

Shaul Shaked, *Le satrape de Bactriane et son gouverneur: Documents araméens du IV^e s. avant notre ère provenant de Bactriane. Conférences données au Collège de France 14 et 21 mai 2003* (Persika, 4; Paris: De Boccard, 2004). 62 pp. ISBN 2 7018 0170 2.

While for some years now many scholars of Aramaic have been gazing at a few words incised on an ancient bone-box, which, even if all claims about their antiquity and interpretation would be correct, would be of very limited interest only (there is, after all, little reason to doubt that Jesus had a brother called James), it has remained almost unobserved that a major development in Aramaic studies is taking place elsewhere. In Afghanistan, under circumstances which have not yet been clarified and which will perhaps remain unclear forever, a number of Aramaic texts on animal skins and on wooden sticks have been found a number of years ago. They issue from the Persian administration there, which largely remained in place even after Alexander the Great conquered the area. These documents span a number of years in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, and appear to belong to at least four different groups. It would seem that either they are the slight remains of an enormous archive, which must once have contained many thousands of such documents, or that they were taken as a group from such an archive in antiquity already, in order to serve a purpose which is not at once clear. This well-written book announces some of the texts and discusses their import, and it surely whets the appetite.

Though the French language and culture are very dear to me, in this case it is a great pity that this book has appeared in French only, as this bars many interested scholars and lay persons from the highly interesting information which is in it. The only other information available in print at the moment, as far as I know, is contained in Professor Shaked's communication to the French *Académie des Inscriptions*, which was published in its papers in 2003 ('De Khulmi à Nikhšapaya: Les données des nouveaux documents araméens de Bactres sur la toponymie de la région (IV^e siècle av. n. è.)', *CRAI* 2003, fasc. IV (novembre-décembre); an Italian dissertation by Omar Coloru about the Greek rule of Bactria on pp. 89-90 briefly refers to the book under review here (available online: <http://etd.adm.unipi.it/theses/available/etd-03272006-101757/>). A full publication of all the new texts, by Shaked and Joseph Naveh, has been announced for 2008.

Three groups of documents on leather, some thirty in all, can be distinguished. One is a correspondence of a certain governor Bagavant with Akhvamazda, the satrap of Bactria under Artaxerxes III, one a collection of fragmentary letters, and the last one a group of documents connected with various provisions.

The collection also contains eighteen batons or sticks on which a very brief description of some sort of transaction, usually in the form 'With [PN1] from [PN2] in [a certain year]'. Their function is not entirely clear, but they remind me of the Greek σκυτάλη, which, beside an ordinary stick, may also be a baton around which a strip of leather was rolled, on which some message was recorded. Plutarchus and other authors describe it as a cryptographic device, especially in use with the Spartans, but other attestations cannot be easily reconciled with this function. Maybe, but this is very tentative, in this case a strip of leather around such a stick containing the full text was sealed, while the inner text on the stick only contained the names and year in order to make fraud impossible.

Of course, a serious discussion of these documents must wait for the official publication, so I will not engage in speculation about their fascinating contents, apart from indicating that these texts somewhat redress the balance of the Aramaic texts against, for example, the enormous archive from Persepolis, which mainly consists of texts in Elamite. Aramaic, after all, was the official language of the Persian administration, but because it was mainly recorded on perishable materials such as leather or papyrus, precious little of the once huge archives of Aramaic texts has come down to us. In combination with the Persepolis

material, the Aramaic documents in which are also finally getting the attention which they deserve through the Persepolis Fortification Archive Project of the University of Chicago (see the weblog at <http://persepolistablets.blogspot.com>), these documents will provide us with many new insights.

I cannot refrain from making two tentative short remarks about some words. The somewhat problematic word אסרחלין (p. 42) invites comparison with the equally enigmatic סרהלצה in the Aramaic Hermopolis Letter 3, 6, which makes the author's Semitic etymology, 'bound/unbound', somewhat less likely. Likewise, the noun חורי, 'white (flour) (?)', occurring also in Driver 6, 3, in קמח חורי, though it looks like Aramaic חור, 'white', may be a loanword instead (there is no real explanation for the *yod* at the end), perhaps equivalent to Elamite (?) *mariyam* in the Persepolis texts (R.T. Hallock, *Persepolis Fortification Tablets* (Oriental Institute Publications, 92; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 725, just as the type of flour used in parallelism with it in the Driver letter, קמח רמי, and apparently also in the new texts (p. 43) appears to have a parallel in Persepolis (*ramiyam*, Hallock p. 747, so the author's proposal to read דמי instead may have to be rejected).

The publication of these wonderful documents is going to teach us a lot about the administration of the Persian empire, about the history of Afghanistan and about the Aramaic language in the Persian period. We eagerly await Professors Shaked's and Naveh's edition and the surprises which it will undoubtedly bring.

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