

DAVID BRAUND

KING FLAVIUS DADES

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For R.D.Sullivan, *regi regum* †

King Flavius Dades is known from a single inscription found in the eastern half of Transcaucasian Georgia (ancient Iberia). It is punched around the edge of the base of a large silver dish in letters that may be read without any difficulty:



Ἐγὼ Βασιλεὺς Φλ. Δάδης ἐχαριστάμην Βερσούμα πιτιαξῆν
 "I, King Fl(avius) Dades, bestowed (this) upon Bersoumas, pitiax"

The dish was part of the inventory of a rich burial at Mtskheta, more precisely at adjacent Armaziskhevi, where several such burials have been excavated. As a result of our inscription, the burial is usually known as "the Bersoumas burial", otherwise simply as burial no. 3.¹ Among the many issues raised by this burial, the concern of this discussion is

¹ The most accessible, detailed account of the burial is A.M.Apakidze, G.F.Gobedjishvili, A.N.Kalandadze, G.A.Lomtadze, Mtskheta vol.1 (Tbilisi, 1958) 53-68.

I wish to acknowledge the valuable advice of Prof. Werner Eck; all responsibility remains with me.

to estimate the date of the inscription and, consequently, the place of Dades in the Iberian royal dynasty.

Where Dades has been noticed and his date considered, it is held that he ruled Iberia under Trajan.² However, our text apart, there is no other evidence even for Dades' existence, let alone his date. There is no mention of him in the mediaeval Georgian annalistic tradition, which, though chronologically unreliable, certainly preserves royal names which are real enough (Parsman, Amazasp, Bakur etc.). In that tradition, the nearest Iberian king's name is Mirdat (Mithridates), which is not near at all.³ It must even be possible that Dades was not an Iberian king: there were many "kings" in ancient Transcaucasia.⁴ Yet, in the absence of any ethnic, it seems better to accept that, as usually assumed, Dades was indeed a king of Iberia. But when?

Our information about the ruling dynasty of Iberia from Nero to Hadrian is sufficiently slight to permit a hypothetical sequence of kings which could include a King Dades under Trajan. Yet that is no reason to advance such an hypothesis. Particularly so, when the knowledge we do have, shows kings of Iberia named only Mithridates (notionally, I and II) and Pharasmanes (notionally, I and II) during the Principate. For the Flavian and Trajanic periods, we depend principally upon two inscriptions.⁵

The first is the famous building-inscription from the region of Mtskheta, which announces that Vespasian, Titus and Domitian strengthened walls for King Mithridates (SEG 20,112). The imperial titles provide a firm date, A.D. 75. There has been much speculation about the significance of this inscription: Roman imperial involvement in fortification in Iberia has been taken to indicate a new Roman dominance there, but parallels suggest that, on the contrary, that involvement indicates the strength and independence of the kingdom of Iberia in A.D. 75.⁶ Moreover, the find-spot of the inscription is most uncertain. It is regularly said to have been found at Harmozica (Armazistsikhe, mod. Bagineti), which dominates the junction of the ancient River Cyrus (mod. Kura, Mtkvari) and the River Aragvi. However, records of the find, in 1867, are both vague and contradictory: on the basis of a careful review of available documentation, Apakidze (for decades the director of excavations at Mtskheta) has argued cogently (but not conclusively) that the stone was

² A.I.Boltounova, "Quelques notes sur l'inscription de Vespasien, trouvée à Mtskhetha", *Klio* 53,1971,213-22, esp. 221 and the literature she cites. She insists on a Trajanic date for Dades despite the substantial problems of chronology which that would entail for her reconstruction of the Iberian royal house.

³ This tradition is most accessible in German translation: G.Pätsch, *Das Leben Kartlis* (Leipzig, 1985).

⁴ See, for example, Arrian, *Periplus*, 11.

⁵ A third inscription, the so-called "Armazian monolingual", seems to mention Mithridates II, but it remains to be translated properly: it is currently under intensive study in Tbilisi: see most conveniently M.N.Tod, *Review of G.Tseretheli, Armazskaya bilingva* (Tbilisi, 1942), *JRS* 33,1943,85.

⁶ D.Braund, "Roman and native in Transcaucasia from Pompey to Sucessionianus", in V.Maxfield and M.Dobson (eds.), *Roman frontier studies 1989: proceedings of the XVth. international congress of frontier studies* (Exeter, 1990) 419-23. More broadly, id., "Rimskoye prisustviye v Kolkhidye i Iberii", *Vestnik Drevnei Istorii* (Moscow) (1991) fasc. 4, 34-52 (in Russian).

discovered not at Harmozica, but at Nakulbakevi on the south-eastern periphery of Mtskheta. The available evidence does not permit a firm conclusion.⁷

The second text is an epitaph from Rome, which records the death of Amazaspus, a member of the Iberian royal family, at Nisibis, where he was part of Trajan's entourage around A.D. 115-16: specifically, he is named as brother of a King Mithridates (IGR 1, 192). The inscription records not only Amazaspus' death, but also his burial at Nisibis. Evidently, the epitaph, and presumably the prince's remains, had been transferred the long distance to Rome. The stimulus to such endeavour may well have been Roman withdrawal from Mesopotamia with the accession of Hadrian: no doubt the king of Iberia took a keen interest, possibly Pharasmanes II.⁸

The simplest interpretation of the evidence of these two texts is that the King Mithridates of the first inscription is the same as that of the second. On that view, King Mithridates would have enjoyed a lengthy reign (assuming that he was still ruling when mentioned in IGR 1, 192), at least from A.D. 75-116. That is evidently why PIR² supposes two kings of the same name (M638-9). But a reign of more than forty years is not impossible. Pharasmanes I, father of the King Mithridates ruling in A.D. 75, had had a long reign: he had gained the throne by A.D. 35 and despite advancing years had continued to reign until after A.D. 62 (possibly a full decade after), when he was sufficiently in control of his kingdom to be entrusted with a portion of Armenia too. Indeed, if Mithridates had come to the throne in his youth, that might help to explain the presence of his mother as well as his deceased father in his royal titulature (a regent perhaps?).⁹ Moreover, the identification of the two Kings Mithridates as Mithridates II produces a neat progression: Mithridates I - Pharasmanes I - Mithridates II - Pharasmanes II. The simplest interpretation is also the neatest. But that leaves no room for a King Flavius Dades under Trajan.

However, a Trajanic date for Dades seems most improbable on other grounds. Crucial to dating Dades' dedication is its context. The burial cannot have been deposited earlier than A.D. 251, for it contained an aureus of Hostilian and, indeed, another of Decius. It has been suggested that both coins may be local copies of Roman originals: if so, a somewhat later date might be required.¹⁰ In principle, the bowl could be older than these coins, of course,

⁷ By far the fullest discussion of the find-spot of this inscription is A.M. Apakidze, *Kalakebi da sakalako tskhovreba dzvel sakartveloshi* vol. 1 (Tbilisi, 1963) 130-4 (in Georgian; cf. the Russian version, *Goroda drevnei Gruzii* (Tbilisi, 1968) 188-94, which is very similar). I am grateful to I. Gagoshidze, Janashia State Museum, Georgia, for access to and discussion of the records of the Janashia Museum; also for his expert guidance in the field, in and around Mtskheta.

⁸ Hadrian's relations with Pharasmanes were less hostile than often imagined: D. Braund, *Hadrian and Pharasmanes*, *Klio* 73, 1991, 208-19.

⁹ Early years: Tac. Ann. 6.32; Dio 58.26.4. Advancing age: Ann. 12.44. Extension of responsibilities: Ann. 14.26. On the (probable) presence of his mother, see A. B. Bosworth, "Vespasian's re-organisation of the north-east frontier", *Antichthon* 10, 1976, 63-78, esp. 75 (after Giorgi Tsereteli).

¹⁰ So, inconclusively, D. G. Kapanadze, "Aureusy Armazskovo nekropol'ya", *Sovietskaya Arkheologiya* (1957) fasc. 3, 159-75, esp. 166.

an heirloom perhaps. However, the shape and decoration of the dish suggest that it was made well after the reign of Trajan. Strong compares it with very similar silver dishes of the mid-third century A.D. from other sites, while Machabeli, after a close examination of this dish and the other silver of ancient Iberia, also advances a date in the third century.¹¹ Given the date of its production, the dish cannot have been inscribed much earlier than about A.D. 250 and possibly considerably later. The inscription itself cannot safely be dated on letter forms, given the lack of comparable material from the region. However, it should be noted that the abbreviation of Flavius is marked with a horizontal wavy line (see illustration): on balance, such an abbreviation-mark would seem more at home in an inscription of the third century or later than in one of Trajanic date.

There seems no good reason to date Dades to the reign of Trajan and some reason not to do so. He is better located in the third or fourth century A.D.. At first sight, a date in the third century might seem more likely, for fourth-century burials in Iberia might be expected to contain less inventory (among other differences), apparently under the influence of Christianity. However, it must be acknowledged that this and other burials at Armaziskhevi are so distinct from the general run of burials in Iberia, not least by virtue of the wealth and status of their owners, that they may well defy the criteria usually employed to date burials there. Indeed, the excavators call attention to apparent peculiarities in the deposition of "Bersoumas" which have no parallel in other burials of Iberia.¹² Accordingly, it remains possible that the burial was deposited in the fourth century. In referring to himself as Flavius Dades, the king seems to be expressing his Roman citizenship and identity in a very local context: for what it is worth, Roman identity was certainly an issue in Iberia in both the third and the fourth centuries.¹³

King Dades' nomen also invites a question: whence Flavius? The Flavian emperors might well be its ultimate source: it seems to be that assumption that has promoted a Trajanic date for him, although the nomen does not require as much in any way. It is quite possible that a forbear of Dades in the Iberian elite had gained citizenship from Vespasian, Titus or Domitian. The "later Flavians", the family of Constantine, would be an alternative possibility, if a fourth century date is allowed for the deposition of the burial.

In any event, if it can be assumed that Dades was indeed king of Iberia, then some break must be supposed in the dynasty after the King Mithridates who ruled in A.D. 75, who should have inherited a Julian nomen from his grandfather or, failing that, from his father. After Augustus, kings without Roman citizenship were a notable rarity, though even kings with citizenship seldom expressed their Roman identity. The kings of Iberia had been so

¹¹ D.E.Strong, *Greek and Roman silver plate* (London, 1966) 173; K.Machabeli, *Dzveli sakartvelos vertskhli* (Tbilisi, 1983) 103 (in Georgian, Russian and French).

¹² On usual burial-practices in Iberia, see Apakidze, *Goroda...* (n. 7), 119-77.

¹³ See W.Winter, *Die sasanidisch-römischen Friedensverträge des 3. Jhdt.n.Chr.* (Frankfurt, 1988) esp. 105, 186-90.

much a part of Roman foreign relations in the east, from Pompey onwards, that they can hardly have been overlooked.¹⁴ Alternatively, if there was no break in the ruling dynasty of Iberia, then King Flavius Dades had his kingdom elsewhere.

Exeter University

David Braund

¹⁴ On Roman citizenship among kings, see D.Braund, *Rome and the friendly king* (London, 1984) 39-53.