



A Line of Brāhmī (?) Script in a Babylonian Contract Tablet

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A Line of Brāhmī (?) Script in a Babylonian Contract Tablet

In a contract tablet from Babylon, recording the sale of a slave-girl and dated in the 23d year of Artaxerxes, there occurs in a space obviously left for this purpose a line of script, the characters of which have been hitherto considered as unknown.¹ The position of this line in the context (as can be readily seen from the photographic reproduction) makes it probable, in my opinion, that it contains the name (or names) of a witness to the transaction. Other possibilities are of course by no means excluded. At any rate, the preceding four lines of the cuneiform contain names of such witnesses, all of them apparently good Babylonians.² The three lines of cuneiform that follow, forming the end of the tablet, contain the name of the scribe, the place (Babylon) and the date—the eleventh day of the month Adar in the 23d year of Artaxerxes.³

It seems to me that at least several of the characters of this unknown script exhibit striking similarities with the akṣaras of the Brāhmī alphabet, such as we know them from the inscriptions of Aśoka and others. In one case, that of the ninth character, counting from left to right, one can possibly claim identity with the Brāhmī akṣara *mu*.⁴

The first character of the line (counting from left to right) I also regard as similar to the Brāhmī *ma* (Bühler, No. 32, col. I,

¹ The tablet was published with a translation of the cuneiform by Theo. G. Pinches in the *PSBA*, 1882-1883, pp. 103-107. It is now at the British Museum, 81-11-3. It was brought to my attention by Mr. R. A. Bowman of the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago, to whom I am greatly indebted for many valuable suggestions. Prof. A. T. Olmstead has been likewise most helpful with his advice.

² The names of the principals in the transaction, with one possible exception, are also unquestionably Semitic. The buyer of the slave, however, is Urmanū son of Lišir. The name Urmanū does not seem to be Semitic, and actually occurs nowhere else except in this tablet. Lišir, on the other hand, is a good Semitic name.

³ This could be Artaxerxes I or Artaxerxes II. In the former case the date would be 441 B. C., in the latter 381 B. C. But the earlier date seems to be much more probable, as documents from Babylon dating from this period of Artaxerxes II's reign are exceedingly rare.

⁴ See Bühler, *Siebzehn Tafeln zur Indischen Palaeographie* (henceforth quoted as Bühler), plate II, No. 32, column IV.



Line of Script (possibly Brāhmī) in a Babylonian Contract Tablet.

II and V), but the upper part of the letter forms a complete circle, a feature which I have not found in Brāhmī elsewhere. The second character presents a problem; the *k* element seems certain (see Bühler, id., No. 9), and the loop with the stroke added to the *k* on the left, seems on the whole akin to the *kha* in the Aśoka inscription at Kālsī (see Bühler, id., No. 10, col. II and III) although the position of the loop there is different. Nevertheless I, tentatively, regard the second character as *kha*. The third character is probably a combination (ligature?) of two consonants, though its form is puzzling to me. Concerning the upper character of this combination I have no suggestions to offer; the lower one, however, is similar to some of the later forms of Brāhmī *ha* (see Bühler, *Indische Palaeographie*, p. 7, No. 22). The fourth character looks very much like certain forms of the Brāhmī *ra* (see Bühler, table II, No. 34, col. XIII). The fifth character seems to be quite identical with the second character, which has been tentatively identified as *kha*. For the sixth character I suggest similarity with the Brāhmī *da* or *do* (see Bühler, id., No. 25, col. II, III and ff.), though the absence of a vertical stroke below is a difficulty. The seventh character is similar to the first and also to the ninth, differing from the latter in the presence of an additional stroke above (this stroke would normally indicate the vowel *i*, see Bühler, id., No. 32, col. III). This character, then, probably belongs to the *ma* group. The eighth character is puzzling but may represent a Brāhmī *ja* (see Bühler, id., No. 15, col. VI and VII). But this identification is very doubtful.⁵ The ninth character has already been discussed above. For the rest of the characters I am unable to give any definite suggestions.⁶

At the present time I am unable to obtain a satisfactory reading of this line. The first two syllables may read *makha*, which may be the first part of a name, likewise characters four and five may read *rakha*.⁷ I trust however that scholars with greater knowledge of Indian palaeography than my own will be more successful. In

⁵ Brāhmī *ṭa* is perhaps preferable (see Bühler, id., No. 18, col. II and IV).

⁶ But perhaps between characters ten and eleven, below the line, we have a Brāhmī *ta*, see Bühler, id., No. 23, col. VII.

⁷ Pāli has the name Makhādeva. I would like here to acknowledge my indebtedness to Prof. Truman Michelson, for his valuable suggestions with reference to identification of the characters.

spite of the difficulties here outlined, I am convinced that we have here some kind of a Brāhmī script, even though differing considerably from the type found in the Aśokan inscriptions. These differences can be easily accounted for by the early date of our tablet. Even if we should accept its date as of the 23d year of Artaxerxes II (381 B. C.), we still have over a century separating our script from even the earliest Aśokan inscription.⁸ The occurrence of a form of Brāhmī script in Babylon in the second half of the Vth century B. C. presents no difficulties. Since 500 B. C., at any rate, the Indus Valley and parts of the Panjab formed a part of the Persian Empire. Indian troops, as we know, participated already in the campaigns of Xerxes. There is also every reason to believe that commerce between Babylon and India existed during the Vth and VIth centuries B. C.⁹ However all definite conclusions will have to be postponed until a satisfactorily certain reading of this line is achieved.

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A Note on Early Arabian Military Organization

The term *hamīs* is one applied in classical Arabic to the army as it existed from the beginning of Islam up to the time of the Umayyad caliph Marwān II (744-50), who abolished this unit in favor of the *kurdūs*, a formation borrowed from the Byzantines (Greek *κοόρτις*, *κώρτης*, from Latin *cohors*, cohort). The origin and correct significance of the word *hamīs* have long been a subject of speculation among Arabists,¹ but up to the present time no satisfactory conclusion has been arrived at. This has been due in a large

⁸ We may of course have some specimens of Brāhmī writing which should be considered as prior to Aśoka; so the Eraṇ coin, see Rapson, *Indian Coins*, p. 11 and plate IV, 8. Also K. P. Jayaswal, *JBORS*. XX, pp. 1-7, dates some Brāhmī seals from Patna as of the IVth century B. C. But the evidence is not absolutely definite in those cases.

⁹ See *Cambridge History of India*, vol. I, pp. 212 and 329. Prof. Olmstead calls my attention to a passage in a cuneiform tablet from Kish (dating probably from the reign of Darius the Great) where a Hindu woman (Hinduś), named Busasa is mentioned as the owner of a house in that city, see Louvre XIII, No. 218, line 21.

¹ Especially lately (1927) Rhodokanakis in Nielsen, *Altarabische Altertumskunde*, vol. I, p. 123, n. 5.