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Traces of language contact in Niya Prakrit: Bactrian and other foreign elements

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CHAPTER 8 Concluding remarks

This monograph set out to investigate traces of language contact in Niya Prakrit: loanwords, borrowed morphemes, and grammatical phenomena that could be contact-induced. The presence of Iranian loanwords had long been apparent, and, over the past decades, it became clear that the once barely attested Bactrian language is one source of Iranian loanwords in Niya Prakrit. A novel conclusion of this study is that the majority of the previously identified Iranian loanwords in Niya Prakrit has or could have been adopted from Bactrian. Another of its results is the identification of formerly unrecognised loans from Bactrian (Chapter 3). Thus, Bactrian influence on Niya Prakrit seems to have been more intense than realised so far—especially if one further accepts that the influence was not limited to loanwords but also manifested itself in the adoption of grammatical morphemes (the suffixes *-ci* and *-ani*) and structural influences, e.g. on the Niya preterite (Chapter 5).

Since administrators of the Shanshan kingdom used Niya Prakrit as a chancellery language, it would be a reasonable inference that also their native language exerted influence on the vocabulary or grammar of Niya Prakrit. However, such influence has never been positively proved, and Burrow's proposal that the otherwise undocumented Shanshan substrate language was a form of Tocharian rests on questionable ground (Chapter 6). More generally, one cannot easily find loanwords or foreign-looking grammatical features whose adoption into Niya Prakrit is securely datable to after the spread of the latter to the Tarim Basin, an occasional loanword from Khotanese left aside (§4.2.5).

Most of the Bactrian loanwords are administrative, political, military, and economic terms. They probably were borrowed when the Kuṣāṇa dynasty (1st–3rd century AD) conquered Gandhāra and other parts of northern India (Chapter 4). That the Bactrian influence on Niya Prakrit seems more profound than on other varieties of Gāndhārī is explainable when assuming that the predecessor of Niya Prakrit was used as a chancellery language by the Kuṣāṇa dynasty, whose official language was Bactrian. Put differently, the ancestor of Niya Prakrit would be comparable to Achaemenid Official Aramaic, which has undergone the same type of influence from Old Persian as Niya Prakrit from Bactrian (Chapter 7).

Because my conclusions are not affected by them, I intentionally put aside two contentious issues, viz. (i) the question whether the Kuṣāṇa dynasty ever ruled over the Tarim Basin and (ii) the original homeland of Niya Prakrit.

Direct rule over (parts of) the Tarim Basin by the Kuṣāṇa dynasty used to be more widely accepted (see e.g. Brough 1965 = 1996: 276–308; Pulleyblank 1968: 254f.). These days, the main proponent of this theory is Doug Hitch, who argues that the use in the Tarim Basin of Gāndhārī as an administrative language containing Bactrian loanwords and legal formulae “implies political control ... and for a long enough period for a legal tradition to take root” (Hitch 2009: 12).

Although Kuṣāṇa rule over the Tarim Basin is not inconceivable, there is but meagre support for it from archaeology and Chinese historical texts (Høisæter 2017: 81f.; Vorderstrasse 2020: 186–191). There also is a viable alternative. Høisæter (2017: 87–90; cf. also 2020: 124–131) notes that Latin literacy spread to Scandinavia and Ireland and Chinese literacy to Japan, even though these regions were not subject to direct political control from the Roman and Chinese empires, respectively. He therefore hypothesises a scenario whereby long-term interregional exchange networks between the Kuṣāṇa empire and the western Tarim Basin would have caused the introduction of Gāndhārī literacy to the Tarim Basin (cf. also §5.4.3; §5.4.7).

The hypothesis that the Kuṣāṇas ruled over the Tarim Basin and Høisæter’s alternative proposal should both be thoroughly re-examined. Yet, if one accepts that Bactrian influenced Niya Prakrit before the latter spread to the Tarim Basin, the exact modalities of this spread are inconsequential for the overall conclusions of this book.

Another unresolved issue is where the ancestor of Niya Prakrit was originally spoken. According to Burrow (1936: 434f.), its original home was located “to the west of the Indus round Peshawar, which was the centre of the Kushan dominions” (cf. also Kogan 2017: 229; 235f.). A possible alternative would be that Niya Prakrit originated in the Gilgit-Baltistan area, a region where Gāndhārī inscriptions have been found⁹⁷² and which is connected to the Tarim Basin via the Karakorum mountain range. For my results to remain unaffected, it suffices that the predecessor of Niya Prakrit originated in a region under Kuṣāṇa rule (as is almost inevitable).

⁹⁷² CKI 258; 268–269; 271–279; 282–324; 337; 350–357; 406–439; 482–502; 515–532; 567–593. The land-sale contract partially preserved on the silk fragment CKM 430 may also come from the Gilgit area (Falk 2021: 10).

The homeland issue and the sociopolitical context behind the introduction of Niya Prakrit to the Tarim Basin are not the only possible topics for further study. This book has, for instance, hardly dealt with calques from Bactrian and other Iranian languages. Morphosyntactic influence on Niya Prakrit is another under-researched topic, as I have only investigated reciprocals/reflexives and the preterite formations from this perspective. Further desiderata are systematic studies of Bactrian loans in South Asian Gāndhārī and Gāndhārī loanwords in Bactrian and the Tarim languages. Some of the questions to ask are (i) if Iranian loanwords in South Asian Gāndhārī traditionally ascribed to “Indo-Scythian” were not more likely borrowed from Bactrian; (ii) whether the Gāndhārī loanwords in Bactrian, Khotanese, and Tocharian were all borrowed at the same time and from the same dialect; and (iii) if Bactrian loanwords in the Tarim languages may have passed through a Gāndhārī intermediary.