



BANDA II. OLD PERSIAN BANDAKA

ii. Old Persian *Bandaka*

The OPers. occurrences of *bandaka* are all in the Bīsotūn inscription, where it is an epithet of men of high rank whom Darius had chosen to be his generals against the “rebels”: Vidarna, Vindafarnā, and Gaubaruva (members of the seven great noble families), Dādr̥ši the Persian and Vivāna (satraps), Vaumisa and Artavardiya (of whom we know only that they were Persians), Dādr̥ši the Armenian, and Taxmaspāda the Mede. All Darius’s generals except his father Vistaspa were his *bandakas*. The word here means a nobleman “bound” to the king in a relationship which, though subordinate, was freely accepted and probably sealed with an oath. The relationship was symbolized by a girdle, worn by all Persians including the king in the Achaemenid period and throughout the history of ancient Iran.

Undoubtedly a similar relationship existed between the Sasanian king Narseh (r. 292-302) and “the greatest, the best, and the noblest subjects in our possessions” (Paikuli inscription, sections 16, 50, 95). These were all princes with distinguished titles who had rallied to Narseh and become his *bandags*.

The word *bandaka/bandag* was used not only with reference to dignitaries but also with the meaning of “servant,” i.e., any person whose relationship to another is one of obedience and/or dependence. Thus in DB I. 19 the



conquered countries are said to be Darius's "servants" (*bandakā*). The Aramaic word *ʾlym* "lad, servant" (cf. Latin *puer*), which is used to translate OPers. *bandaka*, is used in Aramaic documents found in Egypt as the term for "dependent" or "employee": e.g., a bailiff employed by Aršām (Arsames), the Persian satrap of Egypt, his groom whose son received an estate, some workers, and a sculptor, as well as a freed slave who, given the change of his status, could not be reduced to servitude again. The conventional form of opening address in letters in Imperial Aramaic is "To A. from Y., his servant" (*ʾlym*; Cowley, p. 135, Driver, docs. nos. 2, 6, 8, 9). This formula reappears in Sogdian letters of the 8th century a.d., where the writer, being socially inferior to the addressee, declares himself to be the latter's *bandag* (Freiman, *passim*). Selōk, the author of an inscription at Persepolis, similarly calls himself the *bandag* of his king Šāpūr Sakānšāh (Back, p. 496).

Although these facts seem to justify the conclusion that *bandaka/bandag* never meant "slave," the problem presents difficulties. There is no evidence that *bandaka* ever meant "war captive." Several other facts must also be taken into account. In Akkadian there are two possible equivalents of *bandaka*, namely *ardu*, which means either "slave" in the legal sense or "inferior" in any way (even the king being inferior to his god), and *qallu*, which means "slave, servant" or the like (see also i, above). Then again the choice of *doulos* for the Greek translation of *bandaka* (attested in literary texts such as Darius's letter to Gadatas) can only be explained if *bandaka* was taken to signify, literally or figuratively, "slave." The semantics of Mid. Pers. *bandag* are equally complex. In the Bīšāpūr inscription (ŠVŠ 16) it may perhaps denote slaves offered together with other possessions by Šāpūr to Aps'y, but in Mid. Pers. legal texts the only term denoting "slave" appears to be *anšahrīk*. The "slave and master" (*bandag-xwatāy*) antithesis found in the Manichean texts and in the *Dēnkard* (VI, E43 a-e, advice to a *bandag* on ways to attain a better position; Shaked, p. 211) demonstrates the inferiority of the *bandag* but no more.

In both the Achaemenid and the Sasanian periods, *bandaka/bandag* definitely referred to the fact that all individuals were subject to the king and that some were also dependent on men of higher rank. At the same time, the status of the humblest was always depicted, in the vivid language of military-political metaphor, as being like that of the captive and the slave.

The subordination of the *bandag* was not solely political and economic, as the word was also used to denote the relationship between a worshiper and his god: the expression "slave to the gods" is found in the *Dēnkard* (Shaked, p.



177). Likewise in religious writings the word *bandag* is widely used with the meaning of “God’s creatures.” There, too, the girdle (*kostī*) worn by the initiated Zoroastrian is the symbol of his obedience as a faithful follower of the Good Religion (see, e.g., chap. 18 of the *Vīdēvdād*).

The relationship which the word *bandaka* implies probably stems from a prehistoric rank differentiation in tribal élites and in the military retinue of the chief or “king,” already changed in Darius I’s time, when also a non-Persian was able to be his *bandaka*.

Curiously enough, the word has been adduced in support of diametrically opposed historical interpretations. N. Pigulevskaya (pp. 141-58) saw it as proof of a “slavery-based mode of production” in Parthian and Sasanian Iran, while G. Widengren (1969, pp. 21-44) made use of it for his depiction of “feudalism” in pre-Islamic Iran. For opposite ideological reasons, each writer ignores the “Asiatic mode of production” or “Asiatic despotism.” From an objective viewpoint, it can hardly be maintained that the *bandaka* relationship was the basis of feudalism in ancient Iran, for many other factors must have been present: the breakup of communal landownership, the diversification of war techniques, and the increasing use of coins for money, to mention only a few. One certain fact, however, is that “despotism” in ancient Iran had a peculiar and remarkable capacity to incorporate great noble families, which were not only powerful but also stable. Feudalism did not enter the scene until after the disappearance of these great families and their replacement by local gentry (*dehqāns*) in the reign of Kōsrow I Anōšīravān (531-79). Only then and subsequently did the words *bandag* and *banda* perhaps refer to feudal relationships.

See also [bBARDA and BARDA-DĀRI](#)

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