Shorter Notices

*Sasm, Sesen, St. Sisinnios, Sesengen Barpharangês, and . . . "Semanglof".

The following is a summary of an article which I intend to publish in honor of Y. A. Livshits in the next volume of BAI. This study ultimately owes its origin to Professor Livshits. It was he who first made the important discovery that the name of a god previously unobserved for the Iranian pantheon is represented consonantly by the letters ssn, occurring as part of various theophorically compounded personal names in Arsacid Parthian inscriptions (AAmASH 25 [1977], pp. 17ff.).

The assumption has been that this divine name ssn stands for Sásán, found as a personal name which is somehow the source of the designation of the Sasanian dynasty. The interpretation Sásán for the Parthian divine name spelled ssn understandably was attractive to Iranists as providing a correlation for the unexplained Parthian-Middle Persian name Sásán. Thus the same interpretation of the divine name as Sásán was subsequently applied to the spelling ssn [etc.] on Pahlavi magical seal-amulets (Sh. Shaked, and in much greater detail Ph. Gignoux, followed by R. Gyselen).

Now, although ssn is not problematic as the Arsacid Parthian spelling of the personal name Sásán, since the orthography does not ordinarily employ *aleph [*mater lectionis for -a- [cf. ssnd, with -dt = ādai, the divine name ssn cannot stand for Sásán if, as we must, we equate this ssn with the name also spelled ssn [var. ssny, ssn'], ssyn, always without *aleph] for the name of the god in the Sasanian inscriptions of the magical documents: The late Pahlavi orthography of these documents demands internal *aleph for -ā-, as we find without exception in the inscriptions containing the divine name, e.g., *byāt = āyād, *īrāt = ārdā, nīmu = nāmag, [p]m[p]s(y) = pādēfrāh, dlmn = dārmān, p*sp*n = pāsān, p*sd*m = pāy/šām; further wlt*n = Wālamīn, d*lwm[n]m = Dād-Bazāmidān, *rw[m*n] = Adārbād; etc. Note also that ssyn cannot stand for Sásán, and that Sásán, as a personal name on proprietary seals, has the exact spelling with *aleph. Consequently, I distinguish two different names:

1. The personal name Sásán [eponym of the Sasanian dynasty], for which unconvinning etymologies from various roots have been offered, but which I think is merely a patronymic of Sás < *Sasa-, attested in Indo-Parthian, Sogdian, and Scythian materials, itself a reduplicative hypocoristic name like Italian Sasa < Salvatore, Persian Sūsū < Sūdābe, Mod. Hebrew Bīb < Binyamin, Eng. Bob < Robert or French Zaza < Elizabeth, Ital. Tottò again < Salvatore; Mod. Greek Nanos from Yonan; Spanish Kiki < Enrique, etc.

2. The divine name Sesen (which explains the Pahlavi ssyn alongside ssn), from Aramaic *Sasa (whence also the Late Antique Greek ΣΕΣΕΝ = Sesen, etc.), continuing a divinity *Sasrn- of great antiquity in the Near East.

Thus the first attestations of the fým ssn in Aramaic, the theophoric *bssns on 4th cent. B.C.E. coinage from Cappadocia and Sinope, are comparable with 4th/3rd cent. B.C.E. Phoenician *Abd-Sasam [Cypriot syll. A-pa-sa-so-mo, Gr. AΨΑΣΣΟΜΟΣ], and, from the middle of the 2d millennium B.C.E., Ugritic *bsssn (alongside bnsns), the oldest evidence for *Sasrn-. From the Aramaic cultural sphere the cult of Sesen/Sesen entered the realm of the Arsacids, spreading east to the capital Nisa, and further to Marv, etc. The Sasanian magical cult of Sesen
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may be regarded both as a continuation of the Parthian cult and as an extension of the Late Antique East Mediterranean importance of Senen in magic, itself developed and diffused by Aramaic culture.

The magically protective nature of the god is already shown from the famous “first amulet” of Arslan Tash (North Syria), a plaque which contains an extensive inscription in Phoenician written in 7th cent. B.C.E. Aramaic letters, an incantation for the god ssm bn pdt (the current reading, after A. Caquot and others), to ban from house and courtyard the “Stranglers [fem.]” [hwnq] and “Fliers [fem.]” ["pt"], associated with “dark chambers.” These figures are illustrated on the plaque: Sam, wielding an axe, strides forth against the figures on the reverse: a she-wolf from whose mouth protrudes the legs of a small-scale nude human, and a winged female sphinx [note sphinx < Gr. = “Strangler [fem.]”].

The combined inscriptive and iconographic data make it likely that this amulet is directed against an early form of the demonesses who attack[es] pregnant women and young children, like the Akkadian Lamashu and the later Jewish Lilith. In Aramaic, Syriac, and Byzantine texts this demoness is referred to as a strangler (fem.) of children (similarly in Arabic), and on nyanzante and Coptic material is shown to be a winged female. As I shall discuss below, Aram. *Sisinni, Byz. Greek [St.] Sisinnios = Senen is the opponent of this demoness.

In the corpus of Palavni magic seals (see R. Gyselen, Les sceaux magiques en Iran sassanide [1995]) we find Senen described as “the guardian” [psp’n] (cf. Gignoux apud Gyselen, p. 56, n. 182), and as a “good protector” [hwp’y < OIr. hu-pâyâ], the latter with iconography of scissitas (cf. Gyselen, pp. 45, 56; for “bien protégé” one would expect *hwp’tk). However, Senen as opponent of a Lilith-like entity seems evidenced by the Sassanian seal-amulet in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, on which Shaked (BAI 7 [1993], p. 166) has read the name of the god ssny and his demonic opponent ssnymly “death of S.” P. Harper (BAI 6 [1992], pp. 44–45) notes that the text and iconography parallel those of Aramaic [etc.] incantation bowls, with the demonic form on the seal-amulet resembling Lilitho on the bowls, and the spearheads pointed at the figures comparable to the spear—point on amulets protecting women in childbirth against Lamashu [Harper also compare the antedemonic “spear of Qatros” mentioned in Aramaic incantations]. This Senen amulet [like others in the Sassanian magical corpus, cf. Gyselen, p. 57] was made for a woman.

The demonic force is conjured, “Be not mklšy and do not seize her. If you have seize her, then quickly release her . . .” [Shaked, BAI [1993], p. 167]. The hitherto mysterious war mklšy should be interpreted as further evidence of the Mesopotamian (East Semitic) background adduced by Harper. Syriac *mlqṭares woud mean “treating harshly, brutally” (see Payne Smith, Lexicon, s.v. ṣḥrs in Psел form), with an exact equivalent in Mandaic meaning something like “destroying” [Drower and Macaulay Mandaic Dict. s.v. QRS, citing uhtšidin u-imiqarsimm “to cast them down and to drive away them” from a magical scroll].

The foregoing evidence that the Iranian set amulets of Senen continue Aramaic tradition which themselves are based on older Near Eastern lore permits the interpretation of a consequential iconographic detail. One seal-amulet with close variations (Gyselen, p. 38, figs. 36, 37-a, and 38, discussed pp. 36–37 and 40) shows a hemaphroditic demon being smitten by an Iranian hero, to whose right is shown a palm branch. The hero is identifiable as Senen via the inscription, ssn mgw “Senen the Mage”; cf. on a similar seal the Palavni inscription ssyp (thus Gignoux apud Gyselen, p. 37, n. 103). An other series of Sassanian seal-amulets (Gyselen, p. 43, figs. 43-a and 43-b, described p. 41) show a hero brandishing a palm branch against monster. The reverse of one of these depicts an Evil Eye attacked by beasts and weapons, for which a similar depiction occurs on a Byzantine “Seal of Solomon,” on the reverse of an illustration of a mounted hero transfixing demons, with inscription invoking Sisinnios and Sisinnarios [the totality of iconographic elements of this Byzantine amulet being found again on a Coptic fresco of St. Sisinnios at Bawit, Egypt]. Gyselen reproduces the Byzantine amulet and compares it with the Sassanian (p. 59 fig. III, pp. 47 and 89–90), noting the correspondence of Gr. Sisinnios with Pahl. ssnyin [readin, this Sissn, an aporia unverified by the allusion to the old theory that Sisinnios is of Iranian ori
gin), and she notes the parallelism between the equestrian's cross-hafted lance and the Iranian figure's palm branch weapon.

The palm branch wielded by Sesen should, like the palm branch shown alongside Sesen, be the god's symbol. Remarkably, the same symbol is found on a Phoenician artifact from the coast of Syria, published by Ch. Clermont-Ganneau, a pyramidal stone amulet pierced for stringing, three sides of which spell out in Phoenician letters respectively *sîm, and the fourth side shows a stylized date palm branch. I propose that here we have a kind of rebus, in which the Phoenician name of the god, Sasa[ım], is approximated by the sound of the Phoen. word for "fruit[ed] date palm branch," *sasā[n]- or *sasīn-, cf. Bibl. Hbr. sansān in pl., Neo Aram. sansānā, and further Akkad. sissinnu "id." This rebus, I believe, has ritual underpinnings. The date palm branch was an ancient Near Eastern magic implement for curatively eliminating evil. The Phoenician rebus is comparable to a sound-play, one of a number of "conspicuous puns and alliterations" [M. Astour] in a Ugaritic charm, in which the god Hùrub (a close associate and analogue of Sâsâm, see below), works against snake poison: ... sa[m]sân uṣîn "and the palm-stalk [sasīn- or the like] eliminated [ụṣâ-sû-] it." The bridge between the Phoenician and Sasanian palm branch iconography of Sûsâm/Sesen must have been the Aramaic culture of Mesopotamia, the source of the West Iranian magical cult of Sesen, and demonstrably a continuator of the association between date palm branch and the god. [Cf. now P. O. Harper, review of Gyselen, in BAI 9 [1995 [1997]], p. 275, where Harper compares the palm fronds on the above-described Iranian seal-amulets with branches held by a hero/sorcerer on Aramaic inscription bowls, and she notes that Montgomery, in connection with these bowls, referred to the Babylonians' ritual repelling demons by holding aloft a date palm.]

In Mesopotamia the Akkadian word sissinnu was maintained as Syriac sîsîn "[sīsîn] "the fruited branch of a date palm" [cf. Bab. Talm. sîsîn "name of a medicinal plant"]: This plant name was the source of the personal name Bab. Talm. sîsîn (Sisin) and of Sisinios/Sisinés [WMlr. sîsîn, Arab. sīn, i.e., *Sisîn], the name of Mani's successor, as noted [from D. Arnaud] in M. Tardieu's demonstration that the famed Manichee was from Kas[h]kar on the eastern bank of the Tigris in Babylonia. Sisînios was also a Christian name from the end of the first century onwards, frequent for martyrs of the 4th cent., especially under Diocletian, to whose period was attributed St. Sisinios of Antioch, the magical opponent of the demonic afflictress of childbirth.

The name of the mythical "saint" shows the secondary association of Sesen with *sīsīn- "fruited date palm branch." The coexistence of the names Sesen and Sisinios for this magical figure is attested, alongside the West Iranian material, in Armenian charms for childbirth which associate Saints Kipîranos [Cyprian] and the rhyming Sisânanos (= Sisinios), paralleling Syriac charms concluding with the names of St. Cyprian and St. Sesen (mary ssín). Apart from St. Sisinios of Antioch and Christian context, the vocalism *sēwēn [V = various vowels] is found in a variety of forms in incantations: ΣΕΙΣΕΡΩ alongside ΣΕΣΕΡΩ and ΣΕΠΕΝΒΩ in Greek magical papyri; Mandaic Sîsun, Coptic *Sisin; and Gr. ΣΙΣΟΧΩΡΩ; see below. The variation 1 for 0 is explained by the word for "date palm branch," influencing the independent but similar-sounding name of the god (see paragraph after next), who subsequently became one of the saints with the "vegetal" and/or pagan cultic name Sisinios.

The diverse iconography of the Sasanian corpus of seal amulets has what must be recognized as yet another representation of Sesen [Gyselen, pp. 27, 29, and 31, with progressive schematization], hitherto unidentified, on flimsy grounds, as Gayomart or as an arch demon (for both, cf. Gyselen, pp. 80-85). The figure, whose ouroboros and direct glance [p. 27] are apotropaic features, bears lances transfixing a serpent and a scorpion, or otherwise controlling them. I compare with these a "gem," first published by Gori, showing a figure armed with two lances, and bearing the inscription ΣΕΣΕΠΝΒΜ. The Phoenician god Shadraka on reliefs of the early c.e. from Palmyra, like the Iranian representation which I identify as Sesen, holds a lance around which winds a serpent, as on the staff of Asklepios, while a scorpion touches his shoulder. The connection of Shadraka and Sesen is seen from, e.g., an Aramaic incantation with ṣangyāl
and ἄπρος, which explains the ἄσ of ἄσιν - [for -γαγ and -ςι, see below]. Already in 6th-5th cent. BCE, Sicily, the Punic Shadrappa was a chthonic god, like Ἁρών/Ἡαυρᾶς (with whose cult Shadrappa was associated, e.g., in Sardinia and Egypt), and as a chthonic god was also a controller of reptiles and a general repeller of poison and disease [as was Ἁρών] already in the Ugartic snake charm, other Syro-Hellenic chthonic gods, Eshmun and Merod, similarly have power over reptiles and illnesses.

Still at 3d cent. BCE, Amathus, Cyprus, *Sisin = Sesen, merged with Ἁρών, is addressed as the great ΣΙΣΩΧΩΡ, Σισσόκηρ, who opens the gates of Hades." Here Ἁρών is metonymized as his etymology, Ὄρ "The Pit." The underworldly Sisin alone is similarly addressed at the end of a Coptic papyrus containing a charm to ease childbirth: "the keeper of Hades, the ringlets of whose hair stretch over the whole world, Sisnicai Arain (= [Gr. *ΣΕΖΙΝ, ΑΙΕΙ, ΑΜΗΝ "Sisin, forever, Amen"]). The connection of Sisin and Ὅρ is anticipated by the first Arslan Tash amulet, in which the incarnation of Sams is followed by one of Ἁρών/Ἡαυρᾶς. Here Sams himself is also linked to the underworld, for his full epithet is σασγ[ν] τ[σ] "Sams the son of Ἁμᾶτι; Πικλαί (Ugar.) = "[the goddess] of the City (= the Underworld)," cf. Sumerian Nergal "Lord of the Infernal City," and perhaps similarly the underworldly Ugar. Μιλκ-κατ, Phoen. Μιλκατ "King of the City."

This now allows an explanation of the very common fuller Late Antique name of Sesen, ΣΕΣΕΝ [more usually ΣΕΣΕΝΓΕΝ Sesengen] ΒΑΡΦΑΡΑΓΓΗΣ Βαρφαράγγες, to cite the most frequent spellings. The mysterious ΒΑΡΦΑΡΑΓΓΗΣ [pronounced [βαρφαράγγες], with ISO ng = /ŋ/, as usual] is a hybrid Aramaic-Greek name like that of the magical divinity Syr. br ʾw n, brʾwn Bar-Ṭēmon, either simply "Son of the Gods," from Syr. bar "son (of)" and Gr. θεόν "god" [gen. pl.], or, as the context favors, from bar "son of " and Gr. θεόν theón [stereotyped from aC. sg.]. ΒΑΡΦΑΡΑΓΓΗΣ is accordingly from Aram. bar "son (of)", and *Φάραγγης /Φαράγγες, "of *Pharange," the latter *Φάραγγη being an adjective feminine name created ad hoc upon Gr. φαράγγι, phara−x /pharankəs, stem φάραγγ- -y φαραγγ- /pharang- "gulley, crevasse, chasm." The name of Sesen's mother would parallel Ὅρ[ων] "The Pit" in etymology and continue the same netherworldly reference as Pidrai, Sasm's mother.

The infernal nature of Sesen/Sisina's mod is further indicated in Late Antique Aramaic by prγws ʾtylyt "the lithif, P," with prγwσ *prγwσ = ΦΑΡΑΓΓΗΣ via the frequent confus of the Aram. letters ʾ and y, in amulets Ara snyn ʾggyn br prγwσ = (Sesengen Barpharanges) [cf. swṣwgn bprwngs or syygh bprwngs] along side snγ wpγngs "Seng and Pharanēg" [i.e. The Syrian equivalent of prγws ʾtylyt] is prγwσ ṣl ṣl "P, the violent spirit" [Gignoux, "Controversies magiques syriques" (1987), p. 1056]; there is no connection with παλαγας "sea.

We find the paired names Byz. Sisinios a Sisyndōros, or Sisimios and Sisimodos, or Sisinios and Sissithia, or Sisinios and Sissimarios, Sisinnios and Sinēs, etc., on magic texts again the affectress of childbirth. With these compare the two flanking names on a Sasanian magic vs (Gyselen, p. 31, fig. 14), snn and a second nar (Gysela, p. 30 snyn, and [on a different sub-type 2.4.1, published by Gignoux], p. 56 snyn [?] [standing opposite to snyn, one may read snyn-, cf. Seseng > Seng above, and see my next paragraph].

The Byzantine material also shows a typical format of names of the "sainthood: Sisina[n]os, Sin and Synodōros (Senendōros, ṣῆ = ṣl, etc. The corresponding birth-protection triad of angels on the Jewish side, which figure on bowls and amulets containing χωριωλας very similar to that found on the Byzantine side, arc swny, swswy and snygyly [variants swʾwny, swʾwny, and sngr or swʾwny, swʾwny, and syngr, etc.]. These may represent *syny (= Gr. Σινῆς) and *syynys, again with w for y, and for synyny /syngr, syngr, ct. Syr. snyīs /bprγwσ = Sesengen Barpharanges, the Aram. -l may be a dissimilant to Gr. -λ ["Sesengel > Sesengen > Sesengen, the invocation ANNNΓΛ in a Greek magic papyrus!?]. Later (10th cent. seq.) Jewish childbirth amulets against Lilithe spell the names sny /syny, swswy, and snylywp or snyglp, though for the last angel, Iranian lapidary amulets of the 19th and early 20th cent. reported often have only snyly. The latter snyly I derive from snyglp, with *snyglp > *snygwl and ← f < w-v.

The names of the later Jewish triad of angels were found on amulets objects (paper hanging clothes, etc.) throughout the Jewish world in
the present century, and amulets bearing their names are still sold in Israel today (with iconography, once quite varied, now chiefly imitative of drawings in the Amsterdam, 1701, first printing of the Sefer Raziel).

My study brings together and expands three hitherto separate bodies of scholarship, which are addressed to [1] the continuum from the ancient Syrohellenistic "Sasm to Late Antique Greek and Aramaic Senen and Seson Barharanges; [2] the Parthian and Middle Persian magical material featuring Sesen (until now mistaken for a god "Sasān"); and [3] the mythical Eastern Christian St. Sisinnios and his company, and the related Jewish angel triad[s], who protect childbirth. The united data document the 3,500-year (and continuing) longevity of a magical god through various transformations, which have shown both an interesting variety and a recurrence of features across a great geographical spread and a great length of time.

For material summarized here I have made extensive use of data on the Syrohellenistic and Late Antique material on the god in question given by W. Fauth, ZDMG [1970], pp. 229-55. The more recent studies of the first Arslan Tash amulet include those of A. Caquot, Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University [1973], pp. 45-51; G. Garbini, OA [1981], pp. 278-87; and (for the amulet's authenticity) J. van Dijk, Iraq [1992], pp. 65-68. For Phoenician religion in general, I drew on E. Lipiński, Dieux et déesses de l'univers phénicien et punique [1995]. For the Aramaic data, note Ch. D. Ishell, Corpus of the Aramaic Incantation Bowls [1975]. For the comparison of the Late Antique Jewish Aramaic birth incantations with similar Byzantine material, I have used inter alia J. Naveh and Sh. Shaked, Amulets and Magic Bowls, 2d ed. [1987], esp. pp. 105-22 and 188-97; however, I offer a very different account of the etymological relationships of the numinous names: [Sasm > Sesan >] Sisimm > [sw]swany, etc., which, with my account of smngwyp, would provide a solution to the long-sought problem of the origin of the angelic triad. Finally, for more details on the attestations and identifications of ssn, etc., on the Iranian magical seals, cf. Ph. Gignoux's paper, and my appendix to it, in the forthcoming Proceedings of the 1995 Conference of the Societas Iranologica Europaea.

My complete article will also discuss such matters as the role of sny-ll, etc., in Jewish angelology, the misreading of Aram. swn as swswn, etc., and "sys(n)gr, swst, etc., as the origin of a mystique of horses (Heb. asw, etc.) in Aramaic, Byzantine, Pahlavi, and Late Jewish birth amulets, etc., and the broad role of Sesen-complexes in Late Antique magic.

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