



## BACTRIAN DOCUMENTS FOUND IN NORTHERN AFGHANISTAN AS A HISTORICAL SOURCE

*Tarihî Bir Kaynak Olarak Kuzey Afganistan'da  
Bulunan Baktriye Belgeleri*

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### Abstract

This article analyzes the role and significance of the Bactrian documents found in Northern Afghanistan as a historical source for the study of the history of Turan in the early medieval period. The article also examines the history of the discovery and study of these documents. From a critical point of view, it analyzes the erroneous approach in national historiography, which consists in the incorrect generalization of these documents under the name Rabatake Archive and their attribution exclusively to the Kushan period. Furthermore, based on an analysis of the external (duplicate copies, seals) and internal (introduction, main part, conclusion) structure of the documents, the article substantiates the existence of a developed legal system in the region. Through the analysis of information contained in the documents regarding purchase and sale, debt obligations, rent, taxes, slavery, and family relations, the socio-economic picture of Turan in the 4th–8th centuries is illuminated. The significant scholarly novelty of the article lies in the fact that, based on an analysis of Turkic titles (kagan, yabgu, tarkhan, tudun) and ethnonyms (Abdalo) found in the

documents, the role and influence of the Turkic peoples in the statehood of Turan during the early medieval era are proven with direct evidence.

**Keywords:** Bactrian documents, Rabatak Archive, Qutluğ Tabaghliğ Bilge Chavush, Abdals, Abdal tax, Turkic tax, Arab tax.

### Öz

Bu makale, Kuzey Afganistan’da bulunan Baktriye belgelerinin, erken Orta Çağ döneminde Turan tarihinin incelenmesi için tarihî bir kaynak olarak rolünü ve önemini analiz etmektedir. Makale ayrıca bu belgelerin keşif ve araştırma tarihini de ele almaktadır. Eleştirel bir bakış açısıyla, ulusal tarih yazımında görülen hatalı yaklaşımlardan biri bu belgelerin yanlış biçimde *Rabatake Arşivi* adı altında genelleştirilmesi ve yalnızca Kuşan dönemine atfedilmesi olarak analiz edilmektedir. Bununla birlikte bu makalede belgelerin dış (*mükerrer kopyalar, mühürler*) ve iç (*giriş, ana bölüm, sonuç*) yapısına dayalı bir inceleme yoluyla, bölgede gelişmiş bir hukuk sisteminin varlığı ortaya konulmaktadır. Ayrıca satış, borç yükümlülükleri, kira, vergiler, kölelik ve aile ilişkilerine dair belgelerde yer alan bilgilerin analizi aracılığıyla, 4.-8. Yüzyıllar arasında Turan’ın sosyo-ekonomik tablosu aydınlatılmaktadır. Makalenin önemli bilimsel yeniliği, belgelerde geçen Türk unvanları (*kağan, yabgu, tarhan, tudun*) ve etnonimlerin (*Abdalo*) analizine dayanarak erken Orta Çağ’da Türk halklarının Turan devlet yapısındaki rolü ve etkisinin doğrudan kanıtlarla ortaya konulmuş olmasıdır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Baktriye belgeleri, Rabatak Arşivi, Kutluğ Tabahlığ Bilge Çavuş, Abdallar, Abdal vergisi, Türk vergisi, Arap vergisi

### Introduction

The early medieval period underwent significant historical transformations in the history of Uzbek statehood. During this era, the land of Turan was successively ruled by the Chionites, Kidarites, Abdals (Hephthalites), and the Turkic Khaganate. In national and foreign historiography, the history of these dynasties is primarily studied through sources in Chinese, Armenian, Syriac, Pahlavi, Indian, as well as Arabic and Persian, in conjunction with archaeological artifacts that have been and continue to be discovered in the region.

It must be emphasized that the historical sources of this period are of particular importance for studying the political and socio-economic processes of the past, and they play a crucial role in reconstructing historical truth. Although they contain a large volume of information, they are not always presented from an impartial and objective viewpoint. Furthermore, this group of sources contains extremely scarce information directly related to the daily lives of ordinary people, as they are often dedicated to political history. For this reason, an objective and complete assessment of historical processes can only be achieved through a comparative analysis of these sources with contemporary documents.

### 1. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a source-critical and comparative historiographical approach in order to analyze the Bactrian documents discovered in Northern Afghanistan and to assess their role in reconstructing the socio-economic and legal history of Early Medieval Turan. The methodology is based on the following principles:

- *Source Criticism:* The primary body of evidence consists of Bactrian documents from the 4th–8th centuries, preserved on leather, cloth, and wooden tablets. Their external (script, seals, duplicate forms) and internal (structure, terminology, witnesses, dates) features were analyzed in detail. Particular attention was given to evaluating the authenticity of the documents and identifying their functional purpose within the legal-administrative system.
- *Comparative Analysis:* The information from the Bactrian documents is systematically compared with contemporary sources in Chinese, Armenian, Syriac, Pahlavi, Arabic, and Persian languages, as well as with archaeological materials. This comparative method allows the reconstruction of a more objective historical narrative and helps to contextualize the documents within broader Central Asian history.
- *Historiographical Evaluation:* The study critically examines the positions of major scholars such as Nicholas Sims-Williams, François de Blois, Khodadad Rezakhani, Hossein Sheikh Bostanabad, and Said Reza Huseini. Their differing interpretations of chronology, legal terminology, and socio-economic relations are compared in order to highlight historiographical debates and to situate the author's own contribution.
- *Socio-Economic and Legal Analysis:* The methodology emphasizes the functional analysis of the documents as legal acts regulating property, tax, debt, and slavery. By identifying recurrent legal formulas, administrative titles, and contractual mechanisms, the study reconstructs the socio-economic structures of Early Medieval Turan.
- *Terminological and Philological Approach:* Special focus is placed on Turkic-derived names and titles (such as khagan, yabghu, tarkhan, tudun), which provide direct evidence of Turkic influence in the region. Their usage is analyzed not only linguistically but also in terms of political and social implications.

## 2. LIMITATIONS

Since the provenance of many Bactrian documents remains uncertain and they were acquired through the antiquities market, the study refrains from treating them as a single “Rabatak Archive.” Instead, they are analyzed as independent yet related legal and administrative records.

By combining these methodological approaches, the article seeks to present a balanced, evidence-based, and critically contextualized interpretation of the Bactrian documents as a unique historical source.

## 3. THE BACTRIAN SCRIPT

The administrative scripts used in the region from the period of Achaemenid dependence to the Arab invasion can be chronologically divided into three stages. These are: 1) Aramaic; 2) Greek; 3) Bactrian. The Aramaic script was in use until Alexander the Great of Macedon defeated the Achaemenid king Darius III (336-330 BCE) and conquered his territories. Nevertheless, the Aramaic script was retained as

an official script in the Bactrian territories even during the time of Alexander the Great. Over time, it was replaced by the Greek script, which continued until the rise of the Kushan Empire. On the coins of Kanishka, for the first time, inscriptions in the Bactrian language began to appear in place of Greek inscriptions<sup>1</sup>. This implies that Kanishka set aside the Greek script and made the local Bactrian script the official one. Whereas the Greek alphabet had been used for state administration in the Kushan kingdom before him, a reform took place during Kanishka's reign, and the Greek alphabet was adapted for the Bactrian language. The Bactrian script, adapted from the Greek alphabet, served as the administrative script until the Arab invasion.

Two types of the Bactrian script are known to science – monumental and cursive. The monumental type is characterized by the letters not being connected to each other and being written in a rounded form, which makes reading the words relatively easier. In the cursive style, however, the letters are joined to one another, which makes reading it difficult<sup>2</sup>. Archaeological research on discovered coins indicates that the monumental style was characteristic of the Kushan period, and the transition to the cursive style belongs entirely to the era of the Abdals (Hephthalites).

### 3.1. The Discovery of Documents in the Bactrian Script

In the first half of the 20th century, the study of the Bactrian script was limited only to inscriptions on coins and seals. During this period, due to the lack of comparative material for the surviving Bactrian script on coins and seals, it remained impossible to scientifically investigate the evolution of the script. However, in 1957, French archaeologists succeeded in finding a Bactrian inscription at Surkh Kotal near Baghlan, Afghanistan<sup>3</sup>. The text, consisting of 25 lines, was carved onto a stone slab. It was studied by scholars such as A. Maricq, W.B. Henning, and H. Humbach<sup>4</sup>. Specifically, while A. Maricq identified the name of the Kushan ruler Kanishka and some important words and phrases, W.B. Henning clarified that the inscription was about the construction of a well dug in the thirty-first year of the Kanishka era, i.e., at the beginning of the reign of his successor Huvishka (early 2nd century CE). It should be noted that until 1993, that is, until the discovery of the Rabatak stone inscription, the "Great Surkh Kotal" inscription served as the most important source for studying the Bactrian language for nearly 40 years. Although several other Bactrian script samples were found during this interval, they did not significantly contribute to the existing body of knowledge.

In 1993, a stone inscription was found by Afghan mujahideen while digging a trench in the village of Rabatak in the Baghlan province of Afghanistan. This stone pillar was photographed by staff from "The HALO Trust" (The Hazardous Area Life-

<sup>1</sup> Mirsodiq Is'hoqov, *Arxivshunoslik*, Toshkent, 2020, p. 50.

<sup>2</sup> Mirsodiq Is'hoqov, *Arxivshunoslik*, Toshkent, 2020, p. 52.

<sup>3</sup> Nicolas Sims-Williams, "On Kings and Nomads: New Documents in Ancient Bactrian Reveal Afghanistan's Past", *The International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS)*, Volume: 27, 2002, p. 13-14.

<sup>4</sup> Mirsodiq Is'hoqov, *Arxivshunoslik*, Toshkent, 2020, p. 52-53.

support Organisation) and sent to the British Museum<sup>5</sup>. J. Cribb identified its significance as an official document that mentioned the names of four Kushan kings. Subsequently, J. Cribb shared this photograph with Nicholas Sims-Williams, a staff member at the "School of Oriental and African Studies" (SOAS). In 1995–1996, the Bactrian inscription based on the Greek alphabet was published by the scholars. It describes the ancestors of Kanishka as well as some events from the first year of his reign<sup>6</sup>.

By the year 2000, more than 150 Bactrian documents were known to science. The majority of these documents were illegally transported to Pakistan during the years of turmoil that began after the Soviet state sent troops into Afghanistan in 1979. They then began to be sold in the Peshawar market. Subsequently, they were purchased by various collectors and began to be auctioned and sold on the international art market. Today, the majority of the documents are held in the collection of Dr. Nasser David Khalili in London<sup>7</sup>.

Today, in Uzbek historiography, these Bactrian documents have been incorrectly generalized under the name "documents of the Rabatak archive"<sup>8</sup>. This is because none of these documents has a confirmed provenance, and it is unknown whether they belong to a single archive or to several archives. From their content, it is apparent that the Bactrian documents were written between the 4th and 8th centuries. In our opinion, the documents were hidden and preserved under very favorable conditions for centuries. For this reason, they have reached the present day in good condition.

### 3.2. The Study of the Bactrian Documents

The body of scholarly literature dedicated to the study of the Bactrian documents, though relatively young, already possesses its own foundational research. The basis and starting point for nearly all investigations in this field is the three-volume work by Professor Nicholas Sims-Williams of the University of London, titled *Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan*. The first volume of the work, published in 2001, contains legal and economic documents transcribed and translated into English<sup>9</sup>. The second volume was published in 2007. It analyzes and interprets letters and Buddhist texts<sup>10</sup>. In 2012, the third volume of the collection was published. Along with presenting images of the documents, it includes a catalog containing

<sup>5</sup> Nicolas Sims-Williams, "On Kings and Nomads: New Documents in Ancient Bactrian Reveal Afghanistan's Past", *The International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS)*, Volume: 27, 2002, p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> Nicolas Sims-Williams, "On Kings and Nomads: New Documents in Ancient Bactrian Reveal Afghanistan's Past", *The International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS)*, Volume: 27, 2002, p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> Afghanistan'in Kuzeyinden Baktriye Belgeler: <https://www.khalilicollections.org/portfolio/bactrian-documents-from-northern-afghanistan/>

<sup>8</sup> Mirsodiq Is'hoqov, *Arxivshunoslik*, Toshkent, 2020, p. 57-58.

<sup>9</sup> Nicolas Sims-Williams, *Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan. I: Legal and Economic Documents*, Oxford, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Nicolas Sims-Williams, *Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan II: Letters and Buddhist Texts*, London, 2007.

information about their collection location, date (for manuscripts with specified dates), format, and number of lines, as well as its publications (including relevant articles)<sup>11</sup>.

The Bactrian documents are written on leather, cloth, and wooden tablets. Professor Nicholas Sims-Williams has divided them into 4 categories. These are: 1. Legal documents; 2. Analogous documents with uncertain dates; 3. Lists and accounts; 4. Inscriptions on wood. The Bactrian documents mainly consist of deeds of sale and purchase, land inheritance documents, tax payments, deeds of slave trade and receipts, expense reports, and a marriage contract preserved as a single example. The legal documents included in the first volume are designated conditionally in chronological order based on the letters of the English alphabet from "A" to "Y". Two documents written in the same year are arranged in the order of "A" and "Aa". The documents are dated from the year 110 to the year 549<sup>12</sup>.

These publications include the texts of the Bactrian documents, their translations, detailed philological and grammatical analyses, and a comprehensive glossary and indices. The work of Professor Sims-Williams has been crucial not only for introducing the documents into scholarly circulation but also for determining the place of the Bactrian language and identifying its historical stages of development.

The next major study belongs to the Iranian scholar Hossein Sheikh Bostanabad, who in 2017 defended his doctoral dissertation titled "Studies of Bactrian Legal Documents" at the University of Göttingen. His research is primarily dedicated to Bactrian legal documents, studying their formulas, terminology, and historical context. He also demonstrated the degree of connection of Bactrian legal traditions with other legal systems of the ancient Near East and its stages of evolution<sup>13</sup>.

Aside from the major works mentioned above, the study of Bactrian documents mainly consists of small-scale articles and theses. In them, issues of administration, law, and socio-economics are prominent. For instance, the article by the Iranian scholar Khodadad Rezakhani titled "Balkh and the Sasanians: The Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan as a Source for Sasanian Economic and Social History" covers the legal system and contract practices in the region, governorships and their role in state administration, trade routes between Bactria and Sughd during the Hephthalite period, economic agreements, tax collection practices, and other important issues. The author emphasizes the unique importance of the Bactrian documents for studying the daily life and economy of the Turan region and,

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<sup>11</sup> Nicolas Sims-Williams, *Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan III: Plates*, London, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> N. Sims-Williams, François de Blois, *Studies in the chronology of the Bactrian documents from Northern Afghanistan*, Wien, 2018, p. 15 - 16.

<sup>13</sup> Hossein Sheikh Bostanabad, *Studies of Bactrian Legal Documents*, Doktora Tezi, Göttingen, 2017.

without denying Bactria's connection with the Sasanian world, has sought to show its independent significance and its role in the historical processes of Turan<sup>14</sup>.

Another Iranian scholar, Said Reza Huseini, in his article titled "Slavery Represented in Bactrian Documents", provides a detailed analysis of two main documents related to slavery – a manumission charter for a slave buying his own freedom (dated 470) and a contract for the sale of a child into slavery during a famine (dated 669). He analyzed the legal terms, conditions, and social issues related to slavery in the documents. The author demonstrated, based on the documents, that slavery was an officially recognized and legalized practice in the Bactrian legal system, and that documents related to slavery were drawn up in courts, witnessed, and sealed by officials<sup>15</sup>.

The contributions of the renowned English numismatist Joe Cribb in this area must also be specifically noted. In collaboration with Nicholas Sims-Williams, he studied and published the Rabatak stone inscription. His research has been of great importance in clarifying the Bactrian Era<sup>16</sup>. The works of the renowned French Iranologist and Islamic scholar François de Blois have also paid special attention to the dating of the documents. His monograph, co-authored with Nicholas Sims-Williams, titled "Studies in the chronology of the Bactrian documents from Northern Afghanistan", is dedicated to the complex issues of dating the Bactrian documents, in which the problems of the Bactrian calendar and the "Bactrian Era" are deeply analyzed<sup>17</sup>.

Despite the time that has passed since the discovery and study of the documents, no bold step has been felt in national historiography to introduce the documents into use. The reason for this may be, firstly, the inclusion of all Bactrian documents into the "Rabatak archive," and secondly, the incorrect approach of dating the documents and linking their information only with the Kushan period. In our opinion, it is precisely these factors that have kept them from serving as an important source for studying the history of the early medieval period in national historiography.

In general, the discovery of the Bactrian documents and their introduction into scholarly circulation have brought about a radical turn in the study of the history, language, culture, and socio-economic and legal life of Turan, and particularly Bactria. Although research in this field is relatively young from a historiographical point of view, significant achievements have been made in a short time.

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<sup>14</sup> Khodadad Rezakhani, The Bactrian Collection: An Important Source for Sasanian Economic History, *e-Sasanika*. Volume:13, 2008, p. 1 - 14.

<sup>15</sup> Said Reza Huseini, Slavery Represented in Bactrian Documents, *Slavery & Abolition*. Volume: 44, 2023, p. 682 - 696.

<sup>16</sup> Nicolas Sims-Williams, Joe Cribb, A New Bactrian Inscription of Kanishka the Great, *Silk Road Art and Archaeology*, Volume:4, 1995, p.75-142.

<sup>17</sup> Nicolas Sims-Williams, François de Blois, Studies in the chronology of the Bactrian documents from Northern Afghanistan, Wien, 2018.

In recent years, the scope of Bactrian studies has expanded, and as a result of the research by scholars such as Hossein Sheikh Bostanabad, Khodadad Rezakhani, and Said Reza Huseini, the legal, socio-economic, political, and daily life aspects of the documents are being studied more deeply. The work of Joe Cribb and François de Blois is serving to clarify problems of numismatics and the dating of the Bactrian documents.

These studies show that the Bactrian documents not only reveal the region's connection with the political structures of the Kushan Empire but also its unique internal development and that it possessed an independent economic and legal system. They provide an opportunity to re-evaluate the role and importance of the land of Turan at the crossroads of ancient civilizations. At the same time, many issues reflected in the documents, such as local governance systems, religious beliefs, ethnic relations, and various aspects of cultural life, are in need of new research.

### 3.3. The Issue of Dating the Documents

The dating of the Bactrian documents and their study on this basis is one of the most important and controversial aspects of researching these documents. Work on this issue has mainly been carried out by a number of researchers involved in translating the documents, and new ideas have been put forward by them<sup>18</sup>. However, due to the lack of a clear understanding of the chronology of political events in the region, the dated period of the documents remains uncertain. In short, the dated legal and contract documents, as well as letters, are spread between the years 110 and 549 of an unknown era and are often precisely dated with the month and day. These dates are based on the Bactrian calendar, and determining it and converting it to the Common Era presents a particular complexity.

Initially, Sims-Williams associated the beginning of this era with the year 233 CE, calling it the "Kushan-Sasanian era". This is explained by the collapse of the Kushan Empire at the hands of the Sasanians. Later, the scholar changed his views on this matter and put forward the concept of a "Sasanian era" based on the establishment of the Sasanian Empire by Ardashir I in 223/224 CE<sup>19</sup>. However, Khodadad Rezakhani points out that there are serious shortcomings in these dating models. In his opinion, the first reason is that there is no reliable evidence that the Sasanians themselves used such a single imperial era. Secondly, even if we accept the assumption that Shapur I completely conquered the region in 248 CE, it remains unclear why exactly 223 CE should be taken as the starting point<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> Nicolas Sims-Williams; François de Blois, The Bactrian calendar: New material and new suggestions, *Languages of Iran: Past and Present. Iranian studies in memoriam David Neil MacKenzie*, ed. D. Weber. Wiesbaden, 2006, p. 185 – 196.

<sup>19</sup> Nicolas Sims-Williams; François de Blois, *Studies in the chronology of the Bactrian documents from Northern Afghanistan*, Wien, 2018, p.27-29.

<sup>20</sup> Khodadad Rezakhani, *Balkh and the Sasanians, the Economy and Society of Northern Afghanistan as Reflected in the Bactrian Economic Documents*, *Ancient and Middle Iranian Studies*.



Furthermore, Khodadad Rezakhani, based on a comparative analysis of numismatic data with the historical information mentioned in the documents, has cited problems in applying the dating model used by Sims-Williams. He notes that Sasanian silver coins in Afghanistan became widespread mainly after the reign of Shapur II (309–379 CE). However, the first mention of silver coins in the documents appears in document "N" (dated 407 in the Bactrian era). According to the proposed Sasanian era, this corresponds to 630 CE ( $407 \text{ BE} + 223 \text{ CE} = 630 \text{ CE}$ ). In addition, the silver coins of Kavād mentioned in document "Q" (dated 449 in the Bactrian era), if the Sasanian era is applied, correspond to a period almost 150 years after the death of Kavād (488–529 CE), i.e., 672 CE ( $449 \text{ BE} + 223 \text{ CE} = 672 \text{ CE}$ ). These inconsistencies indicate that there are serious flaws in the matter of dating.

Khodadad Rezakhani, having analyzed the contradictory information above, noted that it necessitates the search for an earlier starting point for dating the Bactrian documents. As a reason for this, he cited that Sasanian influence entered the Bactrian territories later, which makes the application of a "Sasanian era" for all the documents completely unfounded. In Khodadad Rezakhani's opinion, if the Bactrian documents are logically calculated from the Kanishka era (from 127 CE), it would correspond to the chronology of Sasanian silver coins in the Bactrian region, particularly the coins minted by Kavād.

Regarding the issue of dating the documents, the following conclusion can be reached. Using the Kanishka era or the reign of Ardashir I for all documents is completely baseless. Based on the details of the historical events in the documents, it can be classified into 5 periods: 1) Kushan-Sasanian (245–370 CE), 2) Chionite-Kidarite (370–466 CE), 3) Hephthalite (466–559 CE), 4) Turkic Khaganate (559–710 CE), 5) Arab Caliphate (710–770 CE). In the first period, the Kushan calendar was used, but as a result of the increasing Sasanian influence in the Bactrian region, the use of the Sasanian calendar was adopted. For example, in document "Ii" dated to the year 260 ( $260 \text{ BE} + 223/224 \text{ CE} = 483/484 \text{ CE}$ ), a statement made by Ohrmazd to a person named Yamsh mentions that Zinduk from the population of Malr paid taxes in gold and sheep to the Hephthalites, and that he had nothing else for payment<sup>21</sup>. Also, as mentioned in the document, taxes were now set not by the Sasanians, but by the Hephthalites. This situation confirms the death of the Sasanian Peroz recorded in sources for the year 484 and the transfer of a part of the territories to the political control of the Hephthalites.

One can agree with the opinion of the Iranian scholar Khodadad Rezakhani. The reason for this is, firstly, that Iranian influence in the Bactrian region was felt from Shapur II (309–379 CE) onwards, and secondly, the Hephthalites and the Turkic Khaganate inherited the basis of state administration from the Kushans. Therefore,

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*6th European Conference of Iranian Studies, held in Vienna, 18–22 September 2007*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010, p. 6 - 8.

<sup>21</sup> Nicolas Sims-Williams, *Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan*. I: Legal and Economic Documents, Oxford, 2001, p. 52.

along with the traditions of state administration, the Kushan calendar was widely used in this region.

#### 4. THE EXTERNAL STRUCTURE OF THE DOCUMENTS

From a source studies perspective, information such as the type of paper, size, script, language, and seal used in the Bactrian documents clearly demonstrates the reasons for the documents' creation, when and where they were written, and, at the same time, the status of the documents. The Bactrian documents consist of single and double-copy documents. A simple document consists of one copy and was written only once. For example, documents "O", "R", "S", "Ss", "Tt", "Uu", and "Uv" consist of only one copy<sup>22</sup>.

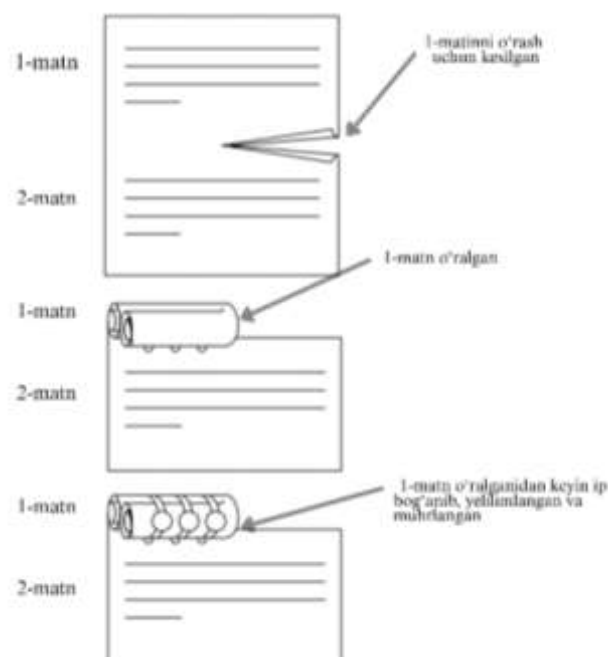
Most of the Bactrian documents were in two copies. They consist of two nearly identical texts of a contract. One copy was written on the upper part and sealed with the fingerprints of the witnesses involved in a particular matter, as well as the plaintiff and the executants.

The second copy was written on the same sheet, with a blank space left between them, and its lower copy was left open for reading. This was confirmed with up to six clay seals bearing the seals or nail marks of the contracting parties and witnesses. Their names are sometimes written on the back of the document next to the holes for the seal strings. Presumably, the closed copy was used to open the sealed version in the presence of a judge when disputes arose. (Figure 1)

In the process of forming the document, the inner text was written first, then a horizontal cut was made in the central part of the document. It was rolled and folded, with the text and the upper part sealed inside. (Figure 2)

#### 5. The Internal Structure of the Documents

According to their internal structure, the documents consist of an introduction, a main part, and a concluding part. The introductory part of almost all Bactrian



<sup>22</sup> Nicolas Sims-Williams, *Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan. I: Legal and Economic Documents*, Oxford, 2001, p. 22.

documents includes the date, the place where the document was drawn up, and a list of the document's executants and witnesses. The dates come in the order of year, then month, and day. The date begins with the word “χρῶνο” or “αχρῶνο” (year) and mostly ends with the word “καλδο” (when). The names of the days in the documents are taken from the Zoroastrian calendar<sup>23</sup>. For example: χρῶνο σ' μ' ζ' μαυο σπανδαρομιδο ρωσο (*It was the 247th year, the month of Spandarmid, the day of Ohrmazd*).

In the documents, the location is clearly indicated after the date, month, and day. The location begins with the word “μαλο” (here). For example: χρῶνο υ' ζ' μαυο χανδιγο ρωσο αἷταδο καλδο ναβιχτο μολρα γο πιτανο βωστιγο μαλαβο σαμιγγανο ωδαγο αβο σανδαρανο αβο ρωβοχαραγγο αλβαρο. (*It was the 407th year, the month of Khandig, the day of Ashtad, when this sealed document, this contract of guarantee, was written here, in the district of Samingan, at Sandaran, at the court of Rob-kehar*).

In the introductory part, after the date and location, the executants and witnesses are listed. All agreements were made in the presence of witnesses. The presence of witnesses was considered one of the factors determining the authenticity and legality of the agreement. Usually, the word “οιγαλφο” was used before the names of witnesses in the documents, which in the Bactrian language meant “to see”, “to observe”<sup>24</sup>. For example: αβο καδαγοβιδο αλβαρο αζδηβιδοζαροοηρο οιβριανο (At the court of the governor, with the cognizance of Zar-wer Vibryan.)

The main part begins with an introductory section that states the facts of the agreement. It reveals the purpose and essence of the agreement. Since the Bactrian documents are mainly focused on facts, the phrases in the introductory part are very similar in most documents. The length and content of the main part of the documents were determined by the nature of the agreement. For example, a contract of sale (of land, slaves, etc.) would include clauses on mutual agreement, the reason for the sale, a description of the property, and payment of the specified amount of money, while settlement agreements contain a guarantee section after the reason clause. Other contracts, including gift, loan, and lease documents, include some of the clauses listed above.

The concluding part consists of the confirmation of the agreement, in which the executant of the agreement states that they wrote the document, sealed it, and delivered the final judgment on the matter to the parties. The phrase “Καλδο πιδοοιησαδο... μανο”, meaning “The contract was written (sealed) by me...,” was used<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> Nicolas Sims-Williams, *Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan*. I: Legal and Economic Documents, Oxford, 2001, p. 31.

<sup>24</sup> Nicolas Sims-Williams, *Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan*. I: Legal and Economic Documents, Oxford, 2001, p. 39.

<sup>25</sup> Nicolas Sims-Williams, *Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan*. I: Legal and Economic Documents, Oxford, 2001, p. 58.

For example, in document "M" from the year 388 of the Bactrian era (612 CE), a person named Moyan lent 3 silver coins bearing the name of Kavād to Mus. Mus and Moyan made a mutual agreement in court for Mus to repay the debt. The concluding part of the agreement contains a guarantee section where the executant, Nane-band, assumes responsibility. The guarantee is stated as follows: "...If Moyan (the original lender) disputes with Mus or his family in the future about the repayment of the debt, Nane-band will take responsibility. He will pay him double...". This shows that Nane-band undertook the obligation to compensate Mus's loss twofold in a dispute with Moyan. This indicates that Bactrian law had a mechanism of serious penalties to ensure the fulfillment of contractual obligations and to protect the parties. Such guarantee clauses increased the strength of the agreement and were aimed at preventing future disputes.

Overall, the Bactrian documents, with their complex external and internal structure, testify to the profound development of the legal system of that period. The single and double-copy forms of the documents, their dating, location, the presence of witnesses, and clearly defined penalty and guarantee clauses show that great importance was attached to contractual relations in the society of that time. In particular, the existence of double-copy documents and their role in resolving disputes, as well as the guarantee clause, confirm the existence of advanced mechanisms aimed at ensuring the legal protection of the parties.

## 6. Socio-economic Issues in the Bactrian Documents

Almost all of the Bactrian documents (except for letters and Buddhist texts) are considered legal documents, and according to their internal substance, they can be studied by dividing them into economic-legal issues and social-legal issues. Economic-legal documents mainly consist of the sale and purchase of property, land leases, gifting of property, borrowing and lending, payment of taxes and other social payments, and letters of surety. Social-legal issues include marriage contracts, agreements on resolving various disputes, and issues related to slavery. These documents testify to the existence of a developed legal system that regulated property and personal relations in the society of the region.

The Bactrian documents record two categories of slaves – 1) a slave born in the possession of the owner (χοβο νιζαδαγο μαρηγο); 2) a slave bought for money (δδραχμο χιρσιγο)<sup>26</sup>. This classification has been further analyzed by Said Reza Huseini, while Arabic sources, such as Narshakhi's History of Bukhara, confirm the persistence of slavery in Central Asia into the 9th century<sup>27</sup>. In both cases, slaves were regarded as personal property, and their owners had full authority over them. Owners could keep, sell, pledge, gift, lease, detain for bad behavior, or free their slaves in exchange for service.

<sup>26</sup> Said Reza Huseini, Slavery Represented in Bactrian Documents, *Slavery & Abolition*. Volume: 44, 2023, p. 687.

<sup>27</sup> Narshakhī, *Ta'rikh-i Bukhara*, trans. R. Frye, Cambridge, 1954, p.38-40.

The documents show how people could become slaves: being born a slave or being born free and later sold into slavery (for example, by family members during difficult times such as famine). A slave could buy his freedom by paying his full price. In this case, he was given an official document confirming his freedom.

Terms such as “māreg” (μαρηγο), “bandag” (βανδαγο), “banz” (βανζο – female slave), and “marshkond” (μαρσκονδο) were used to denote slaves. The terms “māreg” and “bandag” also appear in personal names along with the names of gods (e.g., Bag-māreg – slave of God) and in such cases, they indicated religious devotion rather than legal status. Also, lower-ranking officials used the term “māreg” as a sign of obedience when addressing higher-ranking officials. The word “āzād” (αζαδο) was used to denote free-born people.

## 7. The Use of Turkic Words in the Bactrian Documents

In Uzbek historiography, the socio-economic, political, and cultural life of early medieval Turan is primarily illuminated by using written sources in various languages and material evidence obtained through archaeological research, describing important historical events through their mutual comparison. As is known, every state or people, based on the laws of its own language, has named other peoples or states, their cities and rivers, and the titles and positions in their state administration. For example, the Hephthalites are referred to as "Hep't'al," "Xetal," "Tetal" in Armenian sources; "Ephthal," "White Huns" in Byzantine sources; "Ēftāl" and "Hēftāl" in Pahlavi (Middle Persian) sources; "Eptalit" in Syriac sources; and "Ye-da," "Ye-dian," "Idan" in Chinese sources. However, it is known from their own coin inscriptions and the Bactrian documents that they called themselves Abadalo “ηβοδαλο ββγο”. From this point of view, research should refer to them not by the names given to them by various peoples in their own languages, but by how they referred to themselves in their own language and script.

In several of the Bactrian documents, Turkic names, titles, and positions are mentioned. For example, in Documents "I", "Ii", and "al", the “ηβ οδαλαγγο τωγο” (Abadalo tax) is mentioned. In it, Zanduk and Ram-gul state that they were forced to pay gold and sheep for the Hephthalite tax and that they have no other property. Document "J" also mentions the “ηβ οδαλαγγο τωγο” (Abadalo tax), and it details the events of two citizens of the Malr population selling a house because they could not pay the Hephthalite tax<sup>28</sup>. This corresponds to Chinese chronicles, which record that the Hephthalites (Ye-da, Ye-dian) levied heavy taxes on subject peoples<sup>29</sup>.

In Documents "N", "P", and "Q", “ιενηλο ταρχανο” (Inal Tarkhan) is mentioned by the name of Khulkhan as the owner of the Vilargan region. Also in this document, the ruler of Rob, Framarizm Shaburan, appears with the names “χαγανο” (khagan)

<sup>28</sup> Nicolas Sims-Williams, *Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan. I: Legal and Economic Documents*, Oxford, 2001, p. 54.

<sup>29</sup> Altheim Franz, *Geschichte der Hunnen II. Zweiter band Die Hephthaliten in Iran*, Berlin, Walter De Gruyter & CO, 1969, p.3-9.

and "ταποαγλιγο υλιτοβηρο" (tapaghlig iltäbär)<sup>30</sup>. In Document "S", the title "ταδονο" (tudun) is mentioned, and he is recorded as the tudun of the Gaz region. Document "T" states that Bek Oziyos, the wife of Tapaghligh Bilga Savush, the great ruler of the Khalaj Turks, gave thanks to the god Kamird for the recovery of her newborn child from illness and dedicated property and a person as a sacrifice to him.

Turkic titles and positions are also mentioned in the letters section of the Bactrian documents. For example, in document "eh", an official letter was sent from the judge of Tokharistan and Gharchistan to Ohrmazd Bunukan. Its greeting and respect section begins with "ηβοιδαλο ιαβγο" (Yabghu of the Hephthalites). The sender reports on his health and acknowledges awareness of Ohrmazd Bunukan's letter about his health. The main orders in this document, which is of an official correspondence nature, are related to supervising agriculture and managing grain. Ohrmazd Bunukan is ordered to hand over the grain and collect it from the citizens.

Another official document, "ja", consists of Kilman's appeal to Abag regarding the financial problem of Zun-bandag. The preamble of the letter begins with "To Abag, the ruler of the famous and prosperous Yabghu of the Hephthalites." In it, Zun-bandag complains to Kilman that Tos is not giving him the tax payment and is making excuses. Kilman appeals to Abag, demanding that he ensure Tos returns what he took from Zun-bandag<sup>31</sup>. The document ends with the warning "Do not do hidden evil!". In our opinion, this is aimed at ensuring justice and preventing illegal actions.

Document "jb" pertains to a matter of theft, and the greeting part of the letter begins with "To Sart Khwadevbandag, the glorious Yabghu of the Hephthalites, ruler of Rob, secretary of the Hephthalite rulers, judge of Tokharistan and Gharchistan, the noble ruler." The main content of the document is Azgarak's appeal to Sart Khwadevbandag regarding the matter of returning the stolen money of a citizen named Spiy. He asks about Spiy's case, stating that the thieves who stole his money have fled, that Spiy should return as soon as the thieves come back, and he appeals for an order to have his money fully returned within ten days<sup>32</sup>. The document shows the practice of resolving disputes related to property theft through rulers. The setting of a specific deadline for the return of the stolen money (within ten days) indicates the existence of legal regulation.

Titles such as khagan, yabghu, tarkhan, and tudun appear directly in the Bactrian legal texts. This parallels Arabic and Persian sources: al-Tabari, for instance, describes Turk rulers with the title qayan<sup>33</sup>, while Gardizi mentions yabghu and tudun as key

<sup>30</sup> Nicolas Sims-Williams, *Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan. I: Legal and Economic Documents*, Oxford, 2001, p.74,82,88.

<sup>31</sup> Nicolas Sims-Williams, *Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan II: Letters and Buddhist Texts*, London, 2007, p.122-123.

<sup>32</sup> Nicolas Sims-Williams, *Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan II: Letters and Buddhist Texts*, London, 2007, s.126.

<sup>33</sup> al-Tabari, *Ta'rikh al-rusul wa-l-muluk*, vol. II, p. 1062.

officials<sup>34</sup>. Unlike narrative sources, however, the Bactrian documents embed these titles within administrative and legal contexts.

### Conclusion

Overall, the Bactrian documents found in Northern Afghanistan are, without a doubt, a unique source of fundamental importance for studying the socio-economic, legal, and cultural life of early medieval Turan. These documents, alongside traditional written sources in Chinese, Armenian, Syriac, Pahlavi, Indian, Arabic, and Persian, fill important gaps in reconstructing the multifaceted picture of the region's history. Unlike other sources that focus more on political history, the Bactrian documents are particularly valuable for providing direct information about the daily lives of the common people, property relations, trade, the tax system, slavery, and legal practices.

These documents contain important information about the system of state administration and law. In particular, administrative correspondence, contracts, loan agreements, and tax collection practices confirm the existence of a developed legal system and state administration mechanisms in the region. The single and double-copy documents, the presence of witnesses, specific dates, and guarantee clauses show the great importance attached to contractual relations in the society of that time.

Information on the sale and purchase of property, land leases, loan relationships, the two types of slavery (hereditary and purchased), as well as the manumission of slaves, provides a valuable understanding of the social stratification and economic activity of the region's population. In particular, the appearance of Turkic names, titles (e.g., tarkhan, khagan, tudun, yabghu), and positions in the documents provides direct evidence of the active participation of Turkic peoples in the land of Turan during the early medieval period and their role in state administration. The fact that the Hephthalites called themselves *Abadalo* serves as an important clue regarding their Turkic ethnic affiliation.

At the same time, it should be emphasized that approaches in national historiography, such as incorrectly generalizing the Bactrian documents as the "Ravataki archive" and linking them only with the Kushan period, have hindered the use of the documents' full potential. The fact that the documents cover the 4th–8th centuries creates broad opportunities for studying the complex political and social processes of the region during the periods of the Chionites, Kidarites, Hephthalites, Turkic Khaganate, and the Arab Caliphate.

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<sup>34</sup> Gardizi, *Zayn al-akhbar*, ed. Barthold, Leningrad, 1929, p. 152.

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