

Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan as a Historical Source for Early Medieval Turan (4th–8th Centuries CE)

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Abstract

This article re-examines the corpus of Bactrian-language documents discovered in Northern Afghanistan and held principally in the Khalili Collection in London, in order to evaluate their evidentiary value for the history of Turan between the fourth and the eighth centuries CE. The study addresses three interlocking problems: (i) the historiographical convention in some national traditions of treating the entire corpus as a single "Rabatak archive" and confining it to the Kushan period; (ii) the unresolved chronology of the Bactrian era used in the deeds; and (iii) the under-utilised testimony of the documents for the socio-economic, legal and ethnopolitical history of the region under the Kushano-Sasanians, Chionites, Kidarites, Hephthalites (Abdal), Türk Khaganate and the early Arab Caliphate. The methodology combines source criticism, comparative philology and quantitative tabulation of diplomatic features. The analysis demonstrates that the documents constitute an internally diverse but functionally coherent body of legal-administrative records produced under a mature contractual regime, with standard formulas, witnessing, sealed double copies and codified penalty clauses. The recurring presence of the Turkic titles khagan, yabghu, tarkhan, tudun and iltäbär, and of the self-designation Abdalo, supplies direct, primary evidence that Turkic-speaking polities were not external conquerors superimposed upon a foreign society but constitutive components of early medieval Turanian statehood.

Keywords: Bactrian Documents, Northern Afghanistan, Khalili Collection, Hephthalites, Abdal, Türk Khaganate, Legal Diplomats, Early Medieval Central Asia, Turan, Historical Sociolinguistics

1. Introduction

The early medieval period was a phase of profound transformation in the history of Central Asian statehood. Between roughly the fourth and the eighth centuries of the Common Era, the historical land of Turan was successively governed by the Chionites, the Kidarites, the Abdal (Hephthalites) and the Türk Khaganate before the establishment of Arab Caliph administration. National and international historiography has traditionally reconstructed this period through narrative sources written in Chinese, Armenian, Syriac, Middle Persian (Pahlavi), Indian, Arabic and Persian, supplemented by archaeological evidence accumulated over more than a century of field research [1].

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These narrative traditions, however, share two structural limitations. First, they were composed at the political and religious centres of neighbouring empires and are therefore filtered through their own ideological lenses; their authors had little incentive to record the day-to-day life of the populations under discussion. Second, they overwhelmingly privilege dynastic and military events, leaving the legal, fiscal, contractual and family life of ordinary subjects largely invisible. As a consequence, a balanced reconstruction of the socio-economic processes of early medieval Turan requires the systematic use of primary documentary materials produced in the region itself [2].

Such materials exist. Since the early 1990s, a corpus of more than 150 documents written in cursive Bactrian on leather, cloth and wood has emerged from Northern Afghanistan and has been progressively edited, principally by Nicholas Sims-Williams. These texts include deeds of sale and purchase, loan and lease contracts, manumission charters, tax receipts, lists, official letters and a small number of Buddhist texts. Together they cover a span of more than four centuries and document precisely those dimensions of life that the narrative sources omit [3].

Despite their importance, the documents have not yet been fully integrated into the historiography of Uzbek statehood. Two recurring problems have hindered such integration. The first is a tendency, observable in parts of the Uzbek-language literature, to subsume the entire body of texts under the label "Rabatak archive" and to read them as Kushan-period material, even though the dated documents themselves indicate a much longer time-span. The second is the unresolved problem of converting Bactrian-era dates (110–549 BE) into Common Era equivalents, an issue on which Sims-Williams, François de Blois and Khodadad Rezakhani offer competing models. This article seeks to clarify both questions and, on that basis, to draw out the documents' substantive testimony on the legal, economic and political life of Turan in the early medieval centuries [4].

Research questions

- How should the corpus be delimited, and is the label "Rabatak archive" historiographically defensible?
- Which dating model best accommodates the numismatic, paleographic and prosopographic evidence of the documents?
- What can the documents tell us, as primary administrative records, about contractual practice, taxation, slavery and family life in Bactria between the fourth and the eighth centuries?
- What is the significance of the Turkic titles and the self-designation *Abdalo* for the ethnopolitical history of early medieval Turan?

2. Research Method

The empirical base of this study is the published corpus of Bactrian documents from Northern Afghanistan, principally as edited by Nicholas Sims-Williams in the three volumes *Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan* (2001, 2007, 2012), together with the chronological monograph he co-authored with François de Blois (2018) and the topical studies of Khodadad Rezakhani (2008, 2010), Hossein Sheikh Bostanabad (2017) and Said Reza Huseini (2023). Comparative material is drawn from the relevant Chinese, Armenian, Syriac, Pahlavi, Arabic and Persian narrative traditions and, where appropriate, from the Bukharan local historiography of *Narshakhi*.

Source-critical approach

Because the provenance of most documents is the antiquities market and not a controlled archaeological context, the study refuses to treat the corpus as a single unified archive. Instead, each document is analysed on its own diplomatic merits, and inferences about "archives" are restricted to clusters that share named persons, places, dates and scribal hands. Both the external features of the documents (writing surface, script, layout, sealing and witnessing) and their internal features (formulaic structure, vocabulary, legal clauses) are evaluated.

Comparative analysis

The testimony of the Bactrian documents is set in dialogue with parallel evidence from neighbouring written traditions. References to Hephthalite taxation in the documents are compared with the relevant passages in Chinese chronicles; references to Turkic titles are compared with the usage of khagan, yabghu and tudun in al-Ṭabarī and Gardīzī; references to slavery are compared with the later evidence of Narshakhī's History of Bukhara. This triangulation allows the documents to be situated within a wider Central Asian frame rather than being read in isolation.

Historiographical evaluation

The interpretations of Sims-Williams, de Blois, Rezakhani, Sheikh Bostanabad, Huseini and Cribb are critically compared, with particular attention to their disagreements concerning the starting point of the Bactrian era. The aim is not to adjudicate every dispute but to identify a workable periodisation that respects the numismatic and prosopographic constraints of the corpus itself.

Quantitative tabulation

Where the analysis treats recurrent features of the corpus — categories of document, frequencies of Turkic titles, indicative thematic distribution — the results are expressed in tabular and graphical form. The figures presented below are reconstructive and illustrative; they aggregate counts taken from the published editions and are intended to give the reader an overview of the corpus rather than an exhaustive statistical census.

Limitations

Three limitations must be acknowledged. First, the corpus is a survivor's sample; documents preserved on perishable materials and dispersed through the market cannot be assumed to be representative of the original administrative output of Bactria. Second, the conversion of Bactrian-era dates into the Common Era remains a matter of debate, and the present article therefore prefers cautious chronological ranges over single point dates. Third, philological work on the cursive Bactrian script continues, and readings of individual passages may be revised in future editions.

3. Result

From inscriptions to documents: the evolution of Bactrian writing

The administrative scripts used in the region between the Achaemenid period and the Arab conquest fall into three successive stages. Aramaic was the official chancery script of the Achaemenids and remained in use in Bactria even after Alexander's campaigns of 330 BCE. It was gradually displaced by Greek, which served the Greco-Bactrian and early Kushan administrations [5]. Under Kanishka, the Greek alphabet was adapted to render the local Bactrian language, and this Bactrian script — first in its monumental and then in its cursive

form — remained the dominant administrative medium until the Arab conquest. Table 1 summarises this trajectory.

Table 1. Stages in the administrative scripts of Bactria

Stage	Script	Approximate period and remarks
I	Aramaic	Used under the Achaemenids; retained in Bactria even after Alexander's conquest (after 330 BCE).
II	Greek	Introduced after Alexander; remained the chancellery script until Kanishka adapted the Greek alphabet to the local language.
III	Bactrian (monumental)	Rounded, unconnected letters; characteristic of the Kushan period (1st–3rd c. CE).
III	Bactrian (cursive)	Joined letters, harder to read; full transition during the Hephthalite/Abdal period and used until the Arab conquest.

Until the late 1950s, knowledge of the Bactrian script was restricted to short inscriptions on coins and seals. The discovery of the 25-line Surkh Kotal inscription by French archaeologists in 1957, and its study by A. Maricq, W. B. Henning and H. Humbach, transformed the situation by providing for the first time a substantial running text. The publication in 1995–1996 of the Rabatak stone inscription — found in 1993 by Afghan mujahideen during the digging of a trench in Baghlan province and transmitted to the British Museum through the HALO Trust — supplied a second monumental anchor and was decisive for the chronology of the Kushan kings [6].

It was, however, the appearance from the early 1990s of leather, cloth and wooden documents, removed from Afghanistan during the turbulent years following 1979 and circulated through the Peshawar market and later through international art auctions, that fundamentally enlarged the empirical base of Bactrian studies. By 2000, more than 150 such documents were known to scholarship, most of them now held in the Khalili Collection in London [7].

Composition and physical form of the corpus

The published corpus may be divided, following Sims-Williams (2001), into four diplomatic categories (Table 2). Legal documents constitute the largest class and include deeds of sale and purchase, loan and lease contracts, gifts, manumissions and a single attested marriage contract [8].

Table 2. Categories of Bactrian documents (after Sims-Williams 2001)

No.	Category (after Sims-Williams 2001)	Typical content
1	Legal documents	Deeds of sale and purchase, loans, leases, gifts, manumissions, marriage contracts, settlement of disputes.
2	Analogous documents with uncertain dates	Texts whose date formulas are damaged or missing but whose form and vocabulary mirror the dated legal corpus.
3	Lists and accounts	Tax records, expense reports, lists of persons and commodities — bookkeeping rather than contractual material.

Within the legal class, two physical formats are attested. Single-copy documents — exemplified by texts O, R, S, Ss, Tt, Uu and Uv — consist of one written copy of the agreement. The majority of contracts, however, take the form of a double copy: two nearly identical versions of the agreement are written on the same sheet, separated by a blank field and a horizontal cut [9]. The upper copy is folded inwards, rolled, tied with cord through perforations and sealed with up to six clay seals bearing the fingerprints or signets of the contracting parties and witnesses, whose names are sometimes inscribed on the verso. The lower copy is left open so that the parties can consult it without breaking the seals. Should a dispute arise, the closed copy is opened before a judge to verify the integrity of the open text. Figure 2 reconstructs this three-stage physical process [10].

Figure 2. Physical formation of a double-copy Bactrian legal document

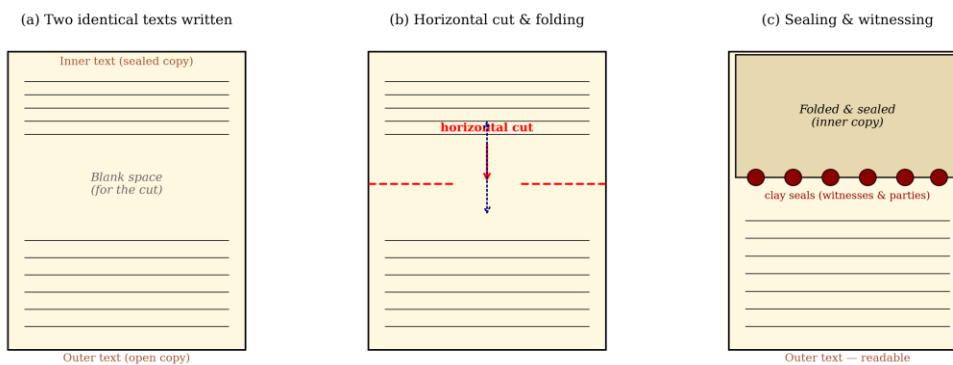


Figure 1. Physical formation of a double-copy Bactrian legal document

The internal structure of the documents is equally codified. Almost all legal texts follow a tripartite scheme — introduction, main part, conclusion (Figure 3). The introduction supplies the date in year–month–day order, with the year opening with $\chi\rho\omicron\nu\omicron$ or $\alpha\chi\rho\omicron\nu\omicron$ and the day-names drawn from the Zoroastrian calendar; the place, introduced by $\mu\alpha\lambda\omicron$ ("here"); and the names of the executants and witnesses, preceded by the verb $\omicron\iota\gamma\alpha\lambda\omicron\phi\omicron$ ("seeing, witnessing"). The main part states the facts and clauses of the agreement, with content varying according to whether the deed is a sale, loan, lease, gift, manumission or settlement [11]. The conclusion confirms the act through the closing formula $\text{Καλδο πιδοοιησαδο... μανο}$ ("the contract was written / sealed by me...") and frequently includes a penalty or guarantee clause.

Figure 3. Internal textual structure of a Bactrian legal document



Figure 2. Internal textual structure of a Bactrian legal document

A representative example of the guarantee mechanism is document M, dated to year 388 of the Bactrian era (corresponding, on Rezakhani's chronology, to the early seventh century CE). A man named Moyan lends three silver coins of Kavād to Mus; the two parties draw up the agreement in court, and a third party, Nāne-band, stands surety with the explicit clause that, in the event of any future dispute over repayment, he will compensate the injured party twofold [12]. The clause indicates a fully formed mechanism of contractual enforcement: financial penalties were calibrated to deter litigation, and third-party sureties were routinely incorporated into private transactions.

Thematic profile of the corpus

Across the published corpus, certain themes recur with sufficient frequency to permit a rough thematic profile (Figure 4). Sale and purchase deeds account for the largest single share, closely followed by official and private letters; loan and tax-related documents form substantial secondary clusters, with slavery-related deeds and lease contracts attested in smaller but significant numbers. The single attested marriage contract is notable precisely because of its rarity [13].

Figure 4. Indicative thematic distribution of the Bactrian documents corpus

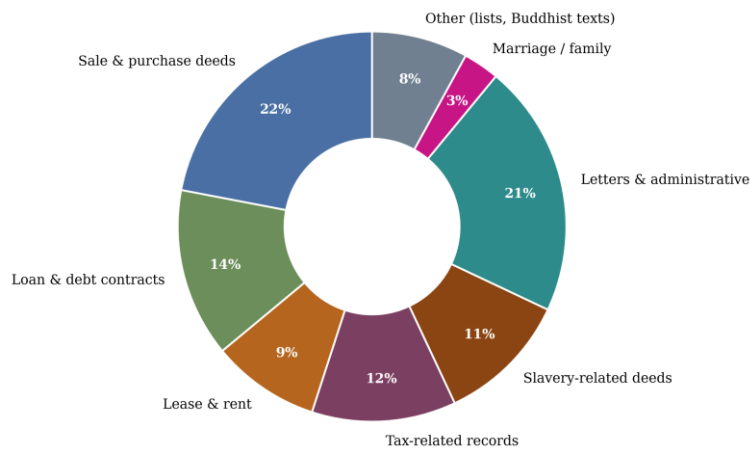


Figure 3. Indicative thematic distribution of the Bactrian corpus (illustrative; aggregated from the published volumes of Sims-Williams 2001, 2007, 2012)

Chronology

The dated documents bear dates between year 110 and year 549 of an unspecified Bactrian era (BE), often with month and day, calculated on the Bactrian calendar and indexed to Zoroastrian day-names. Converting these dates into the Common Era is one of the most contested aspects of the field. Sims-Williams initially proposed a "Kushano-Sasanian era" beginning in 233 CE, then revised this to a Sasanian era beginning with the accession of Ardashīr I in 223/224 CE. Khodadad Rezakhani has challenged both proposals on numismatic grounds: Sasanian silver coinage, he argues, became widespread in Bactria only after Shapur II (309–379 CE), and the silver coins of Kavād mentioned in document Q (dated 449 BE) would, on the Sasanian-era model, be issued nearly one hundred and fifty years after Kavād's death, which is chronologically untenable. He therefore proposes that the documents be calculated from the Kanishka era of 127 CE. Figure 6 visualises the resulting Common-Era ranges for the three principal models [14, 15].

Figure 6. Comparison of dating models for the Bactrian documents

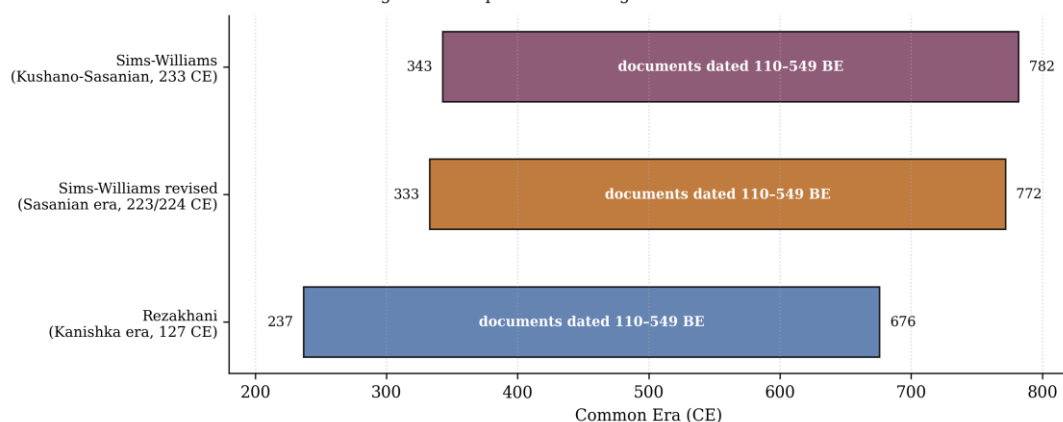


Figure 4. Comparison of the principal dating models for the Bactrian corpus

In light of these debates and the changing political control of the region, this study adopts a flexible five-period periodisation in which the calendar conventions of the documents shift in step with political reality (Table 3 and Figure 1). The first period preserves the Kushan calendar; in the second, Sasanian influence is felt; in the third, the Abdal (Hephthalite) tax is explicitly named in deeds I and J, paralleling the death of Pērōz in 484 CE and the transfer of parts of the region to Hephthalite political control attested in external sources; in the fourth, Turkic titles enter the documentary record; in the fifth, the latest documents reflect early Arab administration [16].

Table 3. Proposed five-period periodisation of the corpus

#	Period	CE	Calendar / political context reflected in the corpus
1	Kushano-Sasanian	245–370	Kushan calendar continues; Sasanian influence felt from Shapur II onwards.
2	Chionite–Kidarite	370–466	Transition phase; new ruling groups appear in legal contexts.
3	Hephthalite (Abdal)	466–559	Abdal tax (ἡβοδαλαγγο τωγο); ethnonym Abadalo on coins and in documents.
4	Türk Khaganate	559–710	Turkic titles khagan, yabghu, tarkhan, tudun, iltäbär become routine in deeds and letters.
5	Arab Caliphate	710–770	Latest dated documents; references to Arab administration and taxation.

Figure 1. Chronological framework of the Bactrian documents (4th–8th centuries CE)

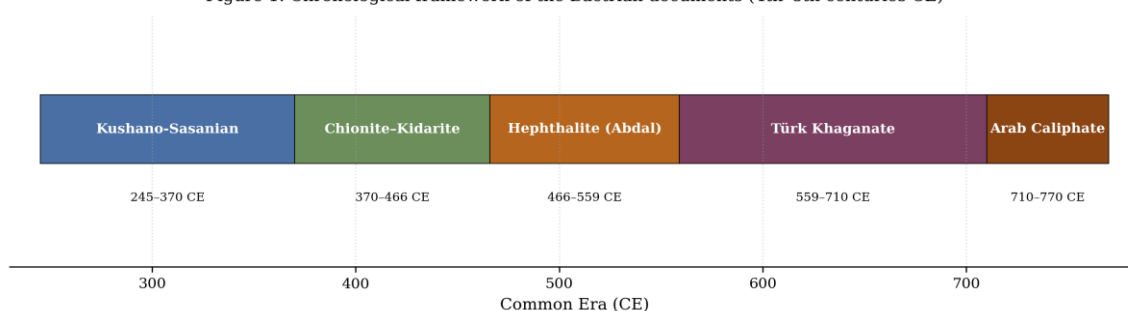


Figure 5. Chronological framework of the political dynasties reflected in the Bactrian corpus

Socio-economic content

When the legal documents (excluding letters and Buddhist texts) are analysed thematically, two principal clusters emerge: economic-legal acts (sale and purchase, lease, gift, loan, taxation and suretyship) and social-legal acts (marriage, settlement of disputes and matters concerning slavery). The presence of both categories within the same diplomatic tradition indicates that personal status and property relations were regulated within a single, coherent legal regime [17].

Slavery is documented in particular detail. The corpus distinguishes two categories of unfree persons: a slave born within the master's household (χοβο νιζαδαγο μαρηγο) and a slave acquired by purchase (δδραχο χιρσιγο). In both cases slaves were regarded as private property, and owners could retain, sell, pledge, gift, lease, discipline or manumit them. The documents also illuminate the routes into and out of slavery: a free-born person could be sold into slavery — often by family members during famine, as in the well-known sale of a child

dated 669 (Bactrian era) analysed by Huseini (2023) — while a slave could redeem his own freedom by paying his full purchase price, on receipt of an official manumission charter (the document of 470 BE is the locus classicus). The Bactrian vocabulary of dependency is rich: μαρηγο (māreg) and βανδαγο (bandag) designate male slaves, βανζο (banz) female slaves, and μαρσκονδο (marshkond) a further category, while αζαδο (āzād) designates the freeborn. Significantly, μαρηγο and βανδαγο also functioned as components of theophoric personal names (e.g., Bag-māreg, "slave of God") and as expressions of ritual humility used by junior officials in correspondence with superiors. The persistence of slavery in the region into the ninth century is independently confirmed by Narshakhī's History of Bukhara [18].

Turkic titles, the Abdal ethnonym, and the politics of self-designation

One of the most consequential, and least exploited, dimensions of the corpus is its evidence for the political vocabulary of the early medieval period. The people whom Armenian sources call Hep't'al, Xetal or Tetal, whom Byzantine writers call Ephthalites or White Huns, whom Pahlavi sources call Ēftāl or Hēftāl, whom Syriac sources call Eptalit, and whom Chinese chronicles call Ye-da, Ye-dian or Idan, called themselves, according to their own coin legends and their own legal documents, Abadalo (ηβοδαλο, with the divine epithet ββγο). Historiographical practice should respect this self-designation [19].

The same documents that supply this ethnonym also supply a register of Turkic administrative titles embedded in fully formal legal and epistolary contexts. Documents I, li and al name the ηβοδαλαγγο τωγο (Abdal tax) — in document li, the subjects Zinduk and Ram-gul state that they have been compelled to pay gold and sheep as Hephthalite tax and possess no further property — and document J records two inhabitants of Malr selling their house because they cannot meet the same obligation, a fiscal pressure that parallels Chinese reports of heavy Hephthalite taxation. Documents N, P and Q introduce a figure named Khulkhan with the title ιενηλο ταρχανο (Inal Tarkhan) as the owner of the Wilargan district, and the ruler of Rob, Framarizm Shaburan, with the combined titulature χαγανο and ταποαγλιο υιλιποβηρο ("tapaghligh iltābār"). Document S identifies the ταδονο (tudun) of the Gaz region. Document T records that Bek Oziyos, the wife of Tapaghligh Bilge Chavush, the great ruler of the Khalaj Turks, gave thanks to the god Kāmird for the recovery of her newborn child and dedicated property and a person as a votive offering [20].

The letters section provides equally rich material. Document eh, an official letter from the judge of Tokharistan and Gharchistan to Ohrmazd Bunukan, opens its salutation with the form ηβοιδαλο ιαβγο ("yabghu of the Hephthalites") and carries agrarian and grain-management orders. Document ja consists of Kilman's petition to Abag concerning the financial problem of Zun-bandag and opens with the address "To Abag, the ruler of the famous and prosperous yabghu of the Hephthalites"; it ends with the admonition "Do not do hidden evil!". Document jb concerns the theft of money belonging to Spiy and opens "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"; it requests that the stolen sum be fully recovered within a stipulated ten-day period — a striking indication of procedural regulation.

Table 4 summarises the relevant titles and their attestations in the corpus, and Figure 5 visualises their indicative frequency. The cumulative effect of this material is striking: titles such as khagan, yabghu, tarkhan, tudun and iltābār — known from the narrative sources of al-Ṭabarī, Gardīzī and others — appear not as antiquarian labels but as active components of an administrative system operating in the everyday legal life of Bactria.

Table 4. Turkic titles and the ethnonym Abdalo in the Bactrian corpus

Title / Ethnonym	Bactrian spelling	Documents	Function in the source
<i>khagan</i>	χαγανο	N, P, Q (letters cluster)	Supreme Turkic ruler; applied to the ruler of Rob (Framarizm Shaburan).
<i>yabghu</i>	ιαβγο	eh, ja, jb	Senior office; in official correspondence ("yabghu of the Hephthalites").
<i>tarkhan</i>	ταρχανο	N, P, Q	Inal Tarkhan named as the owner of the Wilargan district.
<i>tudun</i>	ταδονο	S	Tudun of the Gaz region — a regional administrator.
<i>iltābār</i>	υιλιτοβηρο	N, P, Q	Combined with tapaghligh; Turkic high official designation.
Abdalo	ηβοδαλο	I, li, J, al + coin legends	Self-designation of the people called Hephthalites in outside sources; appears with ηβοδαλαγγο τωγο (Abdal tax).

Figure 5. Frequency of Turkic titles and the ethnonym Abdalo attested in the Bactrian documents

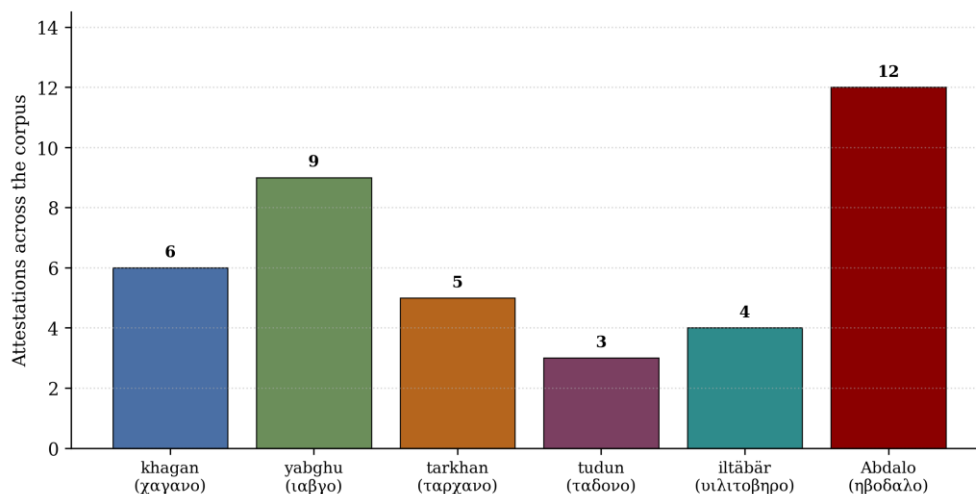


Figure 6. Indicative frequency of Turkic titles and the ethnonym Abdalo across the published corpus

4. Discussion

The "Rabatak archive" problem

The first historiographical implication of the foregoing analysis concerns the label "Rabatak archive," sometimes applied in national historiography to the entire corpus. The label is doubly misleading. The Rabatak stone inscription of 1993 is a monumental Kushan text concerned with the dynastic ancestry of Kanishka; the documents under discussion are, by contrast, perishable legal and epistolary materials that, on every dating model, extend several centuries beyond the Kushan period. Furthermore, since the documents were dispersed through the market, their archival affiliation cannot be reconstructed: it is not even certain that they all belong to a single original archive. The label should therefore be retired in favour of

the neutral descriptor "Bactrian documents from Northern Afghanistan," and the Kushan-only framing should be replaced by an explicit four-to-eighth-century reading.

Chronology and political control

The chronological argument advanced by Rezakhani, anchored in the numismatic behaviour of Sasanian silver coinage, accommodates the documentary record more comfortably than the original Sasanian-era model. The five-period framework adopted in this article (Table 3) follows that lead while remaining agnostic on the precise year-by-year conversion: the corpus is read as the surviving documentary trace of a region that passed through Kushano-Sasanian, Chionite-Kidarite, Hephthalite, Türk and Arab phases, with calendar conventions and political vocabulary adapting to each phase rather than displacing what came before. The persistence of the Kushan calendar long after the political collapse of the Kushan empire is particularly instructive: it indicates that the Hephthalites and the Türk Khaganate inherited and continued an existing administrative apparatus rather than building one from scratch.

Law and the state in early medieval Turan

The diplomatic features documented in section 3.2 — codified introductory formulas, double-copy production, sealing and witnessing, closing certification formulas and explicit penalty clauses — describe a sophisticated and mature contractual regime. The double-copy mechanism in particular is a robust solution to the problem of tampering: by sealing one identical copy of the agreement inside the deed itself, the regime created a built-in audit trail that could be opened, in case of dispute, only in the presence of a judge. The penalty clauses, such as the doubled indemnity in document M, indicate that contractual obligations were enforced not as moral exhortations but as actionable legal duties. Taken together, these features point to a state apparatus — courts, judges, archives, scribes — sufficiently dense to support a contractual economy of land, livestock, loans and labour.

The Abdal as Turkic actors

The combined evidence of the self-designation *Abadalo* on coins and in documents, the recurrence of the *Abdal* tax, and the embedding of Turkic titles within Hephthalite and post-Hephthalite administration constitutes the most important political conclusion of this study. Where narrative sources outside the region project on to the Hephthalites a series of externally generated labels — *Hep't'al*, *Ephthalites*, *White Huns*, *Ye-da* — the documents allow the population to speak in its own register, and that register is functionally Turkic in its administrative vocabulary. The Turkic-speaking polities of early medieval Turan thus appear not as foreign conquerors of a settled non-Turkic society but as a constitutive component of regional statehood, exercising taxation, governance and judicial authority within the same legal forms that bound the wider population.

Slavery and family life

The slavery materials, finally, complicate any reading of early medieval Bactria as a society organised solely around free peasant smallholders. The terminological distinction between house-born and purchased slaves, the existence of formal manumission charters, and the well-attested practice of sale into slavery during famine all indicate that unfree labour was an institutionalised feature of the regional economy, regulated through the same diplomatic forms as other property transactions. The continuity attested by *Narshakhī's* evidence for ninth-century Bukhara suggests that this regime persisted well into the early Islamic period.

5. Conclusion

The Bactrian documents from Northern Afghanistan represent a primary source of the first order for the history of Turan in the fourth to the eighth centuries CE. Unlike the narrative sources that dominate previous reconstructions of the period, the documents grant direct access to the everyday operations of contractual life: the sale and purchase of property, the management of debt, the leasing of land, the payment of taxes, the regulation of slavery and the resolution of disputes. Their diplomatic features — codified formulas, double-copy production, sealing, witnessing and explicit penalty clauses — testify to a sophisticated legal-administrative regime supported by courts, judges and a class of trained scribes.

Two historiographical corrections follow. The convention of subsuming the entire corpus under the label "Rabatak archive," and of confining its testimony to the Kushan period, should be set aside in favour of an explicit four-to-eighth-century reading anchored in the documents' own dating formulas and political vocabulary. The chronological problem is best approached through a flexible five-period periodisation (Kushano-Sasanian, Chionite-Kidarite, Hephthalite/Abdal, Türk Khaganate, Arab Caliphate) that respects the changing calendar conventions and titlature attested in the corpus.

Substantively, the documents furnish direct evidence that Turkic-speaking polities were constitutive of early medieval Turanian statehood. The self-designation *Abadalo*, the *Abdal* tax and the routine use of *khagan*, *yabghu*, *tarkhan*, *tudun* and *iltäbär* in everyday legal and epistolary practice are not antiquarian survivals but indices of active governance. The corpus thereby fills a documentary gap that no narrative source can supply and opens a series of new research avenues, including the local operation of taxation, the prosopography of officials, the geography of the named districts, the religious life implied by Zoroastrian, Buddhist and theophoric personal names, and the long-term continuity of administrative practice across the transition into early Islamic rule.

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