

International Linguistic Association

Monthly Lecture Series

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Aramaic Documents from Ancient Bactria: Connections to the West--and the East--and the Future

In 2012, *Aramaic Documents from Ancient Bactria* in the Khalili Collection were published by the late Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked. These comprise 30 items on leather – many excellently preserved – and 18 wooden tally sticks, all inscribed with ink. They date to the middle of the 4th century BCE, spanning the end of the Achaemenid empire and the rule of Alexander. Their provenance is unknown; the editors believe they came from Balkh, Afghanistan = ancient Bactra, the capital of the satrapy of Bactria – near the farthest eastern extremity of the Empire. What is most striking about the assemblage is their uncanny resemblance to the documents known since the 1950s as the “Driver letters,” a sheaf of correspondence, also on leather, also in Aramaic, discovered presumably somewhere in Egypt, from Arsames, the satrap of Babylonia, of the late 5th century BCE (just under a century earlier than the Bactrian material). The grammar is almost identical, and the script is so similar that the eminent epigrapher Naveh has nothing to say about it.

It is this very identicalness that is of especial interest in the context of the papyrology of the ancient world. These documents show for the first time that there was a uniformity in the diplomatics of chancery practice throughout the empire – not just in the west where Aramaic was in general use – that presages the striking uniformity in orthographic practice among the scribes of the variety of Iranian languages that gradually succeeded Aramaic in writings and inscriptions in Sassanian and Parthian times: there was precedent for what must have been a very close-knit intellectual community across West and Central Asia.

But even more interesting, these documents take us nearly to the exact time and place of the invention of the Kharoṣṭhi script of northwest India – of Gandhara – so that the dearth of epigraphic Aramaic script that might have modeled for the pandits who first wrote an Indic language is made up for by proof that paleographic Aramaic was available. At present we have no Kharoṣṭhi manuscripts dating as early as the Bactria documents, but the demonstrated unity makes it licit to accept that the contemporary epigraphic forms of Aramaic script known from the west can be taken as the models for the earliest known Kharoṣṭhi inscriptions. This was posited by Georg Bühler at the end of the 19th century, but has hitherto always had to be considered no more than a plausible suggestion.

Saturday, February 7, 2015

11 AM - 12 PM

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