

THE “ARYAN” LANGUAGE

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The Bactrian inscription of Rabatak, which was discovered in 1993 in an unexcavated site in the Afghan province of Baghlan, sheds new light upon the use of ‘Aryan’ as a name defining an Iranian language – in this case Bactrian – in pre-Islamic Iran.

In fact, in line 3f. of the inscription, which was published by Nicholas Sims-Williams (1995/6; and cf. 1997a, 4f.; 1997b; 1998) as well as by B.N. Mukherjee (1995), there appears the phrase $\sigma\eta\iota\alpha\ \iota\iota\omega\nu\alpha\gamma\gamma\omicron\ \omicron\alpha\sigma\sigma\omicron\ \omicron\zeta\omicron\alpha\sigma\tau\omicron\ \tau\alpha\delta\eta\iota\alpha\ \alpha\rho\iota\alpha\omicron\ \omicron\sigma\tau\alpha\delta\omicron$,¹ which Sims-Williams translates, “And he *issued a Greek *edict (and) then he put it into Aryan” (1995/6, 83; 1997a, 5). Mukherjee gives a translation that is different from Sims-Williams’ in several places, but there is still the idea of the Bactrian language being used after the Greek.²

As Gérard Fussman³ has pointed out in an important article dealing with this inscription and the origin of the Śaka era, the commentators have taken this phrase to mean that the Bactrian language was substituted for Greek: the same phenomenon is to be found on Kushan coins where, after Kanishka’s reform, the Greek and Kharoṣṭhī legends were replaced by legends in Bactrian.⁴

Fussman’s comment on this passage of the Rabatak inscription does not substantially alter the meaning of the phrase in Sims-Williams’ translation, at least for the part that concerns us here, namely the use of Bactrian $\alpha\rho\iota\alpha\omicron$ “in Aryan (language)”, in an adverbial form which, as Sims-Williams remarks, derives from “*ariya- + suffix as in Khot. hvatanau ‘in Khotanese’, Sogd. swγδw ‘in Sogdian’, etc.”⁵ Indeed the phrase can be compared with the well known passage from the inscription at Bisitun, in which Darius proclaims: *vašnā Auramazdāha ima dipicīçam, taya adam akunavam, patišam ariyā*, “By the favour of Auramazda this (is) the form of writing which I have made, besides, in Aryan”⁶. We must, however, bear in mind Fussman’s remarks: “Le choix du mot “aryen” pour désigner le bactrien n’est certainement pas innocent. Mais la portée de la réforme de Kanishka est infiniment supérieure à celle de Darius: l’écriture

¹ Doubtful readings are indicated by points below the letters.

² Mukherjee 1995, 16.

³ Fussman 1998, 596 with n. 63.

⁴ Cribb 1995/6, 110-111; Mukherjee 1995/6; Grenet 1994/6, 64.

⁵ Sims-Williams 1995/6, 90. Sims-Williams also refers to Gershevitch 1954, 249.

⁶ DB IV, 88-89; Schmitt 1991, 73. But see also, amongst others: Kent 1953, 132; Rossi 1981, 186f. with n. 209; Lecoq 1997, 212.

vieux-perse n'a été utilisée que dans quelques documents royaux et n'a supplanté ni l'élamite, ni surtout l'araméen; le bactrien a définitivement chassé le grec des territoires iraniens au nord de l'Hindou-Kouch."⁷

Regarding the two possible explanations of 'Aryan' formulated in Fussman's hypothesis, the second is perhaps the most convincing one, historically speaking, as I hope will be made clear by this brief note: "...il existait, au delà des différences phonologiques et lexicales, une certaine conscience de l'unité profonde des dialectes moyen-iraniens, et le bactrien aurait été désigné comme "aryen" = "langue des Iraniens" parce qu'il était considéré – au moins par les Kouchans – comme le dialecte moyen-iranien par excellence puisque c'était le leur."⁸ On the contrary, it is much harder to agree with what Fussman says about the fact that our phrase contains a reference to the way Darius used 'Aryan' to mean his mother tongue. In fact, Fussman expresses his scepticism about the possibility of there being a conscious imitation, in the Rabatak inscription, of DB IV, 89, because the latter was placed too high up to be legible and was written in a script that was probably "déjà indechiffable si tant est que beaucoup de gens aient jamais su la lire."⁹ Sims-Williams already replied implicitly to this sort of objection when he pointed out that the similarities between Kanishka's and Darius' inscriptions – besides their use of 'Aryan' there is also their reference to events that took place in a single year: DB IV, 4-5 etc.; Rabatak, line 2 etc. – "must be considered in the light of recent discussions¹⁰ of the linguistic, thematic and structural parallels between Achaemenian and Sasanian inscriptions. It is not inconceivable that both Kushans and Sasanians may have had direct knowledge of the contents of Darius' inscription, presumably through an Aramaic version such as that found at Elephantine.¹¹ The alternative is also to suppose that such later echoes of the contents of the Achaemenian inscriptions are due to an oral tradition, as both Skjærvø and Huyse are inclined to believe."¹²

In any case, Fussman is the one who, most appropriately, brings up the question as to what explanation can be given for 'Aryan' in the Rabatak inscription. We have already mentioned that of the two explanations which he proposes, the second is more plausible. The first explanation, according to which Bactrian was thought of as the language of the nobles (Kushans) – a "bel exemple d'une langue d'adoption devenue en moins de deux siècles langue maternelle et objet de fierté" (Fussman 1998, 597) – would seem to stem (if I am not mistaken) from

⁷ Fussman 1998, 597.

⁸ Fussman 1998, 597f.

⁹ Fussman 1998, 598.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Skjærvø 1985; Huyse 1990.

¹¹ Greenfield-Porten 1982; cf. Huyse 1900, 183 n. 31.

¹² Sims-Williams 1995/6, 83.

the implicit idea that the etymological meaning of 'noble' was felt to be the prevailing one in the language-name 'Aryan'¹³. This is highly questionable, as we have attempted to explain elsewhere in connection with Old Iranian and Middle Iranian evidence¹⁴. It is far more likely that 'Aryan' is used here simply with an ethno-linguistic meaning, without any etymological reminiscences.

As for Fussman's second explanation of 'Aryan', we must say that we do not know whether Kanishka or the Kushans had any real awareness of the profound unity of the Middle Iranian dialects, but we do know without a shadow of doubt that there is evidence of such an awareness in non-Iranian sources, as we shall see below. Furthermore, we may hold that they would hardly have defined their language as 'Aryan' merely because Darius I had defined his thus. If there is a parallelism on this point between the inscriptions of Rabatak and Bisitun – and there most probably is – there must also be a reason why it was possible to use 'Aryan' to define the language, or the "form of writing" for both of them.

There is such a reason and it must be sought in the historical and ethno-linguistic reality of the ancient Iranian world. The evidence lies in a passage of Strabo's *Geography*, XV, 2, 8, where he takes Eratosthenes as his source. After having described the boundaries of Ariana, Strabo writes that the name Ἀριανή could also be extended to part of the Persians and the Medes and also northwards to the Bactrians and the Sogdians, since they were approximately ὁμόγλωττοι: ἐπεκτείνεται δὲ τοῦνομα τῆς Ἀριανῆς μέχρι μέρους τινὸς καὶ Περσῶν καὶ Μήδων καὶ ἔτι τῶν πρὸς ἄρκτον Βακτριῶν καὶ Σογδιανῶν· εἰσὶ γὰρ πῶς καὶ ὁμόγλωττοι παρὰ μικρόν¹⁵.

This passage explains how part of the Persians and the Medes, the Bactrians and the Sogdians, could think of themselves as 'Aryan'. Like other peoples living in Ἀριανή, they were also entitled to the name of Ἀριανοί¹⁶. It also explains, as a consequence, how they could call their language 'Aryan'. Bactrian, therefore, could be called 'Aryan' just as Old Persian could, even without its speakers having a specific linguistic awareness of the profound unity of the Middle Iranian dialects¹⁷.

Thus the use of 'Aryan' as a language-name referring to Bactrian and Old Persian in the inscriptions of Rabatak and Bisitun could be explained by the above-mentioned passage from Strabo's *Geography*. If,

¹³ For the etymology of Indo-Iranian *ārya*- see Benveniste 1969, I, 369-373.

¹⁴ G.Gnoli 1989, 29-32, 142-148, and see also Id. 1986; 1987a; 1987b, 521-524; 1988; 1993, 20; 1994, 150.

¹⁵ G.Gnoli 1989, 77, also for bibliographical references to previous works.

¹⁶ G.Gnoli 1966; 1967, 81ff.; 1989, 106ff.

¹⁷ This confirms that 'Aryan' was a *Gesamtname* in ancient Iran, as W. Geiger (1882, 167f.; cf. Schmitt 1978, 31) proposed. It seems to me that, on this point, the keen-sighted analysis made by A. V. Rossi (1981, 186f.) is over-critical.

for the earlier term of comparison – namely Persian – we were to go beyond the Achaemenian period in order to draw a comparison that is contemporaneous with the Kushans, we should have to admit that we do not know what the Persians of the early Sassanian period called their language, but we do know for certain that they called themselves *ēr* or *ērān*¹⁸. It was only towards the end of the Sassanian period that we have clear signs of the increasing usage of defining as *pārsī(g)* and *darī* the variants of Middle Persian that were to become the language of the whole domain of the empire, from Fars to Khorassan, according to a tendency that became more and more common with the expansion of the Muslim conquest, to which *fārsī* was to owe its fortune¹⁹.

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¹⁸ See also Pahl. *ērīh* [ʔylyh] 'Iranian character, Iranianness'. This brief note, which can be added to the dossier on the name 'Aryan' in pre-Islamic Iran (cf. Gnoli 1989 and 1993), appears appropriately in a miscellany of studies in honour of a scholar who has proposed a good rendering of Pahl. *ērīh*, translated by H. S. Nyberg (1974, 72) as "coll. the Aryans, or Iranians" and by D. N. MacKenzie (1986, 30) as "nobility, good conduct". Shaul Shaked (1979, 330) has significantly chosen to translate it as "the Iranian dignity, nobility", evidently aware of the need to emphasize the ethnic meaning of the term. Cf. Gnoli 1989, 148.

¹⁹ Cf. Lazard 1989, 263. See also by Lazard the very important article published in the miscellany of studies in memory of V. Minorsky: Lazard 1971.

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