

NICHOLAS SIMS-WILLIAMS AND FRANÇOIS DE BLOIS
STUDIES IN THE CHRONOLOGY OF THE BACTRIAN DOCUMENTS
FROM NORTHERN AFGHANISTAN

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AND FRANÇOIS DE BLOIS

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with contributions by Harry Falk and Dieter Weber

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Bactrian document dd, dated 199 BE. Courtesy Aman ur Rahman.
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PREFACE

In the preface to the first volume of my *Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan*, published in 2001, I wrote of “one of the most sensational discoveries of the last decade, a series of more than a hundred Bactrian documents written in cursive script on leather, cloth or wood”. Since that time, the corpus has continued to grow and now consists of well over 150 documents. All of these, with the exception of the most recently discovered, are edited, translated and illustrated in the three volumes of the work mentioned above (*BD1*, 2001; second edition 2012; *BD2*, 2007; *BD3*, 2012). These volumes are complemented by Geoffrey Khan’s *Arabic Documents from Early Islamic Khurasan* (2007), an exemplary edition of 32 Arabic documents which appear to have come to light together with some of those in Bactrian.

Regrettably, none of these documents has an authenticated provenance and it is not known whether they belong to a single archive or to several. It is evident from their contents that they were written in Afghanistan between the 4th and 8th centuries CE and from their often excellent state of preservation that they must have been hidden and stored in extremely favourable conditions for many centuries. It appears that most if not all of them were smuggled into Pakistan during the years of chaos following the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979, after which they passed through the hands of various dealers and were eventually purchased by collectors in many different countries.

Before 1991, when the first of these documents came to light, the usable corpus of texts in Bactrian was effectively limited to a single inscription from Surkh Kotal and the short legends on coins and seals: almost all other texts were illegible or incomprehensible. Inevitably, therefore, the emergence of this material has transformed our knowledge of the Bactrian language. The new documents are equally capable of transforming our knowledge of the history of the region in which they were written, for which we have few contemporary records of any kind; but before they can be exploited as historical sources it is necessary to establish their relative and absolute chronology. This was the aim of the project “The chronology of the Bactrian documents from Northern Afghanistan” (2004–2008), which was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, with a project team consisting of myself, François de Blois and Johnny Cheung. The present volume, together with the prosopographical sections of my *Bactrian Personal Names* (2010), represents the principal outcome of that project. I am happy to express my thanks to the Research Council; to the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, which administered the AHRC grant; and not least to my co-workers, without whose skill and commitment the project could not have been brought to a successful conclusion. Finally, my co-author and I would like to express our thanks to Harry Falk and Dieter Weber for their important contributions to this book, as well as to many other colleagues, amongst them Michael Alram, Hans Bakker, Joe Cribb, Frantz Grenet, Minoru Inaba, Geoffrey Khan, Étienne de la Vaissière, Judith Lerner, Pavel Lurje, Bill Mak, Raymond Mercier, Cameron Petrie, Nikolaus Schindel, Klaus Vondrovec and Yutaka Yoshida, all of whom have kindly taken the time and trouble to provide information, to debate the issues and to answer my sometimes naive questions on matters of history, chronology and numismatics. They will not all agree with all of the conclusions presented below but I hope they will not feel that their time was wasted.

NICHOLAS SIMS-WILLIAMS
Cambridge, March 2017

INTRODUCTION

The material

The Bactrian documents from Afghanistan known up to now may be classified as follows:

1. Legal documents such as contracts and receipts, dated between the years 110 and 549 of an unspecified era. These have been assigned signatures consisting of or beginning with a capital letter: **A–Y**; **Aa, Dd**,¹ **Ii, Nn, Ss, Tt, Uu, Uv**. The main sequence **A** (year 110) to **Y** (year 549) is arranged in chronological order, while a signature such as **Uu** or **Uv** indicates a document later than **U** but earlier than **V**.
2. Similar, mostly fragmentary documents of uncertain date: **aa–ae**,² **an, m**.³
3. Lists and accounts: **af–al**.
4. Wooden tally slips: **am1–38**.⁴
5. Letters: **ba–bi, ca–cr, da–dg, ea–eh, ja–jj, xa–xt**. Of these only a few (**cr, da, dd, de, ea, ed**) are dated. As explained in *BD2*, 17ff, the signatures assigned to the rest of those in the sub-groups **ba–**, **ca–**, **da–** and **ea–** were originally intended to indicate that these letters were likely to be of similar date to the dated documents **B, C, D, E**, while the sub-group **ja–** consisted of later texts and the sub-group **xa–** contained those for which no dating could be suggested. However, as will be shown below, this provisional chronology is certainly not correct in all cases.
6. Fragments of uncertain character: **ya–ye**.
7. Buddhist texts: **za–zd**.

All of these documents are written on leather or parchment with the exception of **C** and **za**, which are written on cloth, **zd**, which is written on birchbark, and the wooden tally slips **am1–38**. In principle, the documents of groups 1–4 are edited in *BD1*₂ and those in groups 5–7 in *BD2*, the exceptions being texts which came to notice too late to be included in the appropriate volume: **Dd** (Sims-Williams 2017), **Uv** (Sims-Williams 2015), **bi** (*BD3*, 21 n. 6),⁵ **jj** and **zd** (both in Sims-Williams 2010a).

Research on the “Bactrian era”

From the summary above it can be seen that the Bactrian documents include about forty which bear dates in an unspecified era which it is convenient to refer to as the “Bactrian era” (BE). These dates are expressed by means of Greek numerical letters, which in the documents are always combined with the word $\chi\rho\nu\nu\omicron$ or $\alpha\chi\rho\nu\nu\omicron$ “(calendar) year”. Dates expressed in a similar way and presumably referring to the same era are attested in a number of Bactrian inscriptions, in particular those of the Tochi valley in Pakistan, now in the Peshawar Museum, which have been known to scholarship since the 1960s. The Bactrian inscriptions of the Tochi valley are accompanied by Arabic and Sanskrit inscriptions, some of which are written on the same stones, and which also contain dates, in the *hijrī* and *Laukika* calendars respectively. Altogether there are seven texts in three different languages. The seven texts and their dates were intensively studied by Helmut Humbach (1966, 1970, 1971) and by János Harmatta (1966, 1969), both of whom came to the conclusion that synchronisms between the dates in the three eras indicated that the Bactrian era began in 232 CE. According to Humbach, this era was most probably a

¹ The date of **Dd** is only partly preserved, but what survives is enough to ensure its chronological position between **D** and **E**.

² Document **aa** once bore a date, but the traces are only enough to fix its date within a range of two centuries. Document **ac** is dated by the day, but not by the month or year.

³ The signature **m** has been given to the older text of a palimpsest, the dated text **M** (see *BD1*₂, 66–7).

⁴ In several cases two fragments of tally slips can be joined, so the total number of texts is 33 rather than 38.

⁵ Older text of the palimpsest **co**.

“Kushano-Sasanian era” marking the Sasanian conquest of the Kushan empire, while Harmatta preferred to suppose that the new era was introduced by Kanishka III.⁶

Following the appearance during the 1990s of a number of dated Bactrian documents, the issue of the “Bactrian era” seemed to demand a reconsideration. A minor modification to the conclusion of Humbach and Harmatta was proposed by Sims-Williams (1997, 1999), who suggested shifting the beginning of the era from 232 to 233 CE on the basis of a revised reading of the date of one of the Tochi inscriptions as $\chi' \lambda' \alpha' = 631$ rather than $\chi' \lambda' \beta' = 632$ BE. This provisional conclusion was accompanied by a number of caveats, in particular that the various Tochi inscriptions “have not been shown to be bilinguals in the sense that the texts in each language have the same contents”.⁷ Consequently, the proposed Bactrian era beginning in 233 CE could not be regarded as more than a “working hypothesis”.⁸

Serious doubt was cast on this working hypothesis in 2006, when François de Blois presented a communication entitled “Du nouveau sur la chronologie bactrienne post-hellénistique: l’ère de 223/224 ap. J.-C.” at the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres in Paris. In his lecture, published in 2008 in the *Comptes rendus* of the AIBL, de Blois argued that the seven Tochi inscriptions were engraved by different persons at different times and thus that the supposed synchronisms are illusory, a point which is fully confirmed by the new edition of the inscriptions presented below in Appendix 1. More reliable synchronisms, he argued, can be found in the documents themselves. In particular, a *terminus ante quem* for the starting-point of the era is indicated by a group of Bactrian and Arabic documents which evidently belong to the family archive of the Bek family. The Arabic tax receipts of Mir ibn Bek are dated between the years 147 and 154 AH, those of his son Qār wāl ibn Mir between 155 and 159. Since Mir’s last receipt is dated in Ramadān 154 (= August/September 771) and Qār wāl’s first in Šafar 155 (= January/February 772), it would seem that Qār wāl inherited his father’s property at some time between those dates. However, the Bactrian document Y is a legal document issued on behalf of Mir and dated in the year 549 BE. If Mir was still alive in this year but had died by February 772, it follows that 549 BE cannot correspond to any year later than 771/2 CE and thus that the latest possible starting-point for the Bactrian era is 223 CE. A *terminus post quem* is provided by the Bactrian letter **ea**, which refers to Peroz as the reigning *shahanshah* and is dated in the year 239 BE. If the effective reign of Peroz began in 459 CE, as generally assumed, the earliest possible starting-point for the Bactrian era must be 221 CE. De Blois opts for an era beginning at Nawroz 223 CE and marking the foundation of the Sasanian empire by Ardashir I. Not only is this the only one of the few theoretically possible dates which corresponds to a significant historical event in the region, de Blois argues, but a year-count beginning in 223 CE is actually attested in the inscription of Shapur I at Bayshabuhr and in the Syriac acts of the Persian martyrs under Shapur II.

The next important contribution to the debate about the Bactrian era is a 2011 article by Nikolaus Schindel.⁹ Schindel correctly points out that there is good evidence that Peroz succeeded to the throne in 457 rather than 459 CE, in which case the *terminus post quem* deduced from the Bactrian letter **ea** should be shifted backwards by two years.¹⁰ The purpose of Schindel’s article, however, is to shift the beginning of the Bactrian era not backwards but forwards, to 228 CE,¹¹ and to identify it with the

⁶ Humbach 1971, 76–7 (revising the conclusion presented in Humbach 1966, 16); Harmatta 1969, 372ff.

⁷ Sims-Williams 1999, 246.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁹ Although Rezakhani 2011, 194–5, includes a section on “The chronology of the Bactrian documents”, he does not make any specific proposal, nor does he engage with the arguments presented in de Blois 2008 (although this is listed in his bibliography).

¹⁰ Schindel 2011, 1–2, referring back to Schindel 2004, 388–9, 511, regarding the supposed reign of Hormizd III (457–9 CE). The further argument (Schindel 2011, 2, 7) that another Bactrian letter, **ed**, referring to Peroz as the reigning *shahanshah* and dated in the year 252 BE, indicates a *terminus ante quem* of 232 CE for the start of the Bactrian era is uncertain in view of the possibility that the date should be read as 242 (see *BD2*, 114 fn.).

¹¹ Following the usual Indological practice (cf. below, p. 42 n. 122), Schindel 2011, 2, cites this date as 227 CE, which would be the theoretical “year 0” of the era.

famous “Kushan era” or “Kanishka era” established by Kanishka I, an event which seems to be referred to in the Rabatak inscription.¹² It is clear that Schindel’s point of departure is his belief (following Göbl) that the rule of Kanishka I began in or around that year (rather than a century earlier as widely accepted nowadays), which would of course exclude the possibility that another official era was established in the same geographical area only a few years before and continued in use for many centuries thereafter. In presenting his case, however, he chiefly emphasizes what he regards as “the main flaw in de Blois’ line of argument”, namely the lack of evidence for an official “Sasanian Imperial Era starting with the coming to power of Ardashir I”.¹³ As for de Blois’ proposed *terminus ante quem* of 223 CE, Schindel argues that the sequence of Arabic tax documents is not sufficiently clear-cut to justify the deduction that Qār wāl inherited his father’s estates in 771/2, and suggests that the position of head of the household liable to pay the *xarāj* alternated between Mir and his brother Bab.¹⁴

A variant of Schindel’s hypothesis recently proposed by Étienne de la Vaissière (forthcoming) is to accept the date of 227 or 228 CE for the beginning of the Bactrian era but to interpret this as the second rather than the first century of the Kanishka era. This would seem to imply that during the second century of that era the years were referred in an abbreviated fashion as “1, 2, 3 ...” instead of “101, 102, 103 ...” (the so-called “dropped hundreds” hypothesis)¹⁵ but at the end of that century the numbering continued with “100, 101, 102 ...” rather than “200, 201, 202 ...” or “100, 1, 2 ...”. Like Schindel, but using partly different arguments, de la Vaissière casts doubt on de Blois’ deduction that Qār wāl had inherited his father’s estates by February 772 and that consequently 549 BE, the date of document Y, cannot correspond to any Persian year later than that beginning at Nawroz 771.

This introduction is not the place to rehearse all the relevant arguments in detail; for a full discussion the reader is referred to Part 1 below, especially §1.3. Our conclusions may however be summarized as follows: The evidence of document ea, which shows that Peroz was ruling in 239 BE, indicates that the Bactrian era cannot have begun earlier than 219 CE. This much is probably uncontroversial. More controversially, we argue that the most plausible interpretation of the Arabic documents from the Bek family archive is that Mir had died or retired, leaving his property to his sons, by February 772 CE at the latest, in which case the evidence of document Y that Mir was still alive and economically active in 549 BE points to 223 CE as the latest possible date for the beginning of the Bactrian era. Finally, we reaffirm de Blois’ identification of the foundation of the Sasanian empire by Ardashir I in the year beginning on Nawroz (2 October) 223 as the event most likely to have led to the creation of the new era.¹⁶

Whilst the importance of establishing the exact starting-point of the Bactrian era cannot be denied, one should not overlook the fact that the rival hypotheses outlined above differ by no more than five years. For many historical questions on which the Bactrian documents can potentially throw light, a difference of five years in absolute dating is likely to be insignificant. Moreover, the relative dating of the documents which bear dates in the Bactrian era can be regarded as firmly established, providing a framework within which it is possible to estimate the dates of the more numerous undated documents, as discussed in detail in Part 2 of this volume.

Geography

For the correct evaluation of the historical data contained in a document it is hardly less important to know where it was written than it is to establish its date. Although the present volume is not directly

¹² See Sims-Williams 2008, 55–6: *κανηρκε ι κοβανο ... κιδι ωγο χρονο νοβαστο* “Kanishka the Kushan ... who has inaugurated the year one”.

¹³ Schindel 2011, 3.

¹⁴ Schindel 2011, 2.

¹⁵ Widely adopted following van Lohuizen-de Leeuw 1949. See in particular Falk 2004, who shows that Gupta inscriptions making use of the Kushan era continue to drop the hundreds in the third and fourth centuries of that era.

¹⁶ Rezakhani 2011, 194, objects that “224 is the correct date”. It is true that Ardashir’s victory over Ardawan took place in April 224, but it is well known that the Sasanians counted regnal years from Nawroz of the king’s year of accession.

concerned with geography, it will be necessary from time to time to refer to features which may be characteristic of the various regions from which the Bactrian documents can be shown to derive. It therefore seems useful to give a summary here of the fuller discussion of this topic which will be found in Sims-Williams (forthcoming).

The majority of the Bactrian documents appear to derive from one or another of three regions: Rob, Kadagstan and Gozgan. In addition, one document (L, dated 602 CE) is written in Warnu, probably to be identified with modern Qunduz, mediaeval Warwaliz, and one other (Uv, dated 726 CE) in a place named Khash, which probably lay to the south of the Hindukush, between Bamiyan and Kabul. There are of course many documents, especially amongst the letters, which cannot be assigned to any specific locality.



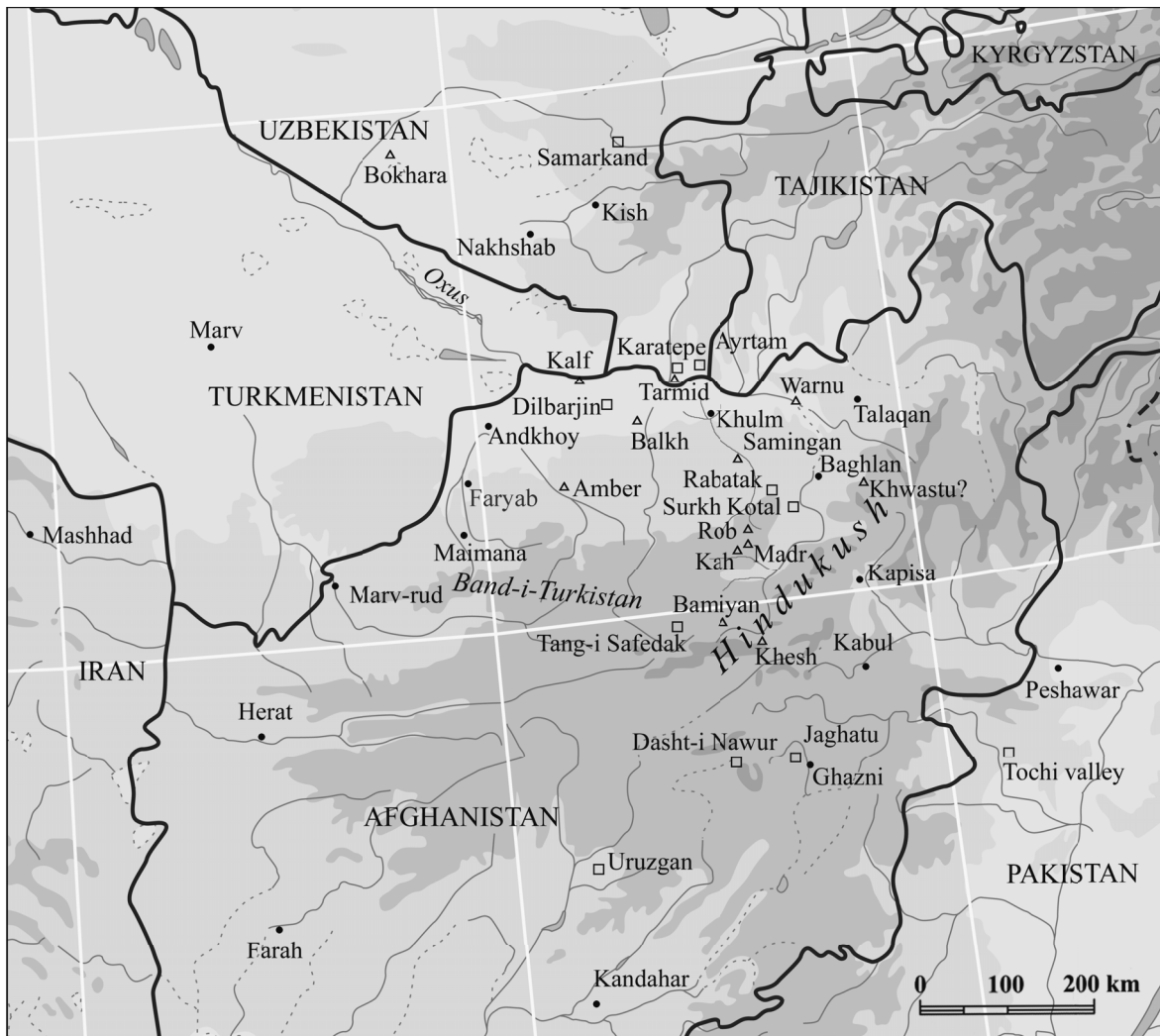
Map 1. The Hindukush and Northern Afghanistan, showing places mentioned in the Bactrian documents (Δ).
Drawn by François Ory.

Many Bactrian documents, including most of the earliest ones, derive from a region in the northern Hindukush ruled by the “*khar* of Rob”. In addition to Rob (modern Rui), which is also referred to in early documents by the name Kandban, the region subject to the *khar* of Rob included Malr or Madr (modern Madr), Kah (modern Kahmard), as well as Rizm and Gandar, neither of which can be precisely localized. In the seventh century CE it also included Samingan (Aybak), which lies a little further north.

The region of Kadagstan, which seems to have been situated to the east of Rob, is attested in documents ranging from **cr** (380 CE) to **Y** (771/2 CE). Throughout this period it was ruled by a viceroy or governor who bore the title *kadag-bid* “master of the household”. In the earlier texts he seems to have been subordinate to the Sasanian *shahanshah*, but later he is subject to the Hephthalite *yabghu*, later still to the Turkish *khagan*. Named places in Kadagstan include Warlu (Chinese Huolu 活路), which was probably the capital city, Lan (Chinese Lan 蘭), Burzawid and Kurwad or Kurad.

A third region, Gozgan in northwest Afghanistan, is attested by seven or eight documents covering a comparatively short period from **Nn** (659 CE) to **Uu** (722 CE). Most of these were written in a city named Gaz, also referred to simply as Lizg “the fortress”, which has not been securely identified. One was written in Kalf (modern Kelif or Kilift) on the Oxus and one in Amber (modern Sar-i-pul).

Some of the documents also mention places outside the regions where they were written, such as Bokhara, Tarmid (modern Termez), Balkh, Bamiyan and Khwastu (probably modern Khost, to the east of Baghlan). These and all other identifiable places mentioned in the documents are shown in Maps 1 and 2. A general term for the region to the north of the Hindukush seems to have been Tukharistan, a name already attested in an inscription from the time of Kanishka I,¹⁷ while the term Garchistan probably refers to the “mountain country” to the south of Tukharistan.¹⁸



Map 2. Afghanistan and adjacent regions, showing places mentioned in the Bactrian documents (Δ) and sites where Bactrian inscriptions have been found (□). Drawn by François Ory.

The plan of the present volume

The present volume is primarily intended to provide, in a reasonably digestible form, the information which will enable historians to understand the evidence for the date of each of the Bactrian documents, and thus to interpret the data contained in them in an appropriate way. In Part 1 we consider the dated documents, discussing the nature of the Bactrian calendar and the epoch of the Bactrian era and concluding with a conspectus in which all the attested dates are converted to Julian dates on the basis of the

¹⁷ Sims-Williams 2016a, 261.

¹⁸ Sims-Williams 1997, 16.

facts and arguments presented. In Part 2 we turn to the undated documents, systematically weighing up all types of evidence, whether historical, prosopographical, palaeographical, linguistic or orthographic, which may have a bearing on their dating. In all cases the basis of the dating is made absolutely explicit, so that it will always be possible to check its credibility in the light of new arguments or new material. Part 3 provides a handy check-list of our conclusions, while the Appendices provide additional and supporting material including editions of the Tochi valley inscriptions and of a Pahlavi document which was acquired together with the Bactrian and Arabic documents.

1. THE DATED DOCUMENTS

1.1. DATES AND NUMERALS IN THE BACTRIAN DOCUMENTS AND INSCRIPTIONS¹⁹

The dates found in the documents are shown in chronological order in Table 1 (overleaf). For the sake of completeness the table also includes the few dates which are known from other sources written in cursive Bactrian script: two (at the beginning) from the Karatepe inscriptions,²⁰ one from a coin of “Tegin, king of Khorasan” (NumH 240 in Göbl’s classification),²¹ one from the inscription of Tang-i Safedak,²² and three (at the end) from those of the Tochi valley.²³ The only dates omitted are that of **aa**, which is very imperfectly preserved,²⁴ and a date written in words rather than numerals on the recently published silver plate donated by a certain Sen-gul to “the god Mana”.²⁵ In the case of the Karatepe inscription IKTB 5+9, it is not absolutely certain that the figures ρ’ ζ’ (= 97) represent a date; all other examples are accompanied by some form of the word χρονο “(calendar) year”. It is convenient to refer to this era, which is presumably the same in all these sources, as the “Bactrian era”.

The reading of the numerals which constitute these dates is not always straightforward. Greek numerals are essentially letters of the alphabet, but they include several letters which have ceased to be used as phonetic symbols. Moreover, a numeral often has a more elaborate shape than the corresponding letter and in some cases there is very little resemblance between the two. In order to interpret the dates correctly it is therefore essential to compare them with the other numerals attested in the documents.

Sometimes the value of a numeral is of course clear from its context. In other cases, the fact that a particular scribe makes a distinction between two similar characters may be helpful in establishing that they must in fact represent distinct numerals, even if it is not obvious from the text which numeral has which value.

The accounting texts naturally contain many numerals. One of them (**ag**) ends with a total, which helps one to calculate the values of the preceding numbers. Other numerals are effectively “glossed”, since numbers in legal documents are commonly written in both words and figures. On the other hand, one must take into account the fact that the documents cover a period of many centuries, during which time orthographical changes are to be expected.

¹⁹ This section is a revised version of the discussion in Sims-Williams 1999, 248–53.

²⁰ On both dates see Harmatta 1969a, 95–6, 104–6; Humbach 1970, 49. The reading of IKTB 10 cannot be verified from the partial photograph in Staviskij 1975, 193 (pl. 16v), but to judge by the drawing in Staviskij 1969, 205 (pl. 19b), λ’ ε’ = 35 is certain. For IKTB 5+9 see the drawing and photograph in Staviskij 1969, 202 (pl. 16) and 1975, 192 (pl. 16b) respectively, from which the reading ρ’ ζ’ = 97 is clear.

²¹ On the basis of the best specimens, this inscription can now be read as υ’ π’ = 480, see Sims-Williams 2012, 64–5 with fig. 2 (whose caption, unfortunately misprinted, should read: “Coin of ‘Tegin, king of Khorasan’, NumH 240, Jean-Pierre Righetti collection, no. 0265. Courtesy Jean-Pierre Righetti”). It was formerly read υ’ ο’ δ’ = 474 both by Göbl 1967, I, 164–5 (with correct attribution to the era of the Tochi inscriptions) and by Humbach 1967, 3 n. 1 (correcting the misprint in Humbach 1966, 61), accepted in Sims-Williams 1999, 248 n. 8. Harmatta (1969, 425) read υ’ ρ’ δ’ = 494.




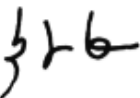

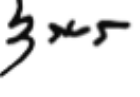
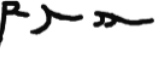

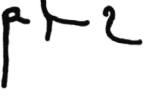

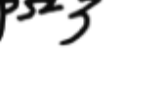
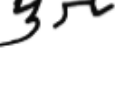


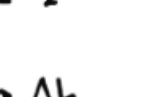


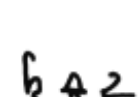

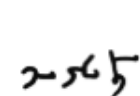
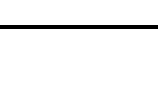
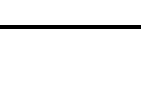
²² See Lee–Sims-Williams 2003. The attempt by Davary (2012) to read the date of this inscription as τ’ ρ’ β’ = 392 instead of υ’ ρ’ β’ = 492, which necessitates understanding ταζιγο as “Tajik” and separating this from the word for “Arab”, cannot be justified either palaeographically or historically.

²³ See below, Appendix 1.

²⁴ See p. 65 with fig. 1. The possibility that the figure ρ’ μ’ ζ’ = 147 in **am2** is a date (= 369/70 CE) is raised in Sims-Williams 2008a, 529, but since other evidence suggests that **am2** belongs to a period about a century later than this (see §2.4 below) this figure is also omitted from Table 1.

²⁵ The date is given as υρηδοσοφοροο χρονο- “year forty-three”, see Sims-Williams 2013, 194.

Table 1. Year-dates in documents and inscriptions written in cursive Bactrian script

IKTB 10		λ' ε' = 35	Dd		σ' ι' [= 210+?
IKTB 5+9		ρ' ζ' = 97	ea		σ' λ' θ' = 239
A		ρ' ι' = 110	E		σ' μ' γ' = 243
Aa		ρ' λ' δ' = 134	F		σ' μ' ζ' = 247
B		ρ' λ' ζ' = 137	G		σ' μ' θ' = 249
C		ρ' ν' ζ' = 157	H		σ' ν' = 250
cr		ρ' ν' ζ' = 157	ed		σ' ν' β' = 252
D		ρ' ρ' ε' = 195	I		σ' ξ' = 260
da		ρ' ρ' η' = 198	Ii		σ' ξ' = 260
dd		ρ' ρ' η' = 198	J		σ' ρ' ε' = 295
de		ρ' ρ' θ' = 199	K		τ' ν' ζ' = 356