

A new Bactrian inscription from the time of Kanishka

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In September 2005 I was shown photographs of a Bactrian inscription inscribed in six long circular lines around the rim on the underside of a silver plate which appears to have been flattened and cracked by a heavy weight. In 2009, after the object had apparently changed hands, I received additional photographs from a different source, but unfortunately neither I nor those through whom I received the two sets of photographs have been able to track down the object or to identify its current owner. Since I have never seen the the object itself, the upper side of which is said to present “a figural element”, the edition which follows is entirely based on these photographs. The script is of the monumental type typical of the Kushan period, with occasional cursive forms and ligatures, especially cases of -t joined to a preceding letter. In the weight formula at the end of the inscription the *v* is cursive and the *o*’ is circular (as opposed to mostly square *o* elsewhere), while *o*’ has the special form used as a numeral.

The inscription presents itself as a first person account by Nukunzik, presumably the same person who is already known from the Bactrian inscriptions of Rabatak and Surkh Kotal as a high official in the service of Kanishka I and Huvishka. Although the text bristles with difficulties as a result of its incomplete state of preservation and the presence of previously unknown words, it is clear that, like the Rabatak inscription, it contains historical data regarding Kanishka’s conquest of India. In particular, it refers to his return in the year 10 from India to “Tokhwarstan”—by far the earliest occurrence of this term in any known source.

The authenticity of the inscription might at first seem dubious, since it contains many phrases which echo the Rabatak inscription, first published in 1996, but a forger in or before 2005 could hardly have known the form *uvdo* “India” (twice in line 3; cf. also *uvda*, line 4), which was not established as the correct spelling of this name until the appearance of my third edition of the Rabatak inscription in 2008, let alone the weight formula consisting of the abbreviation *va* (for **vαγγo* “weight”?) + numerals, which

was first identified in an article published in 2013.¹ Moreover, it would take quite a sophisticated knowledge of Iranian historical linguistics to invent a form such as $\pi\iota\omicron\rho\omicron$ (line 1), the genitive case of the attested $\pi\iota\delta\alpha$ “father”, though this is exactly the form one would expect from Old Iranian **piθrah* (= Old Persian *piça*, Khotanese *pīrā*), genitive of **pitā*. In my view, therefore, there can be no doubt that the inscription is ancient.

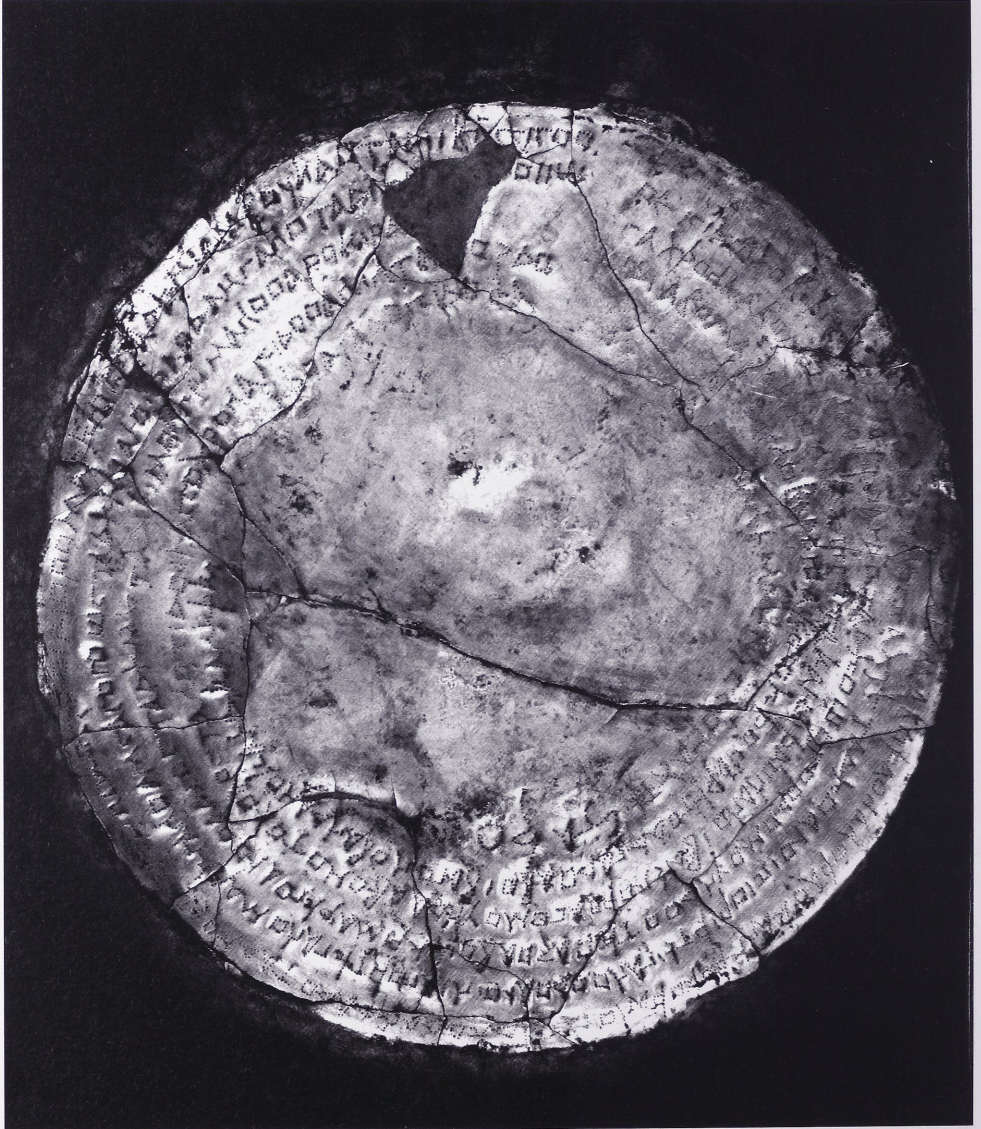


Fig. 1: Silver plate with Bactrian inscription from the time of Kanishka.

¹ See Sims-Williams 2008: 59-60, and Sims-Williams 2013 respectively.

Text

1. βαονανδι² βαο σαρειγο³ [νανα πι]ιδο[ι ωγα]χρονα αβο βαονανο βαο κανηκι
κοβανο ι χοαδηοδανι λαδο ταδηο αζο μο νοκονζικο ι πιορο μαρηγο σταδημι
αμβουκαο ταδι ι βαγεποο-
2. ρε πιδο ι χοβι ριζ[α]ε⁴ οδο πιδο ι μανο σπαχτε ταδηο αλο ι πιοριφτειγανο οδο αλο
ι νιαγοβτηγανο μαρηγανο αμσασογο ωσταδημι αλο ι φαρδαμγανο ταδι ...[..... πιδ]
ο ι ιω-
3. γα χρονα αβο μο υνδο φροαγδο ταδηο ωσπορδο μο υνδο οτηο αζο αβο ι κηρι
μαρηγο αλοσαδο σταδημε ταδι ειμο κηρι μανο οαρο κιρδ[ο]{υα σ' ο'}⁵
4. σιδι αβο μαζδηγγο νιβιχιγγο⁶ τακαλδι βαονανο⁷ ι βαγεπορο⁸ ασο μο υνδα αβο μο
τοχοαρστανο πιδο ι λασσο χρονα πιδο οανιντα[μ]οζδο
5.νοβαρδγο αβο ι οηβο σαρειγο⁹ αδγαδο αβο ι βαγο νοβανδανο
καλδι κανηκι βαο αμο οηβο αγαδο πιδο ι λα-
6. σο χρονα νεισανε μαε λασσο σαχτε [in larger, partly cursive letters:] υα σ' ο'

Translation

“(At) the court(?) of the king of kings, [in] the year [one, Nana] gave the lordship to the king of kings, Kanishka the Kushan. I, Nukunzik, his father’s servant, was then *amboukao*. Then the son of the gods, on account of his own good[ness] and on account of my service—he established me (as) equal(?) with (his) father’s and with (his) grandfather’s servants, with the foremost (people). Then [in] the year one [...] was proclaimed to India; then he conquered(?) India, and I was a trusted(?) servant in his work. Then I performed there this work [...] which (has been) written in the records(?). Then when the <king> of kings, the son of the gods, [returned] from India to Tokhwarstan in the tenth year with the spoils(?) of victory(?), [he] presented(?) [this plate](?) at the court(?) of Wesh, (as) an offering(?) to the god; when king Kanishka brought it to Wesh (it was) in the year ten, the month Nisan, the tenth day. We<ight>:) 270 <staters>(?).”

² It seems impossible to read βαο νανα.

³ Since the area above ρ is not clear, this letter could also be read as β.

⁴ Or ριζ[δ]ε? The last letter can hardly be ο.

⁵ These four letters much fainter than those above and below, perhaps left unfinished or, more likely, partially deleted.

⁶ Looks like -τγγο, probably because the horizontal stroke of τ has been extended too far to the right.

⁷ Mistake for βαονανο <βαο>.

⁸ Perhaps a mistake for βαγεπο<ο>ρο.

⁹ Here one could alternatively read οαρλιγο, but this reading is not possible in line 1.

Commentary

Line 1

βαονανδι βαο “king of kings”: cf. the opening words of the Bactrian text of the inscription of Dasht-i Nawur (DN1), for which I have suggested the reading βαονανδε βαι.¹⁰ In both cases the addition of the sentence-initial particle -δι/-δε to βαονανο will be due to the fact that this is the first word of the Bactrian text (preceded in DN1 by the Greek dating-formula).

οαρειγο probably occurs again in line 4 but is otherwise unknown. Unfortunately the present passage is broken, while the syntax of line 4 is ambiguous. One possible meaning might be “court”, thus: “(At) the court of the king of kings” (line 1), “he presented [this plate](?) at the court of Wesh” (line 4). Etymologically, οαρειγο might be a derivative of **war(a)-*, Av. *var-*, Pahlavi *war* “enclosure”; alternatively one could think of a Saka loanword, cf. Skjærvø 1985: 60-63, on Khot. *vara-* “gate” < **dwar-*, whose native equivalent is attested in the Bactrian documents as αλβαρο “court”.

In view of the statement at the beginning of the Rabatak inscription (Rab.) that Kanishka “obtained the kingship from Nana and from all the gods” there seems to be little alternative to the restoration proposed here. For [π]ιδο[ι ιωγα]χβονα “in the year one” one may compare [πιδ]ο ι ιωγα χβονα (lines 2-3) and πιδο ι λασσο χβονα “in the tenth year” (line 4). The final -α of ιωγα and χβονα, which here indicates a case governed by the preposition πιδο “in”, is also attested in υνδα “India” (line 4), governed by ασο “from”. Cf. also αβεινα οιαγο “in that place” (Rab., 8) and οβεινα ζαμγα “at that time” (Ayrtaṃ, 4), where the governing preposition may be Old Iranian **upa*,¹¹ as well as the unexpected final -α of βαγεποορα “the son of the gods” (Rab., 14-15) and μιροζαδα “Mihir-zad” (Ayrtaṃ, 6),¹² nouns which both function as the agent of a transitive past tense. From these forms it is clear that the usual view of Kushan Bactrian having a two-case inflexional system is an over-simplification; a third case, possibly derived from a combination of Old Iranian cases (ablative, instrumental and perhaps dative), must have survived at least marginally beside the direct and oblique cases.

χοαδηοδανι “lordship” is formed with the same abstract suffix as βαοδανο “kingship”, obl. βαοδανι (Rab., 2), βαοδαγε (DN1, 6).¹³

ταδηο: the 3 sg. encl. pronoun, usually -ηια or -ηιο, is regularly written -ηο in this inscription. The same form may be attested in the Dilberjin inscription (οτηο, Dil., fragment 5, line 6).¹⁴

βοκονζικο: the name is usually spelled βοκονζοκο, but the obl. form βοκονζικι is

¹⁰ See Sims-Williams & Cribb 1996: 95-6.

¹¹ See Sims-Williams 2008: 62-3.

¹² Ibid.: 65b.

¹³ For examples of nouns with this suffix in later texts see Sims-Williams 2007: 208a.

¹⁴ Livšić & Kruglikova 1979: 108, 111.

attested in versions B and M of the Surkh Kotal inscription SK4.¹⁵

πιορο “father” < Old Iranian gen. sg. **piθrah*, obl. of *πιδα* (Rab., 14) < nom. sg. **pitā*, has already been discussed above. The obl. stem **piθr-* may survive in the form *πιριβτο* “inheritance, ancestral estate; heirs” in the Bactrian documents (sometimes written *π̄τ̄ρ̄τ̄βτο*, with the superscript line which often indicates loss of **h* < **θ*) and in its adjectival derivative **πιοριβτειγο* “belonging to the father”, which is attested by the pl. *πιοριβτειγανο* in line 2 below. Since the form *πιδοριβτο* is attested later than *πιοριβτειγανο* and *π̄τ̄ρ̄τ̄βτο*, it is perhaps a standardized form or merely an artificial spelling with *-δ-* taken from the nom. *πιδα*, later *πιδο* “father”.¹⁶ Cf. also below on *νιαγοβτηγανο* in line 2.

σταδημι: 1 sg. intr. pret. “I was”, spelled *σταδημε* in line 3.

The unknown word **αμβουκαιο** is perhaps a title, presumably denoting a comparatively lowly rank held by Nukunzuk at the time of Kanishka’s accession. The inscriptions of Rabatak (written not earlier than Kanishka’s sixth year, if the numeral *οχο* “six” is correctly read in line 19) and Surkh Kotal (not earlier than year 31 of Kanishka, during the reign of Huvishka) document his promotion to the rank of *hasht-walg* and finally that of *karalrang* “margrave”.

Line 2

βιζ[α]ε (or *βιζ[δ]ε*) will be the obl. of the attested *βιζαιο* (or *βιζδο*) “goodness”.¹⁷

σπαχτε: exactly this form, obl. of *σπαχτο* “service”, is also attested in Dil. (fragment 5, line 13), where it is paired with *ναμωσι* “homage”.¹⁸ Beside *σπαχτο*, the Bactrian documents attest forms with prothetic vowel: *ασπαχτο*, *ισπαχτο*.¹⁹

On **πιοριβτειγο*, pl. *πιοριβτειγανο* “belonging to the father” see above. The accompanying **νιαγοβτηγο*, pl. *νιαγοβτηγανο*, is a parallel formation from *νιαγο*, *νιαγο* “grandfather”. Both words may be secondary formations based on Old Iranian **mātr-šti-*, a derivative of **mātar-* “mother” which survives in Pahlavi *mādišt* “matter” and Sogdian *m’škh* “(financial) capital” (though the attested Bactrian word for “capital” is a different derivative of **mātar-*, namely *μαδαριγο*).²⁰

αμσασογο: the context, and in particular the construction with *αλο* “with”, suggests an interpretation as “equal (in status)” < **hama-sāčaka-*, cf. Pahlavi *sazāg* “fitting, worthy” etc.

¹⁵ See Sims-Williams 2010: 96, no. 289.

¹⁶ Contra Sims-Williams 2012a: 193. For the attestations of the various forms see Sims-Williams 2007: 255-6.

¹⁷ Doc. **xm**, line 7, see Sims-Williams 2007: 156-7, 284b.

¹⁸ Slightly different readings and word-division in Livšič & Kruglikova 1979: 108: *παχτε ... ναμ(ω) σι*.

¹⁹ See Sims-Williams 2007: 197a.

²⁰ Cf. Sims-Williams 2007: 255-6 (where the derivation of *πιδοριβτο* directly from **pitr-šti-* should be revised in view of the evidence presented above). For *μαδαριγο* “capital” see *ibid.* 229b.

ωσταδημι: 1 sg. tr. pret. “he established me”.

φαρδαμγανο, pl. of *φαρδαμγο “foremost” < **fra-tama-ka-*, cf. the adv. φορδαμσο “first” (SK4, line 2).²¹

Lines 2-3

ταδι ...[..... πιδ]ο ι ωγα χρονα αβο μο υνδο φροαγδο “then [in] the year one [...] was proclaimed to India”; cf. the almost identical wording of the Rabatak inscription, line 4: **ταδο αβο ιωγο χρονο αβο ι υνδο φροογδαζο.** The illegible word after **ταδι** here is probably the subject of the sentence. In the Rab. version the syntax is far from clear, but it seems likely that the subject is placed after the verb—a fact which may be connected with the choice of the unique periphrastic pf. **φροαγδαζο** as opposed to the simple 3 sg. intr. pret. **φροαγδο** used here.²²

Line 3

ωσπορδο “conquered” < **awa-sprta-* “trampled (upon)”, cf. Pahlavi *ōspurdan* “to tread, trample”, Khotanese *vaspuḍai* “you trampled”.²³

κηρι (twice in this line) may be compared with Khotanese *kīra-* “work” < **karya-* “(what is) to be done” and late Bactrian **αγιρο** “ineffective”.²⁴ I previously assumed that the latter form derives from **a-kārya-*,²⁵ with the short vowel which is required for Khotanese *kīra-*, but the older spelling with -η- rather suggests **kārya-*.

αλοοαδγο probably belongs to the class of possessive compounds formed with the prefix *αλο* “with”. The second component could be **οαδο** “breath, spirit” (attested via **οαδοβαργανο** “living beings”, SK4) or more likely a derivative of the root **wat* “to inspire, be informed, be acquainted”,²⁶ cf. Sogd. *’nwth* “hope, trust, faith” etc., which suggests my tentative interpretation of **αλοοαδγο** as “trusted”.

The expression **οαρο κιρ-** “to make an oath” is attested in several Bactrian documents, so in theory **μανο οαρο κιρδ[ο]** could mean “I made an oath”, but it seems easier in the present context to assume that **οαρο** is the common adverb “there, thereto”.²⁷

The faint but still partially visible signs at the end of line 3 evidently duplicate the weight formula found at the end of the text. Possibly the text originally ended in line 3 with the verb **σταδημι** followed (after a gap) by the weight formula. Then the latter was partially deleted, an additional passage dealing with Kanishka’s year 10 was added, and

²¹ For other Bactrian comparative and superlative forms see Sims-Williams & Tucker 2006: 590-594.

²² On the syntax of the Rab. passage, as well as on the spelling **υνδο** “India”, see Sims-Williams 2008: 59-61. On **φροαγδαζο** “was proclaimed” see Sims-Williams & Cribb 1996: 90 s.v. -αζο.

²³ MacKenzie 1971: 61; Emmerick 1968: 121.

²⁴ Doc. X, line 28’, see Sims-Williams 2012: 140-41.

²⁵ Sims-Williams 2007: 187b.

²⁶ Thus Cheung 2007: 427.

²⁷ Attestations of both ¹οαρο and ²οαρο are listed in Sims-Williams 2007: 242a.

the text was completed with the identical weight formula (since the weight of the vessel had not changed in the mean time).

Line 4

μαξδηγγο is an otherwise unknown word for which I suggest the meaning “memorials, records” on the basis of the likely etymological connection with **maz-dā* “to remember”.

τοχοαρστανο seems to be by far the earliest occurrence in any known source of the place-name “Tukharistan”. Bactrian documents of the Hephthalite period attest the variant spelling τοχοαραστανο.²⁸

πιδο ι λασσο χρονα “in the tenth year” contrasts with πιδο ι λασο χρονα “in the year ten” in lines 5-6. Since there is no reason for λασο “ten” < **dasa* to be written with double -σσ-, and since we know from other examples that either the cardinal or the ordinal numeral can be used in such expressions (e.g. [πιδ]ο ι ιωγα χρονα, lines 2-3 above; ασο ιωγο χρονο αβο ι οχο χρονο “from year one to year six”, Rab. 19; but αβο ι αρημσοο χρονο “in the third year also”, Rab. 20), it seems likely that λασσο is the ordinal “tenth”, perhaps from **dasama-čiya-* with reduction of the sequence **-σμο-* to *-σσ-*.²⁹ The form λασσο occurs again in line 6 in the phrase λασσο σαχτε “on the tenth day”. The only other example of such an expression in Bactrian attests the cardinal (σαχτο κ’ “day 20”, Doc. R, line 1), but the use of the ordinal is paralleled in both Parthian (*pd sxt cwhrm* “on the fourth day”) and in Sogdian (*xwšmyqy sydy* “on the sixth day”).³⁰

οανιντα[μ]οζδο “spoils(?) of victory(?)”: the word-division and restoration are of course speculative. Since a voiceless -τ- in this position is almost certainly the result of secondary contact between two dentals,³¹ οανιντα is likely to derive from **wanant-atā-* “victory”, abstract to οανινδο “victorious” < **wanant-a-*. The noun μοζδο < **mižda-* “reward” is probably attested as a component of Bactrian personal names,³² but this would be its first occurrence as an independent word.

Line 5

Although this line presents many difficulties, it seems clear that it concerns an offering by Kanishka to the god Wesh. The offering may well be this very plate, as is suggested by a comparison with the Bactrian inscription on another silver plate, which states that it was acquired by a certain Sen-gul “for the god Mana” (φαρο μαγαο ιβαγο).³³ In our text,

²⁸ See **eh**, line 4, and **jb**, lines 2-3, in Sims-Williams 2007: 122-3, 126-7.

²⁹ Cf. Sims-Williams 2008: 66 on the formation of φορδαμσο “(at) first” and *αρημσο “third”.

³⁰ See Sims-Williams & de Blois 2006: 188; MacKenzie 1994: 125.

³¹ Cf. οτο “and” < οδο + -δο (Sims-Williams 1985: 112), βαταρο “happier” and οαταρο “worse” (Sims-Williams & Tucker 2006: 591-2), πιδοοασατο “has been declared” < πιδοοασαδο + -δο etc. (Sims-Williams 2007: 44).

³² See Sims-Williams 2010a: 274-5; 2010: 50 (no. 93), 82 (no. 228).

³³ Published in Sims-Williams 2013: 192-5 (no. 3).

the beginning of the line is unfortunately illegible on the available photographs, and it is not clear whether or not the first visible letters, **νοβαρδγο**, belong together and form a complete word. Such a word might be cognate with Pahlavi *nibard* “battle” (New Persian *nabard*), *nibardag* “tried, experienced” (NP *nabarda*), which belong to the root **part* “to fight”; or it might be the pp. to a verb **νοβαρ-* “to offer”, cf. Khotanese *nuvar-* “id.”.³⁴ Either connection gives a meaning appropriate to the general context and it is difficult to choose between them because because of the multiple ambiguities of the following phrases. The clearest part of line 5 is the clause **καλδι κανηρκι βαο αμο οηβο αγαδο** “when king Kanishka brought it to³⁵ Wesh”. In view of the obl. ending of **κανηρκι**, this clause must be transitive, showing that **αγαδο** is here the past stem of **αβαρ-** “to bring” rather than of **ηρσ-** “to come”. The verb of the preceding clause, **αδγαδο** < **ati-gata-*, is unfortunately ambiguous in this respect, since its subject is missing. In principle, therefore, it can be understood either as the 3 sg. pret. of an intransitive verb meaning “to enter” or of a transitive verb meaning “to bring in”, cf. Sogdian *tyt-* as past stem of both *tys* “to enter” and of *ibr-* “to introduce, insert”.³⁶ Thus, we might translate: “he entered the court(?) of Wesh” or “he brought it in (= presented it?) to the court(?) of Wesh”. The latter interpretation of **αδγαδο** is perhaps supported by the Sen-gul inscription, which uses a cognate word in describing the silver plate on which it is written as the “income (**αδογαμο**) of the god Mana”.

The noun **νοβανδανο** is also attested in the Bactrian marriage contract, where the context seems to require the interpretation “established custom”: **σαγωνδο αβο μο λαμο νοβανδανο** “as (is) the established custom in the world”.³⁷ This suggests a possible translation of the phrase **αβο ι βαγο νοβανδανο** as “according to the custom of a lord”. On the other hand Inscriptional Parthian *nybndn* (or *nybndy*?) seems to mean “offering (to a god)” (Morano 1991: 234), a meaning which would fit extremely well here: “he brought it to the court(?) of Wesh (as) an offering to the god”. Although the sense “offering” no doubt derives from the meaning of the root **band* “to bind”, referring to a bound sacrificial victim, as suggested by Morano, it is evident that it also came to be used of inanimate offerings such as statues and silver plates. The secondary sense

³⁴ If Khotanese *nuvar-* derives from **ni-bara-*, as generally assumed (cf. Emmerick 1968: 59), one would expect a past stem **νοβορδ-* < **ni-brta-* or suppletive **νογαδ-* < **ni-gata-*. However, a derivation from the root **parH* “to give, present” (Cheung 2007: 297) also seems possible, despite the past stem *nūda-*, which may display the same treatment of **rH* as is found in some forms of **parH* “to fill”. In any case, it should be noted that the title **γαβαραγο-βιδο** in Doc. **ed**, lines 12-13, tentatively interpreted as “provisioner, quarter-master”(?) (Sims-Williams 2007: 114-15, 236b), can equally well be read **γαβαρδγο-βιδο** and may thus contain the same word as our inscription.

³⁵ As in SK4M, 11 (first understood by Gershevitch 1963: 196 n. 1), **αμο** must here be a contracted form of **αβο + μο** “to the”.

³⁶ See Sims-Williams 2014: 40.

³⁷ Doc. **A**, lines 15, 17, see Sims-Williams 2012: 26-7; 2007: 240a.

“established custom” may not simply imply “(that which is) bound, fixed”, but “(that which is) consecrated (by usage)”. Similarly the cognate verb $\nu\omicron\beta\alpha\sigma\tau\omicron$ < **ni-basta-* (Rab., 3), which refers to the inception of Kanishka’s new era, may not merely mean “began”, like Manichaean Middle Persian *nwyst*,³⁸ but may belong to a more hieratic or ceremonial vocabulary: “consecrated, inaugurated”.

Line 6

The phrase $\lambda\alpha\sigma\sigma\omicron$ $\sigma\alpha\chi\tau\epsilon$ “on the tenth day” is discussed above (note to line 4).

$\nu\alpha$ σ' \omicron' “We(ight:) 270 (stater)s(?)”:³⁸ for this weight formula see Sims-Williams 2013. Since the weight of the bowl is unknown, it is impossible to calculate whether the unit of weight is the stater (as in most instances of this formula), the drachm or even the didrachm.

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³⁸ Shaul Shaked *apud* Sims-Williams 1998: 84.

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