

TWO GREEK TEXTS ON SKIN FROM HELLENISTIC BACTRIA

The two documents written on skin for which we provide a first transcript here belong to a private collection and were shown us by Nicholas Sims-Williams (School of African and Oriental Studies, London). They presumably derive from Afghanistan and, according to O. Bopearachchi, more specifically from Yousufdhara close to Bactra. They are unlikely, therefore, to have come from the same find as the text mentioning the toponym Asangôrna which was published by J. R. Rea, R. C. Senior and A. S. Hollis in *ZPE* 104 (1994), 261-278, cf. Rapin 1996: 459 and Grenet 1996.

Both texts published here are nearly completely preserved, yet in many places we are far from satisfied with our transcription. The irregular smudging and wear of the texts make reading difficult and the nature of document 2, which is short and written in an irregular hand, exacerbates this problem. As always, the editor has to choose between different possible readings. In the memorable words of Youtie (1963), the papyrologist is always in danger of becoming the 'artificer of fact'; hesitant choices threaten to become historical 'facts' once they have turned into neatly printed letters and words. Our doubts are expressed in the notes and we hope that some day new texts will show where we have guessed correctly and where not.

The dating of texts from Bactria remains problematic. There are still very few Hellenistic Greek texts written in ink from the region: jar dipinti from Aï Khanoum (now available in IK 65 Bactria: 323-357), the skin text published by Rea, Senior and Hollis 1994 and the two texts published here. One oil jar text (IK 65 Bactria: 329) is dated to a year 24 without further specification and the Asangôrna text is dated to year 4 of the kings Theos Antimachos, Eumenes and Antimachos, perhaps the latter's son (see Rapin 1996: 459). Document 1 below is dated to a year 30 when Antimachos was king.

The Aï Khanoum jar texts are dated from the archaeological context to the mid second century BC. More specific dates have been attributed according to an era of Eukratides (on which see Bernard 1985: 100-105), combined with the officials named.¹ Thus IK 65 Bactria: 329, with year 24, is dated 148 BC and the payment ticket written on glass IK 65 Bactria: 336, preserving what might be the figure 38, is dated 134 BC.² For document 1 below and the Asangôrna skin text, dating depends on the identification of the kings and the nature of the dates recorded. In all cases, palaeographical criteria come into question.

From a palaeographical point of view, the problem with which we are faced is how far Bactrian texts may be dated by criteria established from elsewhere in the Hellenistic world and how far writing practices here lagged behind those of a Mediterranean mainstream. The same problem has recently been raised by Lerner 2003-2004: 390-395 in relation to the dating of epigraphical material from the site. How backward really was Bactria? It could, and indeed has been, argued that the distant province of Bactria meant that changes in writing came somewhat later than further west.³ However, the Greek version of the Ashoka edicts from Kandahar (IK 65 Arachosia: 290-292) fits well with their mid third century BC date,⁴ and the letter forms of other inscriptions show a development which also closely

¹ Eukratides is the last king whose coins have been found at Aï Khanoum; an era of Eukratides is nowhere certainly recorded. Bactria is not included in Leschhorn's 1993 study of eras.

² This text should be excluded from discussions of dating; there is no year specification here and the reading is not entirely secure.

³ IK 65 Bactria: 381 (the dedication to Hermes and Herakles from the gymnasium) has now been downdated to 200-150 BC; cf. Robert 1968: 420 = 1989: 514, mid third century, no later.

⁴ Note, especially in 291-292, *nu* with its rising right leg, *kappa* with a long vertical shaft, *sigma* without parallel bars, *omega* placed high up and the clear upper line. Aśoka, according to his thirteenth edict, was a contemporary of the Greek Kings Antiochos II, Magas of Cyrene, Ptolemy II, Antigonos Gonatas and Alexander (perhaps of Sardis).

parallels that found in Egypt.⁵ Insofar, therefore, as the limited number of written texts from the third and second centuries BC allows us to form a conclusion, Hellenistic Bactria kept close contact with the written mainstream and writing had not yet developed differently in this region.⁶ We are hesitant to subscribe to the claim of backwardness.

A palaeographer familiar with Greek texts from Egypt, where a vast quantity of written material survives, would date document 1 below, with year 30, and IK 65 Bactria: 329, the Aï Khanoum oil jar text with year 24, to the late third or early second century BC. Both have a clear upper line, especially visible with *omikron*, *delta* and *mu*. In document 1, the right leg of *pi* is shorter than the left, the *tau* lacks a right horizontal after the vertical stroke, the right leg of *nu* still jumps up above the upper line and the *omega* is not yet fully formed. In Egypt this would fit well with a professional hand of the time of Ptolemy IV Philopator or Ptolemy V Epiphanes (c. 220-180 BC). It is roughly comparable to that of *P.Köln* VI 258 (215 BC), *SB* XVI 12287 (illustrated in *AncSoc* 7 (1976), pl. II; 214 BC) or *P.Yale* I 36 and 38 (from the Leon archive; c. 190 BC). The oil jar text shares some of these characteristics – the *mu* is pulled up towards the upper line, the right leg of *pi* is shorter than the left, and *tau* lacks a right horizontal after the vertical stroke – but it also displays some second century features: the *omega* is fully formed, the *lambda* has a regular triangular top and the *omikron* is sometimes quite large. It looks, therefore, somewhat later than our document 1. The jar text is, however, a different type of text, written in a different kind of hand: private hands are less regular and therefore less easy to date than professional hands, like that of document 1. The two texts could be contemporaneous, with the jar text preceding document 1 by six years.

The Asangôrna skin text is in a more personal hand than that of document 1 and is thus more difficult to date, once again on the model of papyri from Egypt. Certainly this skin text also has a third century feel to it, with the small *omikrons* hanging from the top line and with rising *nus*. It seems later than document 1 below – the *omega*, for instance, has a double loop – but this is largely because in document 1 the upper line is more pronounced, which could be a feature of its official style (see too the *nu*, *omega*, *upsilon*, *tau*, *mu* and even *êta*). Rea (1994: 262) dates the Asangôrna text to the first half of the second century BC. We would date both texts circa 220-170 BC, noting that document 1 looks somewhat older than the Asangôrna text, perhaps because professional hands preserved some old-fashioned characteristics, such as the upper line, better than did private hands.

We should like to acknowledge the help we have received whilst working on this preliminary publication from the following scholars: Paul Bernard, Osmund Bopearachchi, Adrian Hollis, Frank Holt, Rachel Mairs, Stephen Mitchell, Claude Rapin and Nicholas Sims-Williams. These and other scholars will no doubt have more to contribute on the context and content of these texts.

⁵ IK Bactria 65: 382 + 384, the Klearchos inscription and Delphic maxims on a single block though in different hands, display good third century letter forms. In 382, to the left of the block, note the jumping righthand stroke of *nu*, the long vertical with short slanting strokes of *kappa*, *sigma* where the upper and lower bars are not yet parallel, the small *omega* hanging from the top line, and *pi* with a short righthand leg. In 384, to the right, there is some attempt to place the letters between two lines (note the larger *omega* and the *nu* which jumps less high). Robert 1968: 424 = 1989: 518 dated these before the Aśoka texts to the early third century BC and, in the case of 382, specifically compared the script to a papyrological hand. The writing certainly finds parallels in the Zenon archive from Egypt from the mid third century BC.

⁶ One minor point of difference, which may be distinctive for documents from the Hellenistic Far East, is the elaborately curved lower line of ξ and ζ, visible in documents 1.3 and 2.4 below, as also in IK 65 Bactria: 324 *passim*, 345 and 349.

1

Amphipolis (Bactria)

Late third or early second cent. BC

Fig. 1 and <http://www.trismegistos.org/bactria/>

The text is written on a well-finished piece of skin measuring 5×10.5 cm. The document has been folded over horizontally in concertina-fashion from the top with a first sharp fold at 1.5 cm below line 2 and a second at 3.5 cm below line 5; the third portion lying at the foot of the main text is 1.5 cm wide. There are further traces, visible also from wear on the surface, of two far less prominent vertical folds at 3.5 and 8.5 cm, suggesting that the document was later folded up on itself. The main text, consisting of five lines (letters of 0.2 cm), is written on the first two horizontal folds. The bottom third, which is folded backwards, may have contained some form of description or docket of which faint traces only survive (line 6) running in the same direction as the main text. There are margins of 0.5 cm above and 1.2 cm to the left of the text. The document is torn to the right and is roughly finished or torn at the foot. The location of the vertical folds implies a loss of c. 1.5 cm to the right of the text (see note on line 1 below). The only comparable skin text published to date (Rea et al. 1994) has a width of 14 cm.

The leather is now somewhat smudged and worn which makes much of it illegible. The record of the sum of 100 drachmas of coined silver suggests a contract. The form of either a regular *homologia* (x acknowledges that he has, for example, received from y) or a simple statement of the transaction (main verb of the transaction + x in nominative and y in the dative) might be expected. We prefer the second; see note on lines 2-3 below. This contract appears to have been made between two military men, one of them a member of a group of forty Scythians and the first perhaps belonging to a detachment of foreign mercenaries (*xenoi*).

The text is dated to year 30 of a king Antimachos, without further specification. Of the two kings named Antimachos in second-century Bactria, neither is otherwise known to have enjoyed a reign of 30 + years. The suggestion, first made to us by Claude Rapin (and by others later), that 30 here indicates an era date rather than a regnal year seems a likely interpretation, though what era this may represent is unclear. Antimachos I is well-known from his coins, where he carries the epithet Theos; this coinage is not extensive and portrays an elderly king. He also occurs as Theos Antimachos in the Asangôrna text (with year 4 of a joint reign). His reign is now normally dated somewhere between 185 and 165 BC: Bopearachchi 1991: 59, c. 185-170 BC; revised by Hollis and Bopearachchi in Rapin 1996: 465 (in western Bactria), and Bopearachchi 1998, as 174-165 BC; cf. Narain 1957: 181, 190-180 BC. The chronology, however, of the Bactrian kings who followed the Diodotoi is still far from clear, see most recently Bopearachchi 1991: 47-62, Rapin: 1996: 464-466 and Bopearachchi 1998, opposite plate 15.⁷ Given the early letter forms of this text (see above), Antimachos I seems more likely than Antimachos II (Nikephoros), though it is striking that the epithet Theos is not here employed.

On two issues of silver coins, Theos Antimachos is associated with his predecessors Diodotos and Euthydemos (Bopearachchi 1991: plate 10, series 9 and 10). Could this connection provide the clue to an era still employed under Antimachos I? The Diodotoi would, on current dating, be too early for the start of an era reaching year 30 under Antimachos I. The following reign of Euthydemos is normally dated c. 230 – 200 BC (Bopearachchi 1991: 49) and, though otherwise unknown, a Euthydemid era could perhaps be that found here. Assuming such an era coincided with Euthydemos' regnal dates, year 30 would fall around the turn of the third and second centuries BC. A less likely starting date for a new era might be the recognition of that king by the Seleucid Antiochos III in 206 BC (Polyb. XI 34.9). Document 1 below might then date to 176/175 BC, early in the reign of Antimachos I before his adoption of Theos. (Had this already taken place it is inconceivable that Theos would have been omitted in an official dating formula). The writing is certainly too early to belong to year 30 of the Indo-Greek era starting 186/5 BC identified on a Buddhist reliquary by Richard Salomon 2005: 364-271; year 30 'of

⁷ Cf. Narain 1957: 181, 'all dates are approximate and many are hypothetical'.

the Yonäs' would be 156/5 BC.⁸ On the whole, we prefer a Euthydemid era, dating this text as early as possible in the second century BC.

If our relative chronology for the texts concerned and the identification of an era date for year 30 are accepted, then the record of year 4 of the joint reign of kings Theos Antimachos, Eumenes and Antimachos in the later Asangôrna text (Rea et al. 1994) would imply the abandonment of this era.



Fig. 1

- 1 Βασιλεύοντος Ἀντιμάχου ἔτους τριακοστοῦ [μηνὸς - -]
- 2 ἐν Ἀμφιπόλει τῇ πρὸς τῇ Κ. ἀρελοτῇ εἰσηγεῖται [ι - - τῶν]
- 3 ξένων μὲν πηρχολλ. μηνὸν τῶν τεσσαρά[κοντα - - -]
- 4 Σκυθῶν ἀργυρίου ἐπισήμου δραχμῶν ἑκατὸν [- - -]
- 5 [. τοῦ . .] ε μενου πλήθους τοῦ ἀργυρίου [- - -]
- 6 [.] ἀρε . [.] *traces of ink*

Translation

- 1 In the reign of Antimachos in year 30 [month + day]
- 2 in Amphipolis near K.arelote has introduced [NN of the]
- 3 mercenaries (?) [to] NN of the for[ty - - -]
- 4 Scythians, of one hundred drachmas of coined silver [- - -],
- 5 [.] of [the above mentioned (?)] sum of money [
- 6 *traces*

1. The name of the king is difficult to read but on the original Ἀντιμάχου was clearer and more convincing than on the image. The reading Αντιμ- for the first five letters is reasonably certain, though only τ and μ are sure; although μ and χ are more or less legible, at first sight more than just α appears to lie between these two letters. We are still not entirely happy with the name Antimachos but other possible candidates such as Εὐθυδήμου or Ἀντιμήδους are impossible to read, as is clear from our tracing (which gives, of course, our interpretation of the remaining traces):

ΑΝΤΙΜΕΛΛΗΝΟΝ

⁸ For the terminology, cf. the Seleucid era described in later Babylon as καθ' Ἑλλήνας, IK 65 Babylonia 86.1-2 (AD 150/51).

The year number $\tau\rho\acute{\iota}\alpha\kappa\omicron\sigma\tau\omicron\upsilon$ was read on the original and is reasonably certain despite the pervasive dark blotches. What looks like the tail of ρ could in fact be wear and tear in the leather and the ink is hard to make out. For the suggestion that year 30 designates an era rather than a regnal date, see the introduction to this text above; for this form of dating, cf. *SEG* XXXIII 1184.1-2 (196 BC), a (Seleucid) era date following βασιλευόντων. The year indication will have been followed, where the text is torn, by the name of a month and probably a day. The shortest Macedonian month would, in its local form as used in the Asangôrna text, be Ὀλώου plus one digit; other months are all longer. At least 7 letters, but possibly more, are therefore missing to the right.

2. The reading of Amphipolis is certain; what follows is far less so. In reading τῇ πρὸς τῇ Κ ἀρελοτῇ we assume that Amphipolis was followed by the name of a mountain (with feminine τῇ). Originally we read τῇ πρὸς τῇ ἄκραι but the absence of the *iota* adscript for the second article was worrying and the first α and the ρ were barely visible. Amphipolis in Bactria is here attested for the first time and its more precise location is unknown. The Macedonian settlers who followed Alexander either gave new names to their cities or modified existing names, Strabo XI 11.5. As in the case of Europos or Dion, Amphipolis would appear to have taken its name from a city in Macedonia. According to Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* V 87, Amphipolis was also used as a new name for Thapsakos on the Euphrates. The name Amphipolis could have been chosen here for the city's double water frontage. In all, few city names survive from Hellenistic Bactria, though the area was well-known for the number of its cities, see Justin XLI 4.5, Diodotos I as *mille urbium Bactrianarum praefectus*, and Strabo XV 1.3, on Eukratides later.

At the end of the line a verb like ἐδάνεισεν or ὁμολογεῖ is expected, specifying the action of the contract and followed by the name of the first party *in lacuna*. If τῇ ἄκραι is correct, this verb starts immediately after this, but no Greek verb can be recognized in the remaining traces. If πρὸς τῇ Κ ἀρελοτῇ is accepted, the verb started with εἰσηγεῖ, though εἰσηγεῖται (he brings forward, he proposes) does not really fit the context. The verb would then be followed by the name of the first party, and perhaps his father's name, *in lacuna*.

3. ξένων at the start of l. 3 indicates the detachment of mercenaries to which the first party belonged. We therefore supply [τῶν] at the end of l. 2. Ξένων can of course be a proper name, but the name of the contractor is expected earlier, in line 2.

The name of the second party is expected following ξένων at the start of the line. This name should be in the dative case, but there is no obvious *iota*. The ρ of ἐρχ is certain; it is hidden beneath a slight fold in the skin where the text has been torn and is not visible on the image. We suggest a local (Scythian or Bactrian?) name (and patronymic?) including the unusual combination ἐρχολλ.

- 3-4. It is tempting to link the genitive plural τῶν τεσσαράκοντα] in l. 3 with Σκυθῶν in l. 4. In that case the second party would belong to a Scythian detachment, perhaps employed by the Bactrians. After 'forty' there would be room for further specification for this troop, perhaps archers or ἐν + a location, depending on how much is lost to the right of the text. Scythians are recorded as the nomadic neighbours of Bactria in Strabo XI 9.2 and 11.6, and may well have been taken into the Bactrian forces, cf. Holt 1999: 135. They were settled in the region already in the Achaemenid period and arrows, which may or may not be Scythian were found in the arsenal of Aī Khanoum and behind the north rampart (Francfort 1984: 66, 'Greek type'; Leriche 1986: 56-7, 118 'Scythian'; cf. Fussman 1996: 247).
4. This line records a sum of 100 drachmas in coined silver, perhaps paid as twenty five tetradrachms in the fine coinage of Antimachos I. The text could, therefore, have been the record of or receipt for the repayment of a loan. Given the genitive δραχμῶν, an accusative such as δάνειον probably preceded, following the verb of l. 2.
5.]...μενου suggests a genitive participle but we are unable to recognize the rest of the verb, just possibly [τοῦ ἀπο]δεδομένου ([προ]ειρημένου is not possible). For the combination τὸ πλῆθος τοῦ ἀργυρίου, see *PSI* IV 324.5; 325.5 (261/260 BC); *P.Tebt.* III 772.6 (236 BC).
6. Despite the fold beneath the last line of the main text, a 'double document' seems unlikely. [Β]ασιλ[εύοντος], which would be necessary for an outer copy, cannot be read here. There is no obvious hole through which a sealing cord or thong would have run. Perhaps what is now illegible here was a heading or some form of docket describing the contents of the main text.

2

Bactria

7.5 × 4.3 cm

Second cent. BC

Figs. 2 and 3, and <http://www.trismegistos.org/bactria/>

The second text is written on far coarser skin, similar in appearance to that of the Asangôrna text (Rea et al. 1994). The surface, darkened through age especially at the top and foot, is coarse and abraded in parts to reveal a far paler skin below. The document measures 7.5 × 4.3 cm and is oblong in shape, tapering to 3 cm at the foot. On the verso, the leather appears to have been split open at the top and at the centre a leather thong has been stitched through with a loop 0.7 cm across, knotted with a double knot and pulled tight where it obtrudes as the more prominent of two bumps on the front surface of the text. The flat leather thong, 0.4 cm in width, runs for a further 2 cm and is now sliced off diagonally at the end (see Fig. 3).

The leather was at some stage, probably in antiquity, folded horizontally concertina-fashion into three. First the bottom half was folded up at 4 cm (above line 6) so as to cover the text; the top was then folded back below the knot at approximately 1.2 cm (running at a slight slant) so that the thong ran out from behind and the two bumps of the recto lay on the upper surface. In its current form the thong is not long enough to have extended round the folded text but it might once have done so or else have held a seal. The wear and darkened colour of the skin imply that the document was stored with the upper fold and the exposed lower portion on the outside. There are also traces on the leather of two vertical folds but the brittle state of the leather does not allow a sense of whether these were ever employed.

The text of 8 lines in Greek is written with letters 0.3 cm high which give the impression of legibility but are in practice difficult to make any sense of and thus to read. There are margins of 0.5 cm at the top and to the left. The bottom two lines are enclosed in a square ink line forming a box around them. Since the sense of the whole text is unclear the function of this box, lying immediately above the bottom fold, is similarly obscure.

On comparative criteria, this document is more difficult to date than 1. There is less legible text and the writing is more irregular (with different forms of *alpha* and *nu*). 'First half of the second century' seems the most likely date.

The text of lines 2-3, 'which Archises has (received) for transport', implies some form of a record. It is probably stretching the imagination too far to understand the puzzling λιθω of 1.7 as lapis lazuli, for which Badakhshan in Afghanistan was the unique source in the ancient world. We do not dare to hazard a fuller translation.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

- 1 [. . .] νσι . . .
- 2 ἃ ἔχει Αρχισης
- 3 ἐπὶ φορᾶι
- 4 ψιλώσομεν ζ . .

5 ἐν ἐκενῶι
 6 κ πᾶντ
 7 λιθῶ δι-
 8 κα<σ>ομεν . . .

1. It does not seem possible to read ἔτους. A geographical location, personal or month name may be hidden here. [Διο]γυσίου is not impossible, but cannot really be read.
2. The initial *alpha* is exceptionally large. This feature may indicate that the first line was an introduction and that the main text starts here. In Egypt such a lay-out is more common in the second than in the third century. Αρχισης has been taken as a personal name, though it is not attested in the lexica.
3. ἐπὶ φορᾶι might mean 'for transport'.
4. If ψιλῶσομεν and δικά<σ>ομεν (ll. 7-8) are accepted, the text is written in the first person plural, but the readings are doubtful. Since the scribe took new ink before ενζ., perhaps ψιλῶς should be read, followed by two illegible letters; ἐν Ζ. might then be an indication of place.
5. Should we read ἐν ἐκείνῳι or rather ἔνεκεν?
7. λιθῶ lacks an *iōta* adscript which makes both its case and meaning uncertain. Perhaps 'stone', either for the dative λίθῳ, the plural λίθοι, or even genitive plural without the final *v*.
- 7-8. δι|κα<σ>ομεν . . or δι|κασμεν[.]? In the first case the *sigma* is missing, in the second case δεδικασμεν[is expected but impossible to read. Another possibility would be to read διὰ Κλομενῶν, with an unknown personal name (for Κλεομένους ?), to indicate the person responsible for the transport.

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