



**John Hyland – Christopher Newport University**

## **Vishtaspa *krny*: an Achaemenid military official in 4<sup>th</sup>-century Bactria<sup>1</sup>**

The publication of the Aramaic archive from fourth-century Bactria (*ADAB*: Naveh and Shaked 2012) sheds new light on the eastern satrapies in the last decades of the Achaemenids and the era of Alexander. Historians have long been frustrated by the paucity of written sources on the region, even in the narrow window offered by classical accounts of Alexander's campaigns, and the appearance of new evidence is cause for great excitement. The *ADAB* documents refer to numerous individuals unattested in other written sources, from minor village officials to a probable satrap of Bactria in the reign of Artaxerxes III. The infamous regicide and would-be king Bessus, previously known from classical authors alone, appears now in a Bactrian context, separated from his role in the fall of the Achaemenid dynasty (*ADAB* C1).<sup>2</sup> Another individual who may appear in both the Alexander histories and the Bactrian archive is a certain Vishtaspa (*wšt'sp*), who appears in a short letter concerning a transfer of sheep between two other men with Iranian names (*ADAB* C2: 1).<sup>3</sup> The editors note the existence of a prominent general named Hystaspes in the reigns of Darius III and Alexander, but do not press the identification.<sup>4</sup> His asso-

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Pierre Briant and the editors of *Arta* for their valuable comments and critique on an initial version of this paper. I would also like to thank Eduard Rung and Marek Jan Olbrycht for graciously sharing their relevant scholarship with me. Any errors remain the fault of the author.

<sup>2</sup> S. Shaked initially interpreted the Artaxerxes in C1's dating formula as the throne name of Bessus, placing the document in 330/29, the first and only year of his bid for the crown (Shaked 2003, 1520-21; Shaked 2004, 16-17; Naveh and Shaked 2012, 180). Lane Fox 2007, 297, and Briant 2009, 147 n. 28, disputed this dating, arguing that the same document would not refer to Bessus by his personal name and a separate throne name. Shaked has subsequently revised his opinion, and following an oral suggestion by J. Tavernier, prefers to identify the King as Artaxerxes IV and the year as 338 (Naveh and Shaked 2012, 259).

<sup>3</sup> Naveh and Shaked 2012, 187-191.

<sup>4</sup> Naveh and Shaked 2012, 190.



ciation with an important military title, though, offers a compelling reason to take Vishtaspa and the general Hystaspes as one and the same.

The name Vishtaspa was common in Achaemenid Iran, and its other occurrence in the ADAB letters seems to refer to a separate individual, a barley distributor in the town of Varaina (C4: 35). The man in C2 appears to be an elite figure, distinguished by the word *krny* that follows his name. Naveh and Shaked propose that *krny* refers to the Kāren family, a powerful noble clan of the Parthian and Sasanid periods, based in the region of Nihavand.<sup>5</sup>

The Vishtaspa of C2 may have belonged to Iranian high society, but an association between *krny* and the later Kārens seems somewhat unlikely. The chronological gap between the fourth century and the Parthian and Sasanid periods is significant, even if a handful of noble family dynasties, like that of Atropates in northwest Media, retained importance for several centuries after the Achaemenids. It is less plausible that the base of the family would have shifted from Bactria, the area of the ADAB archive, to a new location in western Iran. Fortunately, an alternative interpretation of *krny* is available. It is preferable to take the word as a high-ranking military office, described by the fourth-century Greek author Xenophon as a prominent position in the hierarchy of the Achaemenid empire.

Xenophon's *Hellenika* (1.4.3) speaks of a Persian title, rendered in Greek as *karanos*, that gave its bearer military command and control of recruitment over an extensive territory. The only figure explicitly associated with the term is Cyrus the Younger, the subject of Xenophon's discussion, but other historically attested generals may have held the same position. Darius II appointed Cyrus *karanos* over western Anatolia to oversee intervention in the Peloponnesian War and attend to troublesome indigenous groups like the Pisidians and Mysians. Xenophon's account does not claim that Cyrus replaced a previous *karanos*, and it is possible that the office was an extraordinary assignment, rather than a permanent feature of Achaemenid provincial administration.<sup>6</sup>

Linguists have long recognized the title's derivation from the Old Persian root *kāra-*, "army," and some have proposed an original Old Persian title of *\*kārana-*, "army commander."<sup>7</sup> Most importantly for the interpretation of ADAB C2, the Aramaic version of the term is known from coins of the Parthian period, which display the Greek title *autokrator*, referring to supreme military command, and give its equivalent as *krny*.<sup>8</sup> This later attestation of *krny* as *karanos*

<sup>5</sup> Naveh and Shaked 2012, 191.

<sup>6</sup> On the position of *karanos*, see Petit 1983; Keen 1998; Briant 2002, 340. Rung 2011, 19, argues that the term signified all Achaemenid generals (equivalent to Greek *stratēgos*), but could sometimes refer to a general with supreme command (like Cyrus).

<sup>7</sup> On the linguistic derivation, see Widengren 1969, 106; Haebler 1982, 84-87; Testen 1991, 174; Rung 2011, 19; Olbrycht 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Bernard 1994, 500; Briant 2002, 981; Olbrycht 2013.



supports the view that the word after Vishtaspa's name in C2:1 should be interpreted as the same military office.

The Vishtaspa text, therefore, preserves the first occurrence of the title *krny/ karanos* in a surviving Achaemenid document. Its inclusion highlights Vishtaspa's status as a high-ranking military leader, even in a context that does not involve actual warfare – a fact that should not surprise us, as other ADAB letters show groups of soldiers engaged in non-violent tasks, gathering a harvest threatened by locusts (A4) and removing sand (or stores of vinegar) from a house of the satrap (A2: 5-6).<sup>9</sup> Vishtaspa's military duties remain obscure, but he may have conducted operations against warlike Scythian communities on the margins of Bactria and Sogdiana, just as the earlier *karanos* Cyrus had done against trouble-makers in southwest Anatolia.<sup>10</sup>

Vishtaspa's connections to the transaction in C2, on the other hand, remain open to interpretation. The letter states that a man named Kaufadata has delivered forty sheep to another man, Vaidyura. The use of the honorific title “my lord” (*l mr'y*) implies Vaidyura's superior status. Vishtaspa's name and title precede the transaction record, but follow the initial dating formula, which refers to “Year 1” of an anonymous king.<sup>11</sup>

There is no statement of Kaufadata's or Vaidyura's relationship with Vishtaspa, and it remains unclear whether their exchange occurs under the *karanos*' authority, or concerns a matter of direct relevance to his household. One possibility is to take the initial reference to Vishtaspa as a mere augment to the dating formula, translating the initial phrase, “In the year 1. Vishtaspa [was] *karanos*.” The parties to the sheep disbursement might have noted Vishtaspa's position as the senior imperial official in the region, a man to whom they could turn if any dispute arose from their transaction (although this raises the question of the juridical boundaries between *karanos* and satrap). Alternatively, they might have recorded the name of the *karanos* as a legal witness to their exchange.

A more attractive solution is to view Kaufadata as Vishtaspa's personal agent, transferring a gift or payment of sheep to Vaidyura on behalf of the *karanos*. Several fifth-century letters from Egypt show Persian landowners ordering Arshama's steward Nakhthor to deliver promised

<sup>9</sup> For “sand” or “vinegar” in A2, see Naveh and Shaked 2012, 81-82.

<sup>10</sup> Wu 2010, 559-60, discusses combat scenes on seal impressions as visual evidence of a Central Asian military threat to the eastern satrapies. Naveh and Shaked 2012, 17, interpret the construction of a fort at Nikhshapaya in 348 or 347 (A4) as a defensive measure against Scythian incursions. We do not know how the roles of the *karanos* and the satrap would have intersected in such circumstances; on satrapal military duties in the region, see Briant 1984, 71-74.

<sup>11</sup> Naveh and Shaked 2012, 191, note the possibility that Vishtaspa's name implies possession (“the disbursement of Vishtaspa”), but prefer a translation based on regular Aramaic word order, which makes Kaufadata the source of the payment (*wšt'sp krny 'zgm' mn kwpd*).



goods from the satrap to their estates, and this could be taken as a similar case.<sup>12</sup> Kaufadata's name also appears on the reverse side of the letter and remains visible when the letter is folded, which may be a way to document his responsibility for this disposition of his master's property.<sup>13</sup> It is easy to believe that a wealthy general owned the impressive seal used to authenticate the letter.<sup>14</sup>

Vishtaspa's status as a *karanos* in the Bactrian region makes him a promising candidate for identification with the Alexander historians' Hystaspes. C2's reference to "Year 1" allows three dates, all consistent with the match. The earliest possibility is 359 (the first year of Artaxerxes III). The editors refused to date the Bessus text (C2) in this year because it would precede 353, the earliest explicit date for an ADAB letter (A1), but there is no conclusive reason to rule it out.<sup>15</sup> We will note Hystaspes' connections to Artaxerxes III below, and it is not impossible that a noble could have served as *karanos* in 359 and continued to hold senior posts into the 320s.<sup>16</sup> Dates of 338 (Artaxerxes IV) or 336 (Darius III) are also plausible, and consistent with Hystaspes' prominence under Darius and Alexander.<sup>17</sup>

The classical sources mention Hystaspes on two occasions. Curtius 6.2.7 calls him a royal kinsman (*propinquus*) and commander of a great army (*magni et ipse exercitus praetor*), a description compatible with the office of *karanos*. The historian reports that the Macedonians captured Hystaspes' wife, a granddaughter of Artaxerxes III, during the pursuit of Darius III. Alexander, supposedly moved by her plight, promised to search for her husband to facilitate a reunion.

- 12** See Porten and Yardeni 1986 (*TADAE* I), A6.15, 16. On the ADAB archive's evidence for Persian officials as owners or guardians of "household" estates in Bactria, served by estate managers in roles equivalent to Nakhthor's in the Arshama letters, see Briant 2009, 150.
- 13** Naveh and Shaked 2012, 191, note that the case is unusual, as a name on the outside of a letter usually indicates the addressee. Further investigation by scholars of Achaemenid archival practice may help to resolve its purpose in the Kaufadata letter.
- 14** For photographs of the seal image, see Naveh and Shaked 2012, 187, 189. It depicts a hunting scene, in which a rider and a dismounted man confront two rearing lions. Cf. Briant 2009, 150.
- 15** On C2, see Naveh and Shaked 2012, 180 and 259, with note 1 above; for defense of a possible date under Artaxerxes III, see Briant 2009, 147 n. 28.
- 16** The contemporary Mazaeus (Mazday) may have held satrapal rank from the early 350s to his death in 328; cf. Heckel 2006, 157; Briant 2009, 162. Cyrus the Younger was allegedly born after his father's succession (Plut. *Artox.* 2.3), in which case he served as *karanos* before reaching the age of twenty.
- 17** Naveh and Shaked 2012, 189 propose that the document dates to 330/29, Alexander's first full year as King of the Achaemenid empire, but this seems unlikely. Bessus' bid for the throne did not end until the summer of 329, and 330/29 seems too early for a Bactrian document to recognize Alexander's rule. Babylonian texts first acknowledge his takeover by reference to an accession year (331/30), and then continue his dating from year 7 (330/29), since he first came to the Macedonian throne in 336/35; see discussion in Briant 2010, 179-80.



Curtius never returns to the story, leaving readers to wonder whether the captive princess regained her spouse.

Scholars have identified Curtius' Hystaspes with a homonymous individual, named by Arrian 7.6.4 as commander (*hēgemōn*) of the Iranian elites inducted into Alexander's Companion cavalry in 324.<sup>18</sup> Arrian gives no details on Hystaspes' prior service, but significantly, describes him as a Bactrian. If he is the same man as C2's Vishtaspa, his previous military command in Bactria could explain why Arrian's sources gave him this ethnic label, rather than assuming his Persian identity.<sup>19</sup>

Given his eventual success under the new regime, Vishtaspa-Hystaspes cannot have supported Bessus' claim to the throne in 330/29, and he probably joined Alexander at some point between the death of Darius and the invasion of Bactria.<sup>20</sup> Military prominence under Darius III helps to explain Hystaspes' leading role among Alexander's Iranian *hetairoi*, and like Darius' brother Oxyathres, he also may have helped to symbolize the royal family's support for Alexander's rule.<sup>21</sup> The fact that he maintained high rank near the end of Alexander's reign, after the elimination of numerous Iranian satraps, implies that the new King held him in considerable trust.

The limits of the Alexander historians' information on this important figure make his appearance in new documentary evidence all the more remarkable. If the identification proposed here is correct, the fortuitous publication of ADAB C2 sheds welcome light on Vishtaspa's position before Alexander's invasion. Finally, it increases our awareness of administrative complexity in fourth-century Bactria, showing how a military official like the *karanos* might take part in the economic and social life of the province, while working alongside local elites, district governors, and satraps to assert Achaemenid authority in one of the empire's most vital regions.

**John Hyland**

[john.hyland@cnu.edu](mailto:john.hyland@cnu.edu)

**18** Berve 1926 vol. 2, 378; Bosworth 1980, 13 n. 110; Heckel 2006, 142.

**19** Identification of ethnic association from specific names, particularly in the Iranian and Central Asian regions of the Achaemenid empire, remains extremely problematic, with complexities that may have been lost in early Greek writing on the subject; cf. Briant 1984, 89-96.

**20** Bosworth 1980, 13 n. 110, posits a kinship between Hystaspes and Bessus, since both are described as blood relatives of Darius III.

**21** For Oxyathres' induction into the *hetairoi*, see Diod. 17.77.4; Curt. 6.2.11, 7.5.40; Plut. *Al.* 43.7.



## Bibliography

- BERNARD, P. 1994, L'Asie centrale et l'Empire séleucide, *Topoi* 4/2: 473-511.
- BERVE, H. 1926, *Das Alexanderreich auf prosopographischer Grundlage* (2 vols.), Munich.
- BOSWORTH, A.B. 1980, Alexander and the Iranians, *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 100: 1-21.
- BRIANT, P. 1984, *L'Asie centrale et les royaumes proche-orientaux du premier millénaire (c. VIII<sup>e</sup>-IV<sup>e</sup> siècles avant notre ère)*, Paris.
- BRIANT, P. 2002, *From Cyrus to Alexander: a History of the Persian Empire* (P. DANIELS, trans.), Winona Lake.
- BRIANT, P. 2009, The Empire of Darius III in Perspective, in: W. HECKEL and L. TRITLE (eds.), *Alexander the Great: a New History*, London: 141-70.
- BRIANT, P. 2010, *Alexander the Great and his Empire: a Short Introduction* (A. KUHRT, trans.), Princeton.
- HAEBLER, C. 1982, Karanos. Eine sprachwissenschaftliche Betrachtung zu Xen. Hell. I 4,3, in: J. TISCHLER (ed.), *Serta Indogermanica: Festschrift für Günter Neumann zum 60. Geburtstag*, Innsbrück: 81-90.
- HECKEL, W. 2006, *Who's Who in the Age of Alexander the Great: Prosopography of Alexander's Empire*. Oxford.
- KEEN, A. 1998, Persian Karanoi and their Relationship to the Satrapal System, in: T.W. HILLARD, R.A. KEARSLEY, C.E.V. NIXON, and A.M. NOBBS (eds.), *Ancient History in a Modern University. Vol. 1. The Ancient Near East, Greece, and Rome*, Grand Rapids: 88-95.
- LANE FOX, R. 2007, Alexander the Great: 'Last of the Achaemenids?', in: C. TUPLIN (ed.), *Persian Responses. Political and Cultural Interaction with(in) the Achaemenid Empire*, Swansea: 267-312.
- NAVEH, J. and SHAKED, S. 2012, *Aramaic Documents from Ancient Bactria (Fourth Century BCE). From the Khalili Collections*, London.
- OLBRYCHT, M.J. 2013 (forthcoming), The titulature of Arsakes I, king of Parthia – some remarks, in: N. SEKUNDA and K. ULANOWSKI (eds.), *Concepts of humanity and divinity in antiquity (seria monografyczna Akanthina nr. 10)*, Gdańsk.
- PETIT, T. 1983, Karanos. Étude d'une fonction militaire sous la dynastie perse achéménide, *Les Études Classiques* 51: 35-45.
- PORTEN, B. and YARDENI, A. 1986, *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt*, vol. 1., Jerusalem.
- RUNG, E. 2011, Κάρανος / Kārana in the Military and Administrative System of the Achaemenid Empire, in: E. RUNG and O. GABELKO (eds.), *Iran and the Classical World: Political, Cultural and Economic Contacts of two Civilizations*, Kazan: 19.
- SHAKED, S. 2003, De Khulmi à Nikhšapaya: les données des nouveaux documents araméens de Bactres sur la toponymie de la région (IV<sup>e</sup> siècle av. n.è.), *CRAI*: 1517-32.
- SHAKED, S. 2004, *Le satrape de Bactriane et son gouverneur: documents araméens du IV<sup>e</sup> siècle av. n.è.* (Persika 4), Paris.
- TESTEN, D. 1991, Κάρανος=κύριος, *Glotta* 69: 173-74.
- WIDENGREN, G. 1969, *Der Feudalismus im alten Iran: Männerbund, Gefolgswesen, Feudalismus in der iranischen Gesellschaft im Hinblick auf die indogermanischen Verhältnisse*, Köln.



WU, X. 2010, Enemies of Empire: A Historical Reconstruction of Political Conflicts between Central Asians and the Persian Empire, in: J. CURTIS and St.J. SIMPSON (eds.), *The World of Achaemenid Persia. History, Art and Society in Iran and the Ancient Near East*, London: 545-63.

# **Arta**

Directeur de la publication : Pierre Briant

[arta.achemenet@louvre.fr](mailto:arta.achemenet@louvre.fr)

ISSN 2110-6118

© Achemenet