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The Bactrian Collection: an Important Source for Sasanian Economic History

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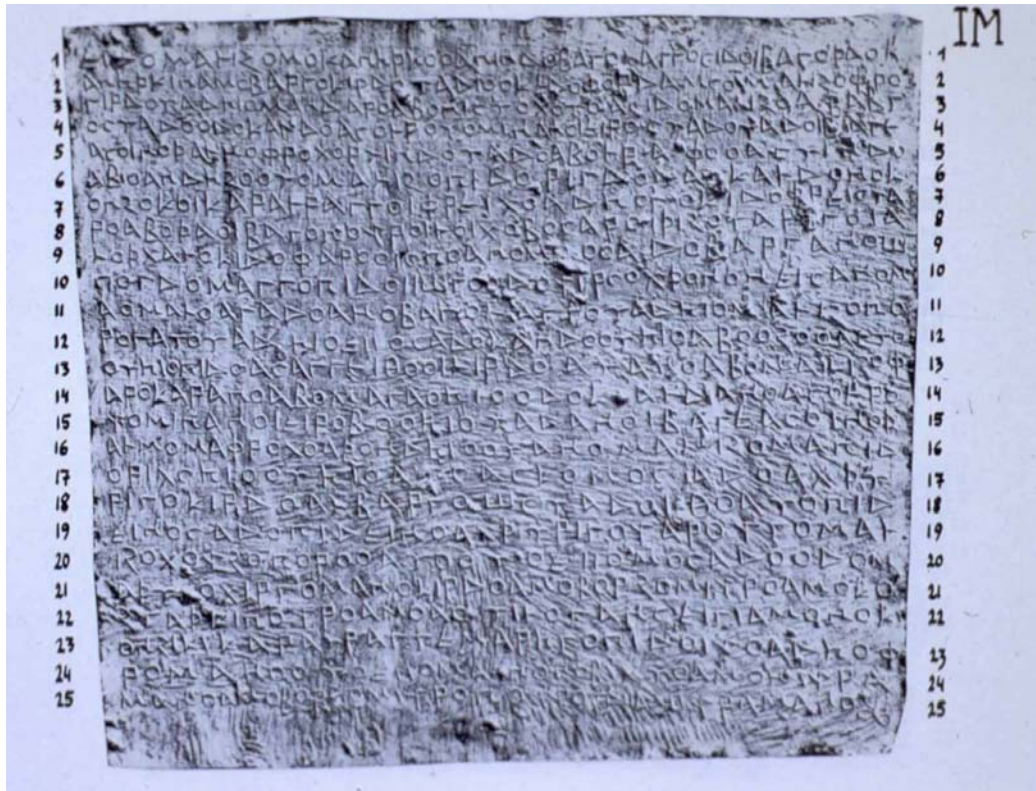
The recently discovered and published Bactrian documents are a series of 150 land-sale contracts, legal judgments, deeds of manumission, sales receipts, tax-lists, and letters regarding commercial matters. These have been found, since 1990, in various markets in northern Pakistan and have found their way into the collections of antique dealers in Europe. The vast majority of the documents are now in possession of Dr. David Naser Khalili of London, with a few pieces in the collection of antique dealers in Europe and the Middle East. With the exception of a few, the documents are written on leather, both tanned and un-tanned.



One of the discovered Bactrian documents (photo: University of Tokyo)

The script used to write the documents is cursive Bactrian, derived from the Greek alphabet, and occasionally uses Greek heterograms to render Bactrian words. For example, the word for “time” is written as $\chi\sigma\omicron\nu\omicron$. The script, written in the cursive

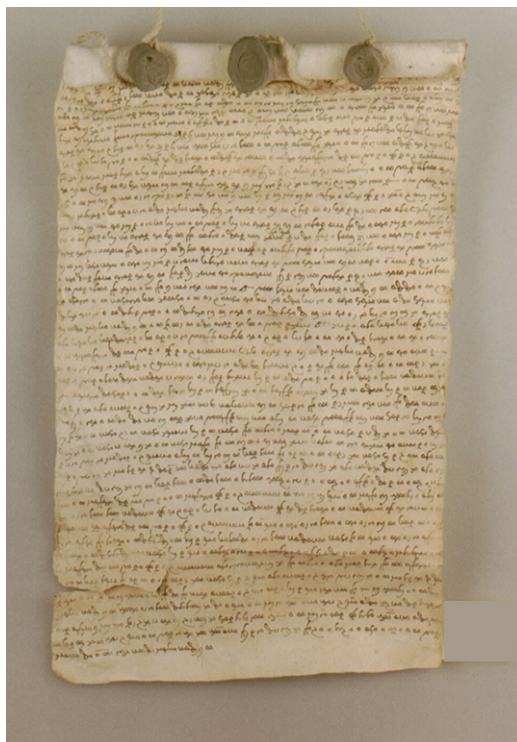
form, is considerably more complicated than the one used for the Bactrian inscriptions of the Kushan kings (e.g. Surkh Kotal) and this, along with our limited knowledge of Bactrian grammar, has made the deciphering of the texts a rather cumbersome task. To this end, Nicholas Sims-Williams has incorporated his knowledge of Bactrian, as well as Sogdian and other related languages, to translate the collection, although even he has had to leave some of the undecipherable words in the original script.



The inscription of Surkh Kotal, written in non-cursive Greco-Bactrian alphabet (photo: U. Tokyo)

The legal documents such as the judgments or land-sale contracts are written in two copies, an upper and a lower copy, usually on the same sheet. The upper copy is normally folded or rolled, sometimes after cutting part of the sheet in the middle, and then has been sealed with the seals of the witnesses. This was to keep an original copy of the contract intact so it can be referred to in case a claim was made about the alteration of the lower, open copy. Many of the documents also preserve the original seals and others still have the thongs used for attaching the seals present at the side of the documents. At the time of the recovery of the documents, a few had the upper copy still closed, giving us a good idea of methods used for keeping the legal rulings. For further information on the physical characteristics of the documents, one should refer to the section on the “List of Documents” in Sims-William’s publication of the documents¹.

¹ Sims-Williams, Nicholas. *Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan, I. Legal and Economic Documents*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. & *ibid. Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan II: Letters and Buddhist Texts*. London, 2007.



One of the documents with the upper copy still folded and sealed with the original sealing
(photo: University of Tokyo)

Geography of the Documents

The Bactrian Documents appear to be the archives of a few individuals or even one individual² – the ruler of the district of Rob – and as such, have a limited geographical expanse. However, from what we know of the geography of historical Bactria (present day provinces of Balkh, Bamiyan, and Samangan in Afghanistan) the localities mentioned in the documents seem to be representing the area of Bactria rather well. Indeed, Rob, the main site mentioned in the documents, is quite close to Bamiyan, while Warnu is considerably more northerly, near Balkh itself. Other locales, such as Bukhara and Tirmidh are also mentioned which are obviously not in this territory and their mention is also connected with exceptional cases. The documents, then, cover a sizable piece of territory and can be relied on to reflect the situation in the whole of Bactria during the time period of their concern (discussed below).

(*Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum*, Vol.2, pt. 4). I would like to offer my sincere gratitude to Prof. Sims-Williams who has been very kind in providing me with the information needed for the writing of this introduction as well as my own doctoral research into this invaluable resource. All photographs are courtesy of the Dept. of Linguistics, University of Tokyo, with kind permission.

² Nicholas Sims-Williams. "Four Bactrian economic documents", BAI, XI, 1997 [2000], 3-15.



A map of the region of Bactria with places mentioned in the documents marked (photo: U. Tokyo)

Interestingly enough, a place whose name is not often mentioned (only once in fact) is Balkh itself, brought up only in an undated letter and in conjunction with the purchase of some linen shirts (Doc. cd). This is actually consistent with other evidence we have of this region, namely reports of Chinese travelers such as the pilgrim Xuanzang that the city “though well fortified, is thinly populated...”³. This is also confirmed by the few archaeological soundings and surface explorations that show untouched and uninhabited layers in the plain of Bactra before the arrival of the Muslims⁴.

Apart from Rob, which seems to be the most important place mentioned in the documents, other major centers such as Guzgan or Lizz are also mentioned. Some, such as Warnu, are geographically too far from Rob to have been realistically under its control. On the other hand, because of the geographical settings of the region, a place such as Bamiyan, quite close to Rob (Islamic *Rui*) seems decidedly separate from it, due to the high mountains that divide the landscape.

Chronology of the Bactrian Documents

A very detailed research into the chronology of the Bactrian documents has been undertaken by Sims-Williams and a team of researchers during the past four years. A complete understanding of the current ideas regarding the dating system of the documents could be gained by reading the publications of this research team⁵.

³ Xuanzang. *Si-yu-ki. Buddhist Records of the Western World*. translated by Sammuel Beal, London: Trübner & Co., 1884, p. 44.

⁴ Jean-Claude Gardin, *Ceramique de Bactres*, Paris: MDAFA XV, 1957.

⁵ Most significantly: Nicholas Sims-Williams & F. de Blois. “The Bactrian calendar”, *BAI* X, 1996 [1998], pp. 149-65. *ibid.* “The Bactrian calendar: new material and new suggestions”, *Languages of Iran: Past and Present. Iranian studies in memoriam David Neil MacKenzie*, ed. D. Weber,

In short, the dated legal and contractual documents, as well as the letters, are spread between 110 and 549 of an unspecified era and are often dated clearly even by month and day (*ρωσρ* in Bactrian, cf. MP *rōz*). Previously, Sims-Williams had fixed the beginning of this era, dubbed “the Kushano-Sasanid era” at 233 AD, the supposed date of the fall of the Kushanid kingdom at the hand of the Sasanians⁶. This has, however, since changed, the research group now opting for a “Sasanian Era”, based on the establishment of the Sasanian Empire by Ardashir I at 223 AD⁷. The last batch of the documents are clearly written after the Islamic conquest as they have references to both an “Arab Tax” as well as Arab coins. We also have a few documents from the same collection which are written in Arabic and even involve some of the same personages mentioned in the Bactrian documents.



One of the Arabic documents, with a sealing attached (photo: U. Tokyo)

Type of Documents

The first volume of Sims-Williams’ translation of the Bactrian documents includes the documents relating to legal and economic matters. These are divided into

Wiesbaden, 2005 [2006], pp. 185-96. and NSW and J. Cribb. “A new Bactrian inscription of Kanishka the Great”, *SRAA IV*, 1996, pp. 75-142.

⁶ NSW and J. Cribb, 1996 (note 5).

⁷ NSW. “Bactrian Chronography Project,” paper presented at the *Sixth Conference of the European Society of Iranian Studies*, 19-22 September 2007, Vienna, Austria.

two categories of dated and undated documents, with the dated documents starting the collection. The majority of the legal and economic documents are court rulings concerned with the sale of agricultural lands, deeds of manumission, and undertakings to solve conflicts. A few documents are lists of products from farms and either the value or the tax assessed for them. Another small group are receipts presented by storekeepers and millers to the people who had brought in goods.

The second volume of the collection contains letters, often including the same characters mentioned in the legal documents, and frequently involved with issues of ownership and production. Other documents are short receipts, sometimes written on narrow wooden sticks which Sims-Williams explains as receipts presented by tax assessors and those receiving goods for rents or taxes. A last set of documents are Buddhist prayers and recitation lists which show an aspect of the religion in the region.

Bactrian Economic Production

The Bactrian documents are concerned first and foremost with matters of economy and commerce, in various forms and shapes. Among these are issues of land-ownership, production, exchange, and human capital. For example, the subject of slavery is present in the documents, in form of contracts of the sale of slaves, one manumission contract, and one donation of a slave to a priest by a Turkish princess. Among the interesting aspects of these is the details to which the seller goes to show that the slave has completely been released of his control (either freed or transferred to a new master). However, none of these details mention slaves working in the agricultural sector and their duties, specified as by lines, seems to be more domestic. On the working of the laborers in farms, we have a letter where a certain “lord” writes to another, requesting the freeing of some obviously free-born workers from their obligations at the latter’s estate so they can assist in harvesting at the estate of the former.

Products like wheat and onions are mentioned in the documents, as well as live animals such as ox and sheep, also horses, although the prominent “Bactrian camel” is not present. Istakhri mentions that Bactra produces so much live-stock that it could actually export them. This might not be that amazing, as he also mentions that all of the major “towns of the district of Khottal are on mountains with the exception of Wakhsh which is on a plain”⁸.

⁸ Istakhri, 290.



Document regarding sale of agricultural land with many seals (photo: U. Tokyo)

Aside from these, wine and its manufacturing unit, the vineyard, is quite present, mentioned in almost any document relating to sale or lease of land. In Islamic sources, Bactria is supposedly well-known for its orchard products and fruits, something that aside from the vineyards, is not really reflected in these documents.

Legal cases relating to the economy

The documents make it very clear that the vigorous way in which the contracts were drawn (in two copies, with many witnesses and seals) was the normal way of doing business in the region. One particular document, a letter from a subordinate to a lord, sarcastically mentions that one cannot buy a sheep without presenting proper documentation in the region, and he reprimands the lords for expecting the subordinate to give a whole piece of land to someone, based only on an oral message.

The documents always have several witnesses, often important and influential people of the region such as the military commander, the treasurer, the market overseer, or even the local god, presumably represented by his priest who affixes his seal on the bullae. The names of these individuals and their ranks are clearly marked, such as Wind-Ormuzd Kulagan (οινδοορομοζδο κολαγανο, with the spurious final –ο which often characterizes Bactrian writing) who is mentioned in document one as the lord of the district where the marriage contract was being concluded. Almost all contracts and judgments carry with them guarantees of surety in form of hefty fines (sometimes as much as five times the amount of the sale or worth of the legal settlement).

Taxes and Production

Taxation, as mentioned in the Bactrian documents, is quite interesting, although for truly understanding the taxes mentioned in these documents, much more research is needed. Taxes are mentioned in a few occasions, most significantly in form of foreign imposed taxes. At least two documents (Ii and J) mention a Hephthalite Tax, levied by the “Hephthalite” lords, as a result of which the seller in the contracts has to sell his land to be able to pay the heavy tax. One of the last dated documents (W2, closed version of W) also mentions an Arab tax (dated 525 Bactrian Era). This probably is the first mention of the elusive Hephthalite Tax we have from a primary documents, since this levy was formerly only known from the Islamic sources which did not elaborate on its imposition or collection.

In other places, lists of products from the farms in the region are given, presumably for tax assessment, although this is not specifically mentioned. In another document, a cash price is assigned to the goods received in kind (at the rate of a dinar for an ox and ten for a horse). Whether this is really tax or rent leaves room for argument, since we don’t have a good idea of who is receiving the products. One document (je) has an interesting insight into this, as it seems to be written by an individual (a land-owner perhaps?) to another (his steward), ordering him to give back the animals he has taken from a farmer for “taxation”, as his taxes have been assessed otherwise. Whether the tax here is indeed a tax and the individuals are government agents is hard to say, as in other cases, the official positions are mentioned. In fact, several other documents mention cash payments, but these seem to have a more official tone and are often addressed to someone from the chief scribe or “the Yabghu of the Hephthal”. However, we could easily think of this as rent.



A Bactrian letter which mentions the Sasanian Shahan-Shah (photo: U. Tokyo)

In the letters, some of the addressees are identified as tax-agents of the “Persian King Peroz” or “the Lord of the Hephthal”. In some cases, the issues involved are

matters of taxation, such as the one mentioned above. In other cases, the individual seems to be a representative of a land-lord, again making it possible to think of the legal argument as a matter of rent instead of a tax. Considering the unstable status of Bactria as sometimes a Sasanian and at other times a Hephthalite, or even a Turkish, possession (as some of the documents seem to suggest by the use of Turkish names and titles), figuring out the exact purpose of the tax or rents and their destination can be a rather daunting task.

Money and Markets

As mentioned in the legal documents and the correspondence, we have quite real and robust use of actual currency in the Bactrian documents. Lands are being sold for cash, either gold or silver, and hefty fines are being laid for those who breach contracts, again in cash. This does not seem to be only a locally valid, “token” like money either, the type de la Vaissiere mentions for Sogdiana⁹. It is the specifically mentioned “struck gold” and “silver dirham of King Kawad” or later “silver dirham of the Arabs”. This is a money that is not circulating only in the bazaars of Bactria, but it is traveling long distance.

We have a direct mention of a market, that of the city of Amber, in Doc. Ss where a trader from Bukhara is attempting to borrow some cash (or establish some credit) with two local market traders. This is also interesting, since most of the coins minted by a certain “Gorigo Shah” (Zhun-lad, king of Guzgan) in the late seventh century, bear the mint mark of ANBYR, very close to the name of Amber indeed. Many other documents mention the market of the city of Rob and its chief overseer, often present as a witness for sale and loan contracts. The existence of a bazaar, a trading market, then seems undeniable.

Conclusion

The Bactrian legal and economic documents - whose vast potentials as sources for constructing the social, economic, and even political history of this previously unknown region we have just started to recognize - provide a new tool for the scholars of the history of eastern Iran. Apart from the above information, they also present us with a wealth of knowledge about the Bactrian language, legal practices, paleography, sigilography, and various aspects of art history and even sociology. Sims-Williams’ impeccable translation of the documents, as well as his continued works on various

⁹ Etienne de la Vaissiere, *Sogdian Traders: A History*. HdO VIII.10, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2005: 173.

aspects of the Bactrian language and culture provide an excellent starting point for all those interested in pursuing research into the history of Late Antiquity.



An unopened Bactrian letter, with the seal closing the document and address lines visible on the outside (photo: U. Tokyo)

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