FOREIGN TERMS IN SANSKRIT PERTAINING TO WRITING

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Prehistory

Writing has an old history in India. Allegedly, there are sign-systems used by potters appearing at the beginning of the third millennium BC, i.e., more or less contemporaneous with the first script in Sumer. However, this system of marks did not lead to a proper script in India. The first writing appears suddenly and fully fledged with the mature Harappan phase in the middle of the third millennium BC. With regard to the shape of its graphemes, only the proto-Elamite script can be regarded as a precursor (Parpola 1994: 53). A rather long text, still unread, occurs on a sacred object from Afghanistan (Francfort 2003), dated to the third, second millennium BC. Despite these apparent cross-relations, we cannot read any of these scripts, neither proto-Elamite, nor the Afghan variety, nor Harappan. Presently, there is an ongoing discussion about the nature of the Harappan script: some regard it as logosyllabic, others as logographic. Without any evidence at hand we can at least state that terms for writing must have been used in the third millennium, all of which have left no trace in the languages of the region.¹

We are on safer ground when the Achaemenid empire spread into what is now Pakistan. In Iran, writing was in full swing; Elamite and Akkadian alike were written in the Sumero-Akkadian system, and the language of Western Iran in a newly designed type of simplified cuneiform writing. The eastern-most discovery place of a truly cuneiform inscription is somewhere in eastern Afghanistan or northern Pakistan, dating from the twelfth century BC (Michaud 2000). Apparently, a cuneiform script was never used on imperishable material in Gandhara. From the start, or from a certain point onwards, writing for administrative purposes in Gandhara was in the hands of clerks belonging to the Aramaic

¹ The arguments brought forward by Farmer, Sproat & Witzel (2004) against the nature of the Harappan signs as 'script' are not convincing, individually or as a whole. I concur with the counter-arguments amassed by Parpola (2008).
The earliest testimony of their Aramaic script in South Asia dates from the time after the collapse of the Achaemenid empire, i.e., from the time of Alexander. The fact is well-known and some pertinent words have been mentioned recently by Witzel (2006: 460f); however, the following attempt at a chronological stratigraphy is new.

The Achaemenid Period

Dipi/libi/lipi

The first loanword we encounter in South-Asia is lipi, “script”. This term is a clear Iranian loanword probably imported by Achaemenid clerks. Its ultimate roots are found in Sumerian *dub*, turned to *dipi*/*dipī* in early Iranian. In Gandhara we first learn about this term in the grammar of Pāṇini (3.2.21) which dates from the middle of the fourth century BC (Falk 1994: 327). Pāṇini presents it in two forms, *lipi* and *libi*, without hinting at which he preferred. This means that he regarded this word as outside his own science, i.e., the science of word- and sentence-formation.

Where Pāṇini was prepared to accept the soft labial of the original second syllable, Aśokan scribes in the Northwest used this import in the form of *dipi*, i.e., his local scribes in Gandhara preserved the original dental initial. So, writing in a new way returned to South-Asia in the first millennium BC during the Achaemenid occupation at the beginning of the fifth century BC. Pāṇini, living around the middle of the fourth century, did not use writing for his grammar, which was based solely on memory and the human faculty to associate related rules. His grammar presupposes an elaborate and absolutely encompassing system of sound analysis, with names for each sound and precise rules for the changes sounds undergo when juxtaposed in a word or sentence.

Aramaic writing was in the hands of clerks of Aramaic stock throughout Iran and into the confines of Taxila, east of the Indus. We find Aramaic – not Greek – on the coins of Alexander’s father-in-law, Oxyartes, who was relegated to rule the area of Kabul, at Kapiśī (Mitchiner 1975: 194; Sear 1979: 576 nos. 6227–8). The same applies to three lithic records from Taxila and Jalalabad from the time of Aśoka. We find Aramaic plus Greek on a lithic record of Aśoka himself from Kandahar.

The term *lipikara*, “scribe” was not used for long. We find it as a self-designation by a scribe of Aśoka in southern India (von Hinüber