Adiabene.

The three new references for *Nwt* confirm that *nwt* or *Nōd* must be the official designation for Adiabene, at least in the Parthian period, with certainty at the beginning of the Sasanian period with Šābuhr I, and perhaps also later. The Semitic-based explanations given by Lipiński and his attempt to read a participle *Ntwn* instead of *nwt* and his turn to *ntw* are probably not correct. That a letter *waw* was simply replaced by a letter *nun* within three middle-Persian inscriptions belonging to the chief magician Kirdīr, was a priori not very likely; with the new references presented here it is out of the question, apart from the assumption of the methatesis *n/t* in the Pahlavi version of this text. This is valid also for his interpretation of a toponym ‘Natūn-Issar-kana’ as ‘moat of Natūn-Issar’.¹⁷

¹⁶ See for the vain attempts by Naveh / Shaked 1983, 135 to bring together a Persian *diz* ‘fortress’ with different proposals for Qarbil, so the Nahr Bil or Kār Bēl in Babylonia. I could add to this the bowl edited by Levene / Bohak (2020, 61) 1. 8 *Krb'l*'. One of the more prominent and earliest Sasanian settlements in Mesopotamia with an Iranian element *diz* is Diz-puhr or arab. Dezful, a town of the Elymais/Susiana region.

¹⁷ For the supposed element *kana*, Lipiński 2015, 204 notes some Old Iranian Persepolis-tablets like Par(r)ikana and Apkana. This sounds strange, as between the *-kana* of the Persepolis area and an Iranian ending *-kn*, interpreted by him as ‘moat’ or in a ‘semantic shift’ to ‘fort’ as the new seat of the government, lay more than 600 years. As a comparison, I could refer to the neighbouring province Garmegān/Garmekan, undoubtedly reflecting Iranian *garm*(‘g) ‘heat’, which is called Bēt Garmai/Garmē in Syriac with its capital Karkā d-Selōk/Kirkuk. See Milik 1972, 57 with remarks on the Iranian Suffix *-ga+ān*.

Theoretically, one may postpone this with the argument that all three new references could be later in time when only Nōd-Ardaxšīragān as a provincial designation was in use. Marciak wants to see in 379 CE as the date for the introduction of this new name when Ardashīr, king of the small kingdom of Adiabene who belonged to the family of the Sasanian rulers as the brother of Šābuhr II, took over the central kingship as Ardashīr II (379–383 AD).¹⁸ Marciak assumes, and I agree with him, that from this time on, after a radical reform of the government, Adiabene could only function as one of the provinces (*šahr*) of the Sasanian Empire. It may be that the veneration of Issar or Nanāia by the autochthonous population was not apt anymore for the now centralized Sasanian administration of the Empire. Hence, the change in names was somehow cogent. But there is not the slightest evidence that the Great Demon List of the Mandaean was drafted late in the Sasanian time at the turn of the 4th to 5th century; all geographical arguments speak for the earlier Sasanian, in some cases also to the Late Parthian period.

Is it possible that Late Sasanian Nōd-Ardaxšīragān replaced an earlier Iranian Nōd-Issargān for Adiabene? That would mean that only the byname of Nōd was changed, away from the local dominating deity Issar or Nanāia and transferred to the name of the king, but the official designation for the administrative unit as Nōd for Adiabene stayed the same. An answer to this question affects also the *ntwšīrakan* ŠKZ 24 in the Parthian version because Huyse in his edition favours this and also the reading Nodšīrakan in ŠKZ 30.¹⁹ Still, judging by the geography this seems very unlikely, as Marciak notes.²⁰ The -šr- in the Parthian text for Issar offers not such obvious problems; one can refer to Šar-bēl, i.e. Issar-bēl, for the previous priest of Ištar of Arbela. But what is the origin of Nōd? One has to take into consideration the few personal names on seals of the 6th century with *nwt*, listed by Gignoux,²¹ like Nōd-Ādur, Nōd-Ādur-Farrbay, Nōd-Farrbay, Nōd-Gōrak, and seen as hypocoristics Nōd and Nōdag. No Iranian scholar was able to give any explanations for this Nōd on the Sasanian seal inscriptions until now, and the remarks by Gignoux on p. 136 ‘le 1^{er} membre du nom n’est pas analysable’ are still valid. This leaves us at least the possibility that the Nōd on seals is identical with the same Iranian Nōd used to name Adiabene of the official administrative texts. It is at least doubtful that *nwt* or *nhw’t* of the Mandaean lead rolls provide some answers to the etymology of this name. Going by the bowl text of C that *nwt* is the common rendition for Adiabene, at least in Sasanian times. Thus it may be that here the Aramaic articulation of a rather foreign idiom for Mandaean writers of singular lead sheets plays a role.

¹⁸ Marciak 2017, 412.

¹⁹ Huyse 1999, 22–23 § 2.

²⁰ Marciak 2017, 309–10. See also Marciak / Woicikowski 2016, 92.

²¹ Gignoux 1989, 136–37 no. 691–697.

The *nwt* of our new reference in A is undoubtedly identical with the city of Arbela. Probably, the city with the Nanāia/Ištar temple on top of this tell was taken over by the provincial designation. For the city of Greek Arbela and later Arbila for Arabic speakers in medieval times, or modern Erbil, it was only an interlude. With the end of Sasanian domination, the *nwt* for Adiabene disappears completely, but not the Aramaic Ḥydhab and its Greek counterpart.

Ultimately, I am unable to provide a satisfying answer to the question of whence Nōd is derived. It surely does not belong to the vocabulary of any known Iranian language. Still, it cannot be ruled out that Pahlavi or Parthian speakers adopted the Semitic name Natūn-Issar as founders of the dynasty in Adiabene and shortened it to a more familiar-sounding name for their languages. However, this must have occurred in earlier Parthian history, in the 1st century BC. From the Hatrean personal names and the Natounia on the coins, there is no easy way to lead us, via Semitic and philological considerations, to our Nōd or Adiabene.

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Abstract

The classical sources refer to Adiabene as Ἀδιαβηνή, which was rendered into Aramaic as Bēt Ḥadhyb/Ḥdyb, primarily by Syriac-Aramaic sources, such as the *Synodicon* of the Nestorian Church (from 410 CE onward), alongside a few Talmudic expressions. The etymology of both names is unclear. To expand the discussion, one can now rely on three further references for *nwt*. Two of them appear in unpublished Mandaean lead rolls, while the other is found in a magic bowl, known since 1993, written in Babylonian Aramaic square script. The three new references confirm that *nwt* or *Nōd* must be the official designation for Adiabene, at least in the Parthian period, with certainty at the beginning of the Sasanian period under Šābuhr I, and perhaps also later. The Semitic-based explanations provided by Lipiński, along with his attempt to read a participle *Ntwn* instead of *nwt* and his subsequent shift to *ntw*, are likely incorrect.