

## **An Investigation into the Pantheon in Bactrian Economic Documents**

**Seyed Saeid Reza Montazeri,<sup>1</sup> Amir Emadaldin Sadri<sup>2</sup>**

Received: 25-03-2016 / Accepted: 12-06-2016

---

In the 90s, a remarkable number of manuscripts were found in Northern Afghanistan, including economic documents, legal documents, and letters, which have become an important resource for academic studies. This paper aims to investigate the Bactrian pantheon as reflected in the economic documents of this collection. At first, these economic documents and the pantheon mentioned in them are introduced. After that, the names of the gods that were commonly used in people's names are studied, and finally the gods of the Bactrian pantheon are discussed in detail. The conclusion is that the names of the gods in the Bactrian pantheon are not Indian but Iranian, and also the gods themselves are rather pre-Zoroastrian than originally Zoroastrian.

**Keywords:** Bactria, economic documents, pantheon, pre-Zoroastrian.

---

### **Introduction**

In Arsacid and Sassanid eras, Eastern Iran had centers for trade in Asia. People of different nations and various faiths came to these centers for commercial matters. Among these Eastern Iranian trade centers, Sogdiana, Khotan, and Bactria were the most remarkable ones. These trade centers were also the loci of cultural interaction between different nations (Iranian, Indian, Chinese, and Greek), which prepared the ground for religious debates among different faiths, such as Zoroastrianism, Manicheanism, and Buddhism. Therefore, one can find useful information about these religions in the economic documents belonging to these centers in that era. In this paper, we have investigated

- 
1. Assistant professor, University of Religions and Denominations, Iran (ssmontazery@yahoo.com), corresponding author.
  2. Independent Scholar, PhD in Ancient Cultures and Languages from the University of Tehran (am\_sadry@yahoo.com).

the economic documents of Bactria with the aim of discovering new aspects of the Bactrian faith. Bactrian language was recognized in the late 1950s. In that time, some inscriptions, coins, and seals, as well as a few documents were found that were written in this language. Again, in 1990s, a few inscriptions and a remarkable number of documents were discovered.

Sims-Williams has labeled the dated economic and legal Bactrian documents in BD1 with capital letters ordered according to their dates. For example, the label of the oldest document is A, the second oldest one is labeled B, and so on. He has labeled the rest of the documents (e.g., the non-dated documents) with two lowercase letters—the first letter suggests a stylistic similarity of that document with the document from the former group whose label is the same letter in capital. As examples of the labels of this second group of documents, we may see aa, ab, ba, bb, and so forth. The letter “a” in aa and ab, for instance, indicates that they both have a style of writing similar to the document A in the former group. The dated economic and legal Bactrian documents discovered after the publication of BD1 are each labeled with a capital letter along with its lowercase counterpart (which was chosen according to the label of the nearest formerly discovered document in date); for instance, the document Aa is a dated document discovered after the publication of BD1 and is nearest in date to the document A in that collection; in other words, the document Aa has either the same date as A or a date between A and the next oldest formerly discovered document, B.

The twenty-five Bactrian economic documents discovered are the following:

1. Receipts (**Aa, B, E, G, H, K, M, ac, an**)
2. Civilian contracts: (**I, Ii, J, L, Nn, V, W, aa, ab**)
3. Vineyard lease contract (**U, m**)
4. Property payment expression (**D**)
5. Slave purchase contract (**P**)
6. Loan money contract (**Q**)
7. Hundred dirham loan contract (**Ss**)
8. Cost inventory (**al**)

In this paper, we have explored Bactrian documents in order to further our knowledge of the gods worshipped in Bactria and their

influence as reflected in the use of their names in people's names. After an introductory discussion on the development of Buddhism in Bactrian documents, we first mention the names of the gods found in these economic documents. Then, we move on to explore the names of the gods which became common names for people. Finally, we will discuss about some of the gods in the Bactrian pantheon in more detail.

### **Buddhism in Bactrian Documents**

From Bactrian economic documents, it can be inferred that Buddhism developed most extensively in the last years of the Sassanid dynasty, because *bahar* (Buddhist sanctuary, βαναρο in Bactrian language) is discussed only in the later documents **V** and **W**. Furthermore, it could be argued that Bactrian Buddhist documents are more recent, since the Buddhist expressions therein are all loanwords; for example, “λωγοασφαροραζο βοδδο” is taken from from the Sanskrit “*lokeśvararāja Buddha*,” and “λωγοασφαρο βοδοσατρο” from the Sanskrit “*lokeśvara bodhisattva*” (BD2, 174-75).

### **Bactrian Gods and the Usage of Their Names**

There are two local gods mentioned in the economic documents of Bactria: (1) Bagh Wakhsh and (2) Bagh Ramset.

Wakhsh (οαχβο in Bactrian) is a river-god (the river Wakhsh is the very Oxus river) that is mentioned in documents **L**, **Nn**, **U**, **V**, and **W** and is described in **Nn** as “wonderful, the granter of favours and fulfiller of wishes whose fame and miracle has filled the whole world” (BD2, 243; Sims-Williams 2001, 13). He is said in document **L** to be worshipped in Warnu, and in documents **U** and **W** in Gundar. His description in the document **V** is as such: “The God Wakhsh, the granter of favours and fulfiller of wishes, great and wonderful who has worship in Kah” (BD1, 64, 106, 114, 126). It could be concluded that the god Wakhsh was worshipped throughout different areas of Bactria.

Ramset (ραμοσητο in Bactrian and r'mcytk βγγ in Sogdian derived from OIr. \*rAma-caITa), meaning “the spirit Ram,” is the name of a god which is similarly called rAmaN-god in Avesta (BD2, 259). It is also mentioned in documents **P**, **Q**, and **Ss**; in the latter document, one can see only the name of this god. It is described in documents **P** and **Q** as “God Ramset, the granter of favour and fulfiller of wishes, wonderful who has a worship place in Marugan” (BD1, 82, 88; Sims-Williams 2001, 19) It could be concluded that this god was worshipped only in

Marugan and Guzagan, since the document **Ss** is originally from Guzagan.

The name of Wakhsh is used in the following personal names: σαχβομαρηγο (“Wakhsh’s slave,” in **U4**, 19, 4’, 6’, 20’, 26’), σαχβοανινδο (“victorious through the Oxus,” in **aa6f**), σαχβοιαμφο (a combination of the names Wakhsh and Yamsh, in **L14**, 17), and σαχβοβορδο (“received from the Oxus,” in **V6**, 34, 33’) (Sims-Williams 2010, 103-5). Also, the name of god Ram is used in the personal name ραμογολο “belonging to Ram family” in **Iv2** and **Ii5**, and the last name ραμανο (in **Ii10**) (**BD2**, 259; Sims-Williams 2010, 119).

The names of some other gods are mentioned only within people’s names: (1) Yama or Jam (ιαμφο in Bactrian) in **C11**, **I6’**, **Ii17**; ιαμφοβανδαγο “slave of Yamsh” in **Ss3**; ιαμφοοανινδο “victorious by Yamsh” in **aa7**; and ιαμφοσπαλο “belonging to Yamsh’s army” in **C6** (Sims-Williams, 2010: 67-69). Another case is Οαχβοιαμφο, which was discussed earlier. (2) Mihr (μυρο) used in personal names βορζομυρο “high Mihr” in **J5**, 7; μυροβαβορο “Mihr Shabour” in **J2**, v4; μυρο “Mihr” in **W10**, 24’; μυροβανδαγο “the slave of Mihr” in **C9**; and βορζομυρανο in **L16** and **N13** (**BD2**, 204; Sims-Williams 2010, 51, 88-89, 92). (3) Wesh (σηβο in Bactrian) is used in personal names σηβλαδο “given by Wesh” in **ab11**, 20, 22; σηβοοαραζο “boar of Wesh” in **J6**; and οαραζοσηβο, inversion of σηβοοαραζο, in **L5**, 5f, 9f, 28, 29’, v1 (Sims-Williams 2010, 100, 106-7). (4) God Zhun (ζοβο in Bactrian), which is used in the personal name ζοβολαδο “given by Zhun” in **L8**, 19, 23, 30, **P3**, 4f, **Q5**, 5f (Sims-Williams 2010, 65-66). (5) Nana (νανα in Bactrian) used in νανηβανδο “Nana’s slave” in **M2**, 7 (Sims-Williams 2010, 94).

## **A More Detailed Study of the Bactrian Gods**

### **1. Wakhsh, about whom Markwart writes:**

The great Birouni, who was himself Khwarazmian, has written in his Khwarazmian calendar sketch: “And the tenth day of Ispandārmacī, the twelfth month, is the feast known as Waxšangām, and Waxš is the name of the angel in charge of water and specially Jeyhoon River.” On one of Kushan coins, [the picture of] a man could be seen, whose name is obviously Οαχβο. It seems that he has in his left hand a fish or a dolphin, which most likely represents sea-god or divine river (Markwart 1938, 31-32).

In a passage from the Chinese work by Duan Chengshi (803-863), a temple near the Oxus River is mentioned in which the god of the temple sometimes arises as a golden horse. Panaino believes the temple to be located in Bactria and the god to be Tishtar (Panaino 1995, 105-6). The authors of this paper, adopting the hypotheses of Markwart and Panaino, believe that it is likely that god Wakhsh is the same as Tishtar.

2. Mihr (μῆρο in Bactrian), which is used in personal names βορζομῆρο and μῆροβαβορο. These and other names such as μῆρο, μῆρομαρηγο, and μῆροβανδαγο show the significance of the god Mihr for Bactrian people. Μῆροασανο (spelled alternatively as μῆροασανο and μῆροσασανο) means “east” and is derived from OIr. \*mī{rAsANa-. Its middle Persian equivalent is xwarAsAN. Μῆροναφρανο (its alternative spellings are μῆροναφρανο, μῆροναφρανο, etc.) signifies “west” and is derived from OIr. \*mī{ra-NifrANa-. Its Parthian equivalent is hwrnyfryn. It could be inferred from these data that Mihr (μῆρο, μῆρο, and μῆρο in Bactrian) was the very sun in Bactria which had replaced the Greek ἡλιος in Kanishka coins. The above discussion is another evidence proving the hypothesis of Gershevitch, according to which Mihr as the god of the sun was originally an eastern Iranian idea (BD2, 233-34; Gershevitch 1954, 41; Sims-Williams and Cribb, 1996, 108, 110).



Fig.1. Mithra on Kushan coins (Staviskij 1986, ii)

3. Wish, used in the personal name οἷβλαδο. This name and the personal names οἷβμαρδο, οαραζοοἷβο, and οἷβφαρδαρο indicate the importance of the god οἷβο for the Bactrian people. Cribb asserted that Wish was a kind of Indian Shiva; however, Humbach demonstrated that it is in fact Vayu “god of the wind” (Sims-Williams and Cribb 1996, 108; Sims-Williams 2010, 106).



Fig.2. Wish on Kushan coins (Staviskij 1986, ii)

4. Zhun (ζονο in Bactrian) is used in the personal name ζονολαδο “given by Zhun.” Zhun is the god of Zabulistan in Chinese and Arabic sources. Schaeder and Humbach have considered Zhun as equal to Iranian Zurvan (Sims-Williams 2010, 66).

5. Yamsh. Grenet has read  $\alpha\mu\beta\omicron$  as /yamCU/ and believes it to be an alternative form for  $\alpha\mu\omicron\beta\alpha\omicron$  “King Jamshid” (Kaferi: Imro<yama-rAja-, Sogdian: /ImI/, and middle Persian: yam or jam). The picture of the God Yamsh could be seen on the gold coin of Kushan sovereign Huvishka II (Grenet 1984, 254).



Fig.3. God Yamsh with Varghan bird on his right hand depicted on Huvishka’s coin (Grenet 1984, 253).

In *al-Farq bayn al-firaq*, King Jamshid is described as being worshipped (Baghdadi 1408 AH, 345).

6. Nana ( $\nu\alpha\nu\alpha$  in Bactrian) is the name of a Babylonian goddess. The goddess Nana was revered and worshipped in Eastern Iran. Her name and picture is seen in Kushan coins and silver vessels from Kwarazm and in the paintings on Dzhar-Tepa. In Nisa Parthian documents, Anahita fortress and temple is written as 'yzn nnystwkn. Hence, Lifshits believes that this Mesopotamian goddess has replaced the Iranian goddess Anahita (Lifshits 1962, 44, 45; Grenet 2001, 45). G. Azarpay believes that Nana, the Sumero-Akkadian Goddess, is the very Iranian goddess Armaiti (Azarpay 1976, 541). However, since we have no evidence of the old temples of Armaiti, the authors do not agree with this viewpoint.



Fig.4. Nana on Kushan coins (Staviskij 1986, ii)

## Conclusion

(1) In studying the Bactrian economic documents, we found out that the gods worshipped by Bactrian people are Iranian deities or the replaced local and Semitic gods. Unlike what was expected, Buddhism turned out to have much less presence in those documents, and the few exceptions belong to a later period.

(2) The figures of fifteen Zoroastrian deities (Ahura Mazda, Mithra, Mah, Adur, Wad, Ashi, Farn, Arshtat, Wanind, Shahrewar, Druwasp, Tir, Wahram, Vayu, and Wahman) and two Non-Zoroastrian Iranian deities (Wakhsh and Yama) are seen on Kushan coins of Kanishka and Huvishka (Grenet 2006, 88). Moreover, in Kanishka's Rabatak inscription we read that "for these gods, whose service here the ... glorious Umma leads, (namely:) the above-mentioned Nana and the above-mentioned Umma, Aurmuzd, the gracious one, Soroshard,

Narasa, (and) Mihr” (Sims-Williams 1998, 82). However, in these economic documents, only two of those Zoroastrian deities are mentioned along with the two non-Zoroastrian ones, in addition to two other Zoroastrian deities. Original Zoroastrian deities (Ahura Mazda, Shahrewar, and Wahman) are neglected in these documents, while pre-Zoroastrian Iranian deities are preserved. This indicates that in time of writing these documents (4<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> centuries), the original Zoroastrian deities gradually vanished from the worshipping scene, but pre-Zoroastrian Iranian deities continued to be worshipped. Thus, Bactria’s Iranian religion throughout this era was drastically different from the Zoroastrian orthodoxy of Sassanids.

## References

- Azarpay, G. 1976. "Nana, the Sumero-Akkadian Goddess of Transoxiana." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 96:536-42.
- Baghdadi, Abu Mansur. 1408 AH. *Al-Farq bayn al-firaq*. Beirut: Dar al-Jil.
- Gershevitch, I. 1954. *Avestan Hymn to Mithra*. London.
- Grenet, F. 1984. "Notes sur le Panthéon Iranien des Kouchans." *Studia Iranica* 13:253-61.
- . 2006. "Iranian Gods in Hindu Garb: the Zoroastrian Pantheon of the Bactrians and Sogdians." *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 20:87-99.
- Grenet, G., and B. Marshak. 2001. "Une Nouvelle Peinture Murale Sogdienne dans le Temple de Džartepa II." *Studia Iranica* 30:45-66.
- Lifshits, V. 1962. *Yuridiceskie Dokumenty i Pisma* (Sogdiiskie Dokumenty c Gory Mug 2). Moscow.
- Markwart, J. 1938. *Wehrot und Arang*. Leiden.
- Panaino, A. 1995. *Tištrya II: the Iranian Myth of the Star Sirius*. Rome.
- Sims-Williams, N. 1998. "Further Notes on the Bactrian Inscription of Rabatak." In *Proceedings of the Third Iranian European Conference of Iranian Studies, Part I: Old and Middle Iranian Studies*, 79-92.
- . 2000. *Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan I: Legal and Economic Documents*. Oxford (=BD1).
- . 2001. "Bactrian Legal Documents from 7th-8th Century Guzgan." *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 15:9-29.
- . 2007. *Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan II: Letters and Buddhist Texts*. London (=BD2).
- . 2010. *Bactrian Personal Names* (Iranisches Personennamenbuch Band II Faszikel 7). Vienna.
- Sims-Williams, N., and Joe Cribb. 1996. "A New Bactrian Inscription of Kanishka the Great." *Silk Road Art and Archeology* 4:75-142.
- Sims-Williams, N., and F. de Blois. 2005. "The Bactrian Calendar: New Material and New Suggestions." In *Languages of Iran: Past and Present*, edited by D. Weber, 185-96. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- Staviskij, B. J. 1986. *La Bactriane sous les Kushans*. Translated by P. Bernard, M. Budra, F. Grenet, and P. Leriche. Paris.