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Tasabara Bagabatos: A recently discovered Old Phrygian graffito from Daskyleion

Abstract

The Old Phrygian graffito on the votive tray from Daskyleion reads tasabara Bagabatos, which can be interpreted as ‘axe-bearer Bagabadzos’. Bagabadzos may well be identical with Darius’ famous general Megabazos, mentioned in Herodotus’ Histories; his previously unknown court title would then have been tašabara- ‘axe-bearer’.

Keywords

Daskyleion, votive tray, graffito, Old Persian, Megabazos, satrap, court title, Old Phrygian.

Mots-clefs

Daskyléion, plateau votif, graffito, vieux perse, Mégabazos, satrape, titre de cour, vieux phrygien.

Introduction

Daskyleion is an ancient city situated on the southeastern shore of modern Manyas Lake in northwestern Turkey.² It appears to have been settled in the 8th century BCE by Mysians or Phrygians, while Lydian, Persian, Greek, and Macedonian influences became prominent in later periods. The city occupied a strategic position

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² The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of the Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the Turkish Historical Society, the Governorship of Balıkesir, Balıkesir Municipality, Bandırma Municipality, and Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University. We also thank archaeologist Ece Aşık for the drawing of the object and



at the crossroads of major north–south and east–west trade routes and lay close to rich economic resources. Manyas Lake provided both natural protection and fertile surrounding lands.

The nearby port of Kyzikos supplied imported goods to Daskyleion, particularly during the 5th and 4th centuries BCE. The site was abandoned after the Hellenistic period but was reoccupied beginning in the 6th–7th centuries CE. Owing to its abundant natural resources and strategic location, Daskyleion continued to serve as a settlement from the 8th century BC until the 12th century AD, reaching its zenith during the Persian period, when it served as a satrapal center of the Achaemenid Empire.

Daskyleion consistently maintained a multicultural character, as evidenced by the diverse elements of material culture recovered from the settlement and its necropoleis.

Archaeological background

In 2022, archaeologists investigated a trench known as AF-XVII, tracing water pipes dating to the 4th century BCE. During the cleaning and reinforcement of the trench's eastern edges, three terracotta fragments were uncovered, although they were found without a clear archaeological context (Fig. 1). After restoration, archaeologists observed that the fragments bore graffiti. The pieces likely belonged to a terracotta votive tray, similar to examples discovered at Claros.³

Catalog (Figures 2-4)

Storage location: Daskyleion Excavations House

Sector: AF – XVII

Lot number: JBS 108/118

Material: Terra cotta

Object type: Votive tray

Description: Rectangular shaped table. Pentagram, sandglass symbols and two lines of a Phrygian inscription incised on the tray after firing. Micaceous (3%), calcareous red clay (2.5 YR 5/6)⁴, added grits (10%). Length 0,32 m; width 0,19 m; thickness 0,035 m.

Wouter Henkelman, Alwin Kloekhorst, and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments on an earlier version of this article.

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Şahin 1998, pp. 45, 87 fig. 61.

4

The color of the clay was determined according to the Munsell Soil Color Charts (Grand Rapids, MI, 2009).



Paleography

Two lines of a sinistroverso graffito (see Fig. 2): TASABARA BAGABA↑OS.

Line 1.

The reading TASABARA is in general clear. The only issue concerns letter 4, which could in theory be read as a V with a very long stroke above. Since the sequence SVB is phonotactically impossible in Phrygian, the letter is more likely an A with a very short crossbar. In this graffito, the crossbars of all A's do not reach the opposite side, so the reading as A can be considered certain.

Line 2.

The third letter is unmistakably a G and the fourth a B, yielding the sequence GB, which never occurs in Phrygian. It is therefore plausible to follow Dr. Rostyslav Oreshko's suggestion (p.c.) – based on his study of the object at the Daskyleion excavation site in the summer of 2023 – that the scribe, upon noticing the omission, added a small A beneath the G.

The arrow ↑ is clear (for this letter, which had the value /d^z/ or /z/, see Obrador-Cursach 2020, p. 33).

The last but one letter is an O. Possibly, the scribe originally wrote an A and then corrected it into an O.

The last letter is problematic. It can scarcely be an I, since final diphthongs are written with I only in the archaic Old Phrygian inscriptions, prior to the introduction of Y in the 6th century BC (Ligorio & Lubotsky 2018, p. 1817); the spelling -OI would therefore be unexpected in Daskyleion. Most likely, the letter represents a quick, cursive form of S.

Interpretation

TASABARA

The word of the first line, *tasabara*, with all its *a*'s, must be an Iranian loanword, most likely a compound in **-bara-* 'bearing, bearer'. These compounds typically refer to characteristics and functions of people, e.g., Young Avestan *gaḍa-uvara-* (*gaḍā-* 'club' + *-bara-*) 'bearing a club, club-bearer', which is a standing epithet of the epic hero Kərəsāspa, or Young Avestan *sruuara-* 'with horns, horn-bearer' (*srū-* 'horn' + *-bara-*), an epithet of the dragon.

In Old Persian royal inscriptions, we find three of those compounds. Old Persian *taka-bara-* 'shield-bearer' is of the same type, characterizing a group of Ionians (cf. Schmitt 2014, p. 250 and Rollinger 2006). Two others are denominations of court officials:



- *aršti-bara*- ‘spear-bearer’, the title of Gobryas, the royal bodyguard (Schmitt 2014, p. 239; as a title or name also found in Babylonian, Elamite, and Greek, cf. Schmitt 2011, p. 139). The text DNc, which appears at the tomb of Darius next to a figure on the relief, reads: *Gaub(a)ruva Pātišuvāriš, Dārayavahauš xšāyaθiyahāya arštibara* ‘Gaub(a)ruva, a Pateischorian, the spear-bearer of Darius the king’ (Schmitt 2000, p. 45).
- *vaça-bara*- ‘chamberlain, responsible for king’s wardrobe’ (lit. ‘garment-bearer’), the title of Aspakanah, one of the persons depicted on the tomb of Darius. The text DNd reads: *aspacana vaçabara Dārayavahauš xšāyaθiyahāya isuvām dārayatiy* ‘Aspakanah, the chamberlain, holds the bow-case of Darius the king’ (cf. Schmitt 2000, p. 46). The title is also found in Babylonian documents, in its “Median” form **vastra-bara*- (cf. Tavernier 2007, p. 434f.).

Many Old Persian compounds in *-bara*- (though not directly attested in Old Persian itself) are recorded in Elamite, Babylonian, and Aramaic documents, where they denote various administrative offices of the Achaemenid Empire. In these compounds, the element *-bara*- carries the meaning ‘bearing responsibility for, in charge of,’ as already seen in *vaça-bara*- ‘chamberlain’. Tavernier 2007, p. 414ff. mentions the following administrative titles:

- **āpidāna-bara*- ‘responsible for the water-reservoir’ [Elamite]
- **ā-prna-bara*- ‘head of the wine cellar’, lit. ‘barrel-carrier’ [Elamite]
- **bāra-bara*- ‘load-carrier’, cf. also Modern Persian *bār-bar* ‘carrier, porter’ [Elamite]
- **dāta-bara*- ‘judge’, lit. ‘law-carrier’, cf. also Middle Persian (Pahlavi) *dādwar*, Middle Parthian *dādβar* [Aramaic, Babylonian, Elamite]
- **ganda-bara*- ‘treasurer’ [Biblical Aramaic and Elamite] and **ganza-bara*-, the same title in the non-Persian form, cf. also Middle Persian (Book Pahlavi) *ganjwar*, Manichaean Middle Persian *ganzwar*, Middle Parthian *ganzβar* (for more details on this term, cf. Stolper 2000) [Aramaic, Babylonian, Elamite]
- **gāθuka-bara*- ‘throne-carrier’ [Elamite]
- **hambāra-bara*- ‘warehouse manager’ [Elamite]
- **(h)uvarša-bara*- ‘quartermaster’, lit. ‘responsible for the food’ [Elamite]
- **mari-bara*- ‘cellar-master’, lit. ‘jar-carrier’, title of a person receiving wine for royal stores [Elamite]
- **upa-ganzabara*- ‘assistant treasurer, vice-treasurer’ [Aramaic]

Given the productivity of *-bara*- formations designating administrative titles in the Achaemenid Empire, it is tempting to interpret *tasabara* in our graffito as representing Old Persian **taša-bara*, where *taša*- is a word for ‘axe’. Although unattested in Old Persian (a fact unsurprising in view of the very limited corpus of Old Persian inscriptions), *taša*- ‘axe’ is well attested in other Iranian languages and can be securely



reconstructed for Proto-Iranian: Young Avestan *taša-* m. ‘axe, adze’,⁵ Sogdian *tš* ‘axe’, *tšycq* ‘axe, spade’, Modern Persian *taš* ‘hatchet, adze’, etc. This *taša-* ‘axe’ is an Iranian derivative of the verb *taš-* ‘to fashion, create, carpenter’, and thus probably denoted a carpenter’s tool rather than a battle-axe. Old Persian *taša-bara-* could therefore have designated an Achaemenid official responsible for carpentry (a chief carpenter, so to speak) but it seems likelier that *taša-bara-* was a court title, with the *taša-* functioning as a ceremonial axe, especially in view of the parallel ‘bow-case bearer’ and ‘spear-bearer’, discussed above.⁶ It is noteworthy that, of all the administrative titles cited, only the terms for highly prestigious functions – judge and (vice-)treasurer – are attested outside Persia proper; a chief carpenter in a Phrygian city would scarcely be expected to bear a Persian title.

Grammatically, *tasabara* can be analyzed as the nominative singular of a masculine *a*-stem. In Phrygian, this class consisted largely of personal names and loanwords (e.g., *Baba*, *Kaliya*, *μῑτραφατα*; cf. Obrador-Cursach 2020, p. 76), so it is only natural that *tasabara* would belong to this class.

BAGABAṬOS

Bagabaṭos /*Bagabadʿos*/ can be identified as a compound name of Iranian origin, attested in Aramaic as *Bgbz*, in Elamite as *Ba-ka₄-ba-su* (cf. Tavernier 2007, p. 131)⁷, and in Greek as *Μεγάβαζος*, where *Baga-* is replaced by *Μεγά-*, the usual Greek rendering of Iranian names containing *Baga-*.

This name is usually etymologized as Iranian **Baga-bādʿu-*⁸ ‘god + arm’ (see Benveniste 1968, p. 115ff.), which appears to be the most plausible analysis.⁹ As Sims-Williams (1991) emphasizes, *Baga* often refers to Mithra, so *Baga-bādʿu-* could have originally meant ‘the arm of Mithra’ or (as a possessive compound) ‘possessing Mithra’s

- ⁵ Young Avestan *taša-* is a hapax (V 14.7), but it appears among all kinds of instruments used for timber production, cf. Andrés-Toledo 2016, pp. 311–312 for a recent translation of the text.
- ⁶ For comparable titles at the Achaemenid court, see Henkelman 2003, pp. 120–122, and 162–165 more specifically on the office of the ‘chamberlain’.
- ⁷ Most probably, also Elamite *Ba-ka₄-ba-du*, which may reflect the Persian form of the same name, **Baga-bā-du-* (Tavernier, *ibidem*).
- ⁸ Proto-Iranian **dʰ* regularly developed into Old Persian *d* and to *z* elsewhere. Old Persian contains many words with a non-Persian *z* in them, evidently borrowed from another Iranian dialect.
- ⁹ Schmitt in a number of publications (e.g., 1967, p. 132f., fn. 97, 1968, p. 68, 2011, p. 98) argued for an alternative interpretation of the Greek names in *-βαζος*, namely as Iranian compound names in **-yazdah-*, something like ‘endurance’. The consistent rendering of the names with *-b-* in all these languages (Aramaic, Greek, Elamite, and now Phrygian) makes this suggestion less probable, however.



arm,’ i.e., ‘acting as Mithra’s arm.’ The idea behind this name can be illustrated by a passage from the Avestan *Mihr Yašt* (Yt 10.104): *miθrəm ... yazamaide yeyjhe darəyāciṭ bāzauua fragrəβənti miθrō.aojanhō* ‘Mithra we worship, whose long arms reach out to catch the violators of the contract’ (Gershevitch 1959, p. 125). Mithra’s two long arms symbolize sunrise and sunset, while simultaneously underscoring his formidable warrior strength (Kellens 1979, p. 716; Cantera 2017, p. 32).

In principle, *Bagabatos* in our graffito can be either the nominative of an *o*-stem (if the original *Baga-bādu*- was taken over as a thematic stem in Phrygian, as occurred in Greek) or the genitive of a *u*-stem, if the name retained its original inflection (cf. nom.sg. *Vasus*, gen.sg. *Vasos* < **Vasvos*, cf. Ligorio & Lubotsky 2018, p. 1825, Obrador-Cursach 2020, p. 238). Since interpreting it as a genitive yields no meaningful reading of the graffito, we opt for a nominative.

TASABARA BAGABATOS

It seems thus most likely that the graffito consists of two nominatives: *tasabara Bagabatos* ‘axe-bearer Bagabadzos’. If “axe-bearer” was indeed a court title, as argued above, then Bagabadzos was a Persian nobleman and a prominent figure in the Phrygian satrapy. In Greek literature predating Alexander, we find references to three Persians bearing the name Μεγάβαζος (see Schmitt 2011, p. 249): two are mentioned by Herodotus and one by Thucydides. Most relevant to us is Μεγάβαζος whom Herodotus describes as a relative of Darius and his favored general¹⁰, because of his obvious connection to Daskyleion.

We learn about Μεγάβαζος that he participated in Darius’ campaign against the Scythians in 513 BCE. When Darius returned to Asia, he made Μεγάβαζος commander of the “European” troops, in which capacity Μεγάβαζος subdued all the people of the Hellespont, then Thrace, Macedonia, and Paeonia (Herodotus 4.144, 5.1-2). Later, Μεγάβαζος was replaced in this position by Ὀτάνης (Herodotus 5.26).

The family of Μεγάβαζος clearly controlled the satrapy of Daskyleion: his son Οἰβάρης was satrap of Daskyleion during the Ionian Revolt 499–494 BCE (Herodotus 6.33), and was in turn succeeded by another son of Μεγάβαζος, Μεγαβάτης (cf. Weiskopf 2011). Although Herodotus does not explicitly say so, it is conceivable that Μεγάβαζος himself served as satrap of Daskyleion (albeit only briefly), because he could then easily leave his son in charge when summoned by the king to assume other duties.

¹⁰

Most probably, his father Μεγαβάτης was Darius’ cousin. See Henkelman 2023, pp. 275–280 for a recent account of Μεγάβαζος and his family.



Conclusions

The Old Phrygian graffito on the votive tray from Daskyleion reads *tasabara Bagabatos*, which can be interpreted as ‘axe-bearer Bagabadzos’. Bagabadzos may well be identical with Darius’ famous general Μεγάβαζος, mentioned in Herodotus’ *Histories*; his previously unknown court title would then have been *tašabara*- ‘axe-bearer’.

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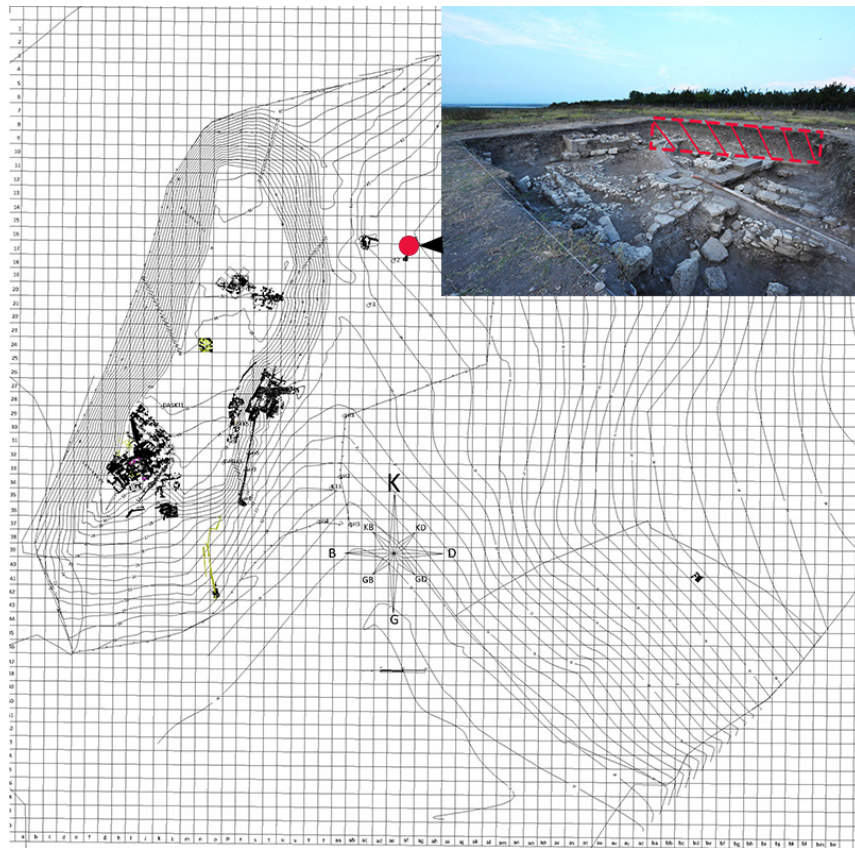


Fig. 1. The eastern section of the trench.

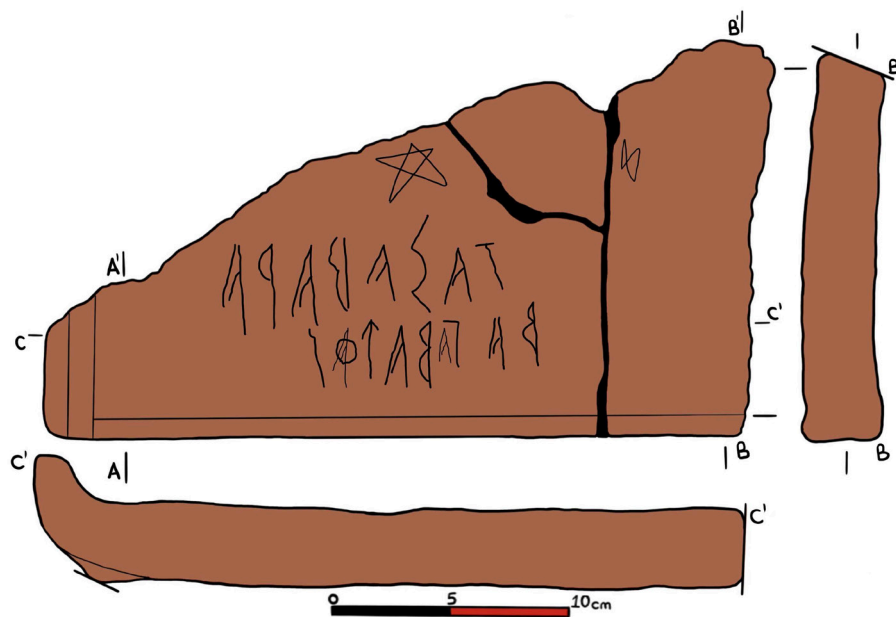


Fig. 2. Drawing by Ece Aşık.



Fig. 3. The interior surface of the votive tray (a photo from the Daskyleion Archive).



Fig. 4. The back side of the votive tray (a photo from the Daskyleion Archive).

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Directeur de la publication : Pierre Briant

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ISSN 2110-6118

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