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This paper focuses on the restoration and etymology of three personal names attested on the coinage of present-day northern Afghanistan (ancient Bactria) and argues that they represent the earliest known traces of Bactrian, the local Middle Iranian language. Moreover, it will be shown that the identification of a Bactrian origin for these three names sheds light on a very obscure period of the history of Bactria.

Unlike any other Middle Iranian dialect, the writing system adopted for Bactrian was the Greek alphabet, which had been introduced in the country during the period of Greek domination over Bactria (323 - ca. 140 B.C.). Bactrian was chosen in the second half of the 1st century A.D. to be the official language of the Kushan empire probably by its founder, Kujula Kadphises.

Very few is known about this language in the period between the end of the Graeco-Bactrian reign and the rise of the Kushan dynasty: the only written evidence we have are the names, engraved in Greek letters, of the so-called ‘small rulers’ who struck coins on the Bactrian soil from the second half of 2nd cent. B.C. to first half of 1st cent. A.D. These names are often believed to belong to the nomad chiefs who, according to the ancient sources, invaded the region causing the fall of the Graeco-Bactrian reign. As a matter of fact, no systematic attempt to analyse these names from a linguistic point of view has been hitherto pursued.

The aim of this paper is to show that the names of at least three of these ‘small rulers’ (ΣΑΠΙΑΔΒΙΖΗΣ, ΑΡΣΕΙΑΛΗΣ and ΠΥΛΑΓΗΣ) can instead be traced back to a Bactrian origin, challenging the idea that Bactria became a fully nomadic dominion, as is currently believed. These three rulers probably belonged to the same local dynasty, which is sometimes referred to as the ‘Pulagids’ (Francfort 2011, 2012, 2020), and have been variously identified as ‘Scythian dynasts’ (Senior 2001-2006: II/214), ‘Yüeh-chih princes’ (Mitchiner 1975-1976, 285), ‘Scytho-Bactrian rulers’ (Francfort 2011, 284) etc. Only Alram 1986 has opened to the possibility that some of the pre-Kushan dynasts may be Bactrian notables (“baktrische Barone”), but he did not further prove his hypothesis with linguistic arguments.

A generic Iranian origin for the names ΣΑΠΙΑΔΒΙΖΗΣ and ΑΡΣΕΙΑΛΗΣ has already been cursorily proposed by N. Sims-Williams and P. Lur’e (*apud* Grenet 2012, n. 8) on the basis of the following etymologies:

- 1) ΣΑΠΙΑΔΒΙΖΗΣ < OIr. **spāda-pati-ča*- “commander of the army”.
- 2) ΑΡΣΕΙΑΛΗΣ < OIr. **arša(n)-ila-* or **ṛša-ila-*, hypocoristic of *arša(n)-* “male, warrior” or of *ṛša-* “bear”. These etymologies are based on traditional readings, which can now be improved thanks to the numerous high-definition coin images available online. An accurate revision of the coin legends will demonstrate that the readings of the names of these two rulers can be restored as follows:

- 1) ΣΑΠΙΑΔΒΙΖΗΣ < OIr. **spāda-pati-ča*- “commander of the army”, with typical Bactrian lambdacism (OIr. **d* > Bactr. *l*), cf. Bactr. personal name *ασπαλοβιδο* (Sims-Williams 2010, 36).
- 2) ΑΡΣΕΙΑΛΗΣ < OIr. **ṛša-ya-ka-*, cf. *Ἀρσίκας* (Schmitt 2011, 96) and maybe [*A*]*r-še-ek-ka-*’ (Tavernier 2007, 290) in the Greek and Babylonian parallel traditions respectively.

Both reconstructions are compatible with Bactrian historical phonology, and the presence of lambdacism in the name ΣΑΠΙΑΔΒΙΖΗΣ clearly points to a Bactrian origin. This is confirmed by the third name, that of ΠΥΛΑΓΗΣ, for which an etymological proposal will be formulated for the first time:

- 3) ΠΥΛΑΓΗΣ < OIr. **puda-ka-*, cf. *Bu-da-ak-ka-* (Hallock 2038: 12) in the Persepolis Fortification tablets, Sarm. *ΦΟΔΑΚΟΣ* (Harmatta 1970: 89), MP *pōyag* / *pūdag* < *pwdk’n* (Gignoux 1986: II/149).

The result of this analysis is twofold. On the one hand, it shows that in pre-Kushan Bactria, among the several ‘small rulers’ of uncertain linguistic affiliation, at least three were of Iranian and more precisely Bactrian origins. Furthermore, it is argued, these three names represent a rare piece of evidence of the Bactrian language before the rise of the Kushan dynasty.

Abbreviations:

OIr. = Old Iranian; Bactr. = Bactrian; Sarm. = Sarmatian; MP = Middle Persian.

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