

On Kings and Nomads:

New Documents in Ancient Bactrian Reveal Afghanistan's Past

Research > Afghanistan

Until very recently, Bactrian, the ancient language of northern Afghanistan, had been one of the least known of the Middle-Iranian languages. During the first half of the 20th century, the Bactrian language was known only from legends on coins and seals, which naturally contain very limited data, while the later cursive script — a local development of the Greek alphabet — remained undeciphered for lack of comparative material.

many numerals, whose correct reading is important for the interpretation of the dates in many documents.

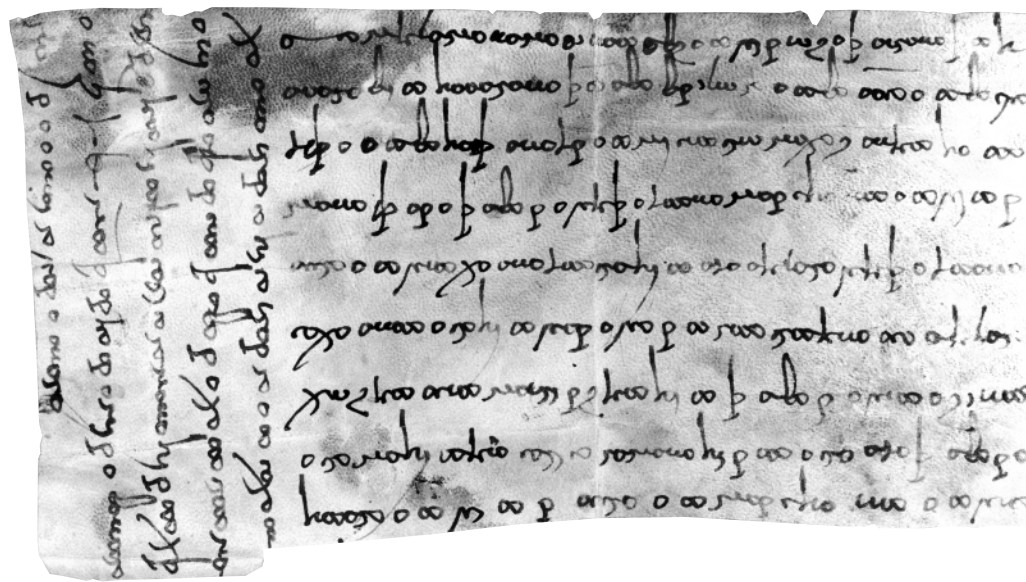
Sealed Legal Contracts

Most of the dated documents are legal contracts dealing with sales, leases, gifts, the manumission of a slave, or the settlement of disputes. There is even a marriage contract, which happens to be the earliest dated document. Many such documents exist in two copies written on the same parchment. One copy is left open to be read, while the other is tightly rolled, tied with string, and authenticated with up to six clay sealings impressed with the seals or fingernail impressions of the contracting parties and witnesses. Their names are sometimes written on the reverse of the document beside the holes for the seal-strings. Probably this format was employed so that the sealed copy could be opened in the presence of a judge in case of a dispute.

The dates attested in these documents range between the year 110 and 549 of an unspecified era. From Bactrian inscriptions found at Tochi, in Pakistan, it has been deduced that this era probably began in AD 233. This would put the dated Bactrian documents between AD 342 and 781, and thus from the Kushano-Sasanian period through the years of Kidarite, Hephthalite, and Turkish rule, well into Islamic times, when Arabic finally took over the role of Bactrian as the administrative language of the area.

Sasanian Presence

One of the earliest dated documents is a deed of a gift dated in the year 157 (= AD 389) written on cloth, rather than on the more usual leather. It exists in two copies: one sealed, the other left open to be read. The two copies give different names to the place where the document was written. The closed copy refers to it as "the city of Rob" (modern Rui), apparently the administrative cen-



Bactrian letter dated in the year 239 (= AD 471?) and referring to a Shahanshah of Iran, probably Peroz (ruled 459-484).

Courtesy of Dr D.N. Khalili

By Nicholas Sims-Williams

Inscriptions and Manuscripts

This state of affairs began to change in 1957, when French archaeologists discovered the first substantial Bactrian inscription at Surkh Kotal near Baghlan. The text was published by André Marcicq, who identified some important words and phrases, including the name of the Kushana Emperor, Kanishka. W.B. Henning established that the inscription deals with the construction of a well, which was dug in the year thirty-one of the era of Kanishka, that is, early in the reign of his successor Huvishka (early second century AD). For forty years after its discovery, the Surkh Kotal inscription remained the most important source for the study of Bactrian. More inscriptions were found, but none sufficiently extensive or legible to contribute significantly to our knowledge of the Bactrian language.

During the last ten years, however, the corpus of Bactrian texts has

increased dramatically. At Rabatak (in the province of Baghlan) a stone inscription was discovered in 1993 and published in 1995-1996 by Joe Cribb and myself. The inscription, in Bactrian language and Greek script, is of great historical value, as it mentions the predecessors of Kanishka and describes some of the events of his first regnal year.

Even more important for our knowledge of the Bactrian language are over a hundred documents in Bactrian cursive script that appeared in the bazaar of Peshawar and on the international art market within the last ten years. Many of these are now in the collection of Dr Nasser David Khalili in London. These documents were written on leather, cloth, and even on wooden sticks. They cover the whole period between Sasanian rule in the fourth century AD and the Arab supremacy in the eighth century. It seems that many of the texts derive from the Khulm Valley in the northern Hindukush, from places which were within the jurisdic-

tion of a ruler who is referred to in the Bactrian documents as "the ruler of Rob".

Letters and Legalities

The Bactrian documents consist of legal documents, economic documents, Buddhist texts, and letters, many of which are still sealed and therefore perfectly preserved. However, most letters are fairly short and difficult to understand, since they often allude to previous correspondence and events of which we have no knowledge. Two of the new documents are Buddhist texts, perhaps associated with the Pure Land school of Buddhism. A larger group consists of economic documents. These include texts written on wooden sticks (with up to three short lines of writing), which seem to be a kind of receipt or tally for deliveries of foodstuffs, such as wheat and onions. Other economic documents consist of lists of personal names, commodities, and amounts, presumably recorded for accounting purposes. Such documents contain

Bactria
from 6th century BC to 8th century AD

Achaemenids
from 6th century BC

Bactrian Greeks
from 3rd century BC

Yüeh-chih and Kushanas
from 2nd century BC

Inscriptions from Rabatak and Surkh Kotal
2nd century AD

Sasanians and Kushano-Sasanians
AD 233 = year 1 (local era)

First dated legal documents in Bactrian
AD 342 = year 110

Chionite and Kidarite 'Huns'
from ca. AD 375

Document on a gift at the city of Rob
AD 389 = year 157

Hephthalites
ca. AD 460

Document mentions the Sasanian emperor
AD 471 = year 239

Documents on taxes paid to Hephthalites
AD 492-527 = years 260-295

Sasanians and Turks
from AD 560

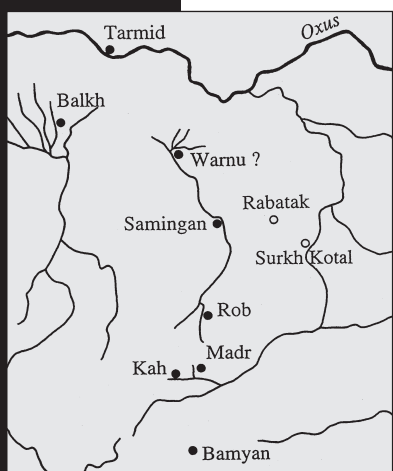
Document mentions Turkish titles
AD 639 = year 407

Document mentions a 'Turkish princess'
AD 710 = year 478

Arabs
from early 8th century AD

Last dated document in Bactrian
AD 781 = year 549

A sketch map of northern Afghanistan showing the principal places mentioned in the Bactrian documents.



Courtesy of Dr D.N. Khalili

Ancient History of Bactria

Due to a lack of native sources, our knowledge of the ancient history of Bactria is sketchy. The region is first referred to in the *Avesta*, the Zoroastrian sacred book, and in the sixth-century inscription of Darius at Bisitun, where Bactria is mentioned as a province of the **Achaemenid Empire**. In the fourth century the region was overwhelmed by the armies of **Alexander the Great** and, under his successors, **Greek** culture became strongly rooted in Bactria. Great cities were built in Greek style, with temples, theatres, and gymnasia, and the Greek language, written in the Greek script, became the exclusive language of culture and administration.

In the second century BC, Bactria was overrun from the north by nomadic peoples, including those known to the Chinese historians as the **Yüeh-chih** and to the Greeks as the Tokharoi. Amongst these new rulers, the tribe or family of the **Kushanas** achieved supremacy and, by the end of the first century AD, their empire extended far beyond Bactria and across much of northern India and Central Asia.

The rule of the Kushanas was roughly contemporary with that of the Parthian Arsacids in Iran. In about AD 224, the **Parthians** were ousted from Iran by the Sasanians and, within a few years, the **Sasanians** had also conquered Bactria, which they ruled thereafter, either directly or through a viceroy known as the **Kushan-shah** ("King of the Kushans"). These rulers continued to issue coins with Bactrian inscriptions. In place of the angular Greek letters of the Kushana coins, however, the Kushano-Sasanian coins use a cursive form of the script.

In the middle of the fourth century, Bactria was again invaded from the North by nomads referred to as "**Chionites**", apparently a variant form of the name "Huns". Under their chief, Grumbates, they soon reached an understanding with the Sasanians and fought on the Persian side against the Romans at the siege of Amida in AD 360.

Thereafter, control of Bactria passed to a people known as the **Kidarites**, or "Kidarite Huns" (possibly another name for the Chionites), until the Hephthalites entered Bactria from the north in the fifth century and drove the Kidarites south of the Hindukush. The Hephthalites often achieved great success in their wars against the Persians; however, just after the middle of the sixth century they too were swept aside by an alliance between the **Sasanians** and the **Turks**, who had recently established their empire in the lands beyond the Oxus. The overlordship of the former Hephthalite territories was divided between Sasanians and Turks, though Hephthalites and other local rulers may have retained control here and there.

One further episode in the turbulent history of Bactria is the coming of Islam and the **Arabs**. The Arab conquest of Iran was completed in AD.651. The conquest of Bactria took much longer, although the city of Balkh was first raided by the Arabs as early as AD 653. By the time that Balkh succeeded Marv as the capital of the Arab province of Khurasan (in AD 736), the whole area was probably largely subdued. - NSW <

> Timeline

tre of the region, whose ruler is known as the 'khar of Rob'. The open copy refers to "the city of Kandban". This seems to be an earlier name for the same town, which is found only in the earliest documents.

A letter dated in the year 239 refers explicitly to the Sasanian emperor, the Shahan-shah. The writer identifies himself as "Meyam, the steward (and) ruler of the houses of the illustrious, successful Peroz Shahanshah". If the era indeed began in AD 233, the year 239 should correspond to AD 471, during the reign of the Sasanian ruler Peroz. The apparent reference to his name, therefore, seems to confirm the chronological framework which had been deduced from the inscriptions of Tochi. However, "peroz" may also have been intended as a mere epithet meaning "victorious". Similar formulae in later documents suggest that this may, in fact, be the correct interpretation.

Hephthalite Arrivals

A later group of documents reveals the presence of the Hephthalites as a new political power. Three documents, dated in the years 260 (= AD 492) to 295 (= AD 527) refer to a property tax payable to the Hephthalites or to "the Hephthalite lords". The vendors are referred to as servants of the king ("shah") and the purchasers as servants of a lord with the Persian name "Shabur Shaburan". The persistence of a Persian aristocracy suggests that there was no abrupt break whereby the rule of the Hephthalites succeeded and replaced that of the Sasanians. On the contrary, it is likely that the local dynasty of the "khars of Rob", at whose court this contract was drawn up, continued to wield power at a local level, acknowledging the long-established overlordship of the Sasanians, but also paying tribute to the Hephthalites, who had more recently arrived in the region. Unfortunately, the references to the Hephthalites do not indicate even approximately the date of their arrival in the northern Hindukush. They provide only a *terminus post quem*: by the year 260 (= AD 492) at the latest, the Hephthalites had arrived and established themselves in sufficient strength to be able to exact the payment of taxes or tribute from the local population.

The Turks as Overlords

The next new arrivals, the Turks, are first attested in the year 407 (= AD 639). The *khar* of Rob now has Turkish instead of Hephthalite titles, but his name and patronymic in the texts show that he is no Turk. In the year 478 (= AD 710), a Turkish ruler is named in a deed recording a donation by "Bag-aziyas, the great Turkish princess ...". Although she is described as a princess of the Turkish tribe of the Khalach, her name is evidently Bactrian. She belongs to the Bredagan family, which is attested as far back as the year 247 (= AD 479) as the ruling family of the otherwise unknown city of Lan. Probably Bag-aziyas was the daughter of a local ruler, who had been given in marriage to a Turkish *qaqhan*.

Increasing Arab Domination

The Arabs are named in two of the latest texts. The first of these is a purchase contract dated in the year 507 (AD 739). While earlier texts had expressed prices in gold *dinars* or in Persian silver *dirhams*, here they are given in "Arab silver *dirhams*", which

are specifically described as locally current. A further stage in Arab economic domination is revealed in a document from the year 525 (= AD 757), which refers to the payment of taxes to the Arabs. In a document of two years later, a son of the local landowner bears the name "Khamir", probably a local form of the Arabic title *amir*. Soon afterwards, Arabic would replace Bactrian as the language of the local administration, as is clear from a group of Arabic tax records which appear to have come to light together with the Bactrian documents.

The documents described above have already made it possible to decipher Bactrian script, revealing a previously unknown tongue which, in its heyday, was one of the world's most important languages. In this brief survey, I have

only been able to hint at the contents and importance of an immense new body of material. The new documents cover a period of more than four centuries, including some periods for which we have hardly any authentic sources. The publication of these texts will soon be completed with the appearance of the second volume of my *Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan*, which will include the letters and Buddhist texts. Then the whole of the material will be available to students of many disciplines, to be compared with Chinese and Arabic sources and confronted with archaeological and ethnographic data. I confidently expect that the result will be to cast new light on many aspects of the history and culture of ancient Bactria and modern Afghanistan. <

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Professor Nicholas Sims-Williams of the SOAS in London is an expert on Sogdian and Bactrian languages. Together with Joe Cribb of the British Museum, he deciphered and interpreted the newly discovered Rabatak inscription in northern Afghanistan.

E-mail: ns5@soas.ac.uk

More info >

See also <http://www.gengo.l.u-tokyo.ac.jp/~hkum/bactrian.html> (in English and Japanese).

The Destruction of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage

Afghanistan's civil war, raging between rival groups fighting for political power, gave birth to the systematic looting of archaeological sites, such as Ai Khanum, Begram, and Hadda. Their willful destruction, coupled with illicit diggings and vandalism in pursuit of material gain, obliterated the ancient heritage of sculptures and paintings. On 22 March 2001, three weeks after decreeing that all the statues of Afghanistan should be destroyed, the Taliban briefly opened the National Museum to journalists. They revealed a gloomy, near-empty labyrinth of rooms missing virtually all of its treasures.

Forum > Afghanistan

By Osmund Bopearachchi

Not a single coin is now left in the cabinets where once over 30,000 coins were stored; among them were coins from hoards recovered at Mir Zakah, Chaman-i-Hazuri (Kabul), Qunduz, and from the excavations at Ai Khanum and Begram. Most of the artefacts stolen from the Kabul Museum surfaced a few days later in the Peshawar bazaar and, from there, found their way to private collections. Among them are the invaluable ivory plaques excavated at Begram by French archaeologists in 1937.

Hoards of Ancient Coins

The Mir Zakah II hoard was the largest ancient coin deposit ever attested in the history of mankind. It was named after Mir Zakah, the village where it was found in 1992, 53 km north-east of the city of Gardez. The hoard must have consisted of approximately 550,000 gold, silver, and bronze coins. Of these, I managed rapidly to examine six sacks full of coins, each weighing at least fifty kilos, in February 1994 in the Peshawar bazaar. We still do not know under what circumstances the Mir Zakah deposit was found. According to witnesses who visited the findspot, the Mir Zakah II hoard

The ancient site of Ai Khanum, before the illicit diggings.

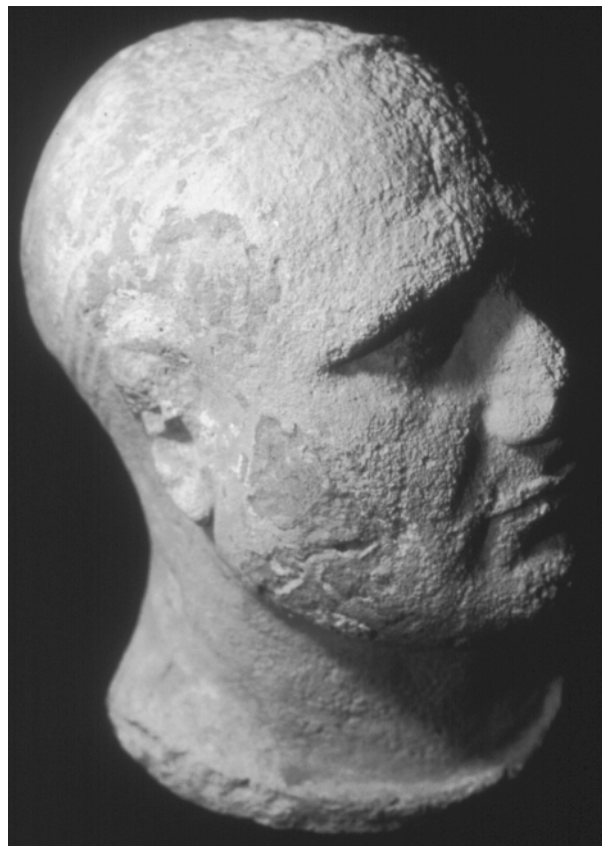


Professor Paul Bernard, 1978.



Hin-Tchi-Ono, May 1993.

The ancient site of Ai Khanum, after the illicit diggings.



Faience head of a Graeco-Bactrian king from Ai Khanum.



Kabul Museum after its destruction

also contained more than 300 kilograms of silver and gold objects. Of course, such second-hand information should be handled with care, as informers tend either to exaggerate or to romanticize the event.

Among the artefacts were gold and silver vessels: for example, a gold censer in the shape of a high beaker on a round base from which thin trails imitating wisps of incense twist upwards. Another piece among them was a squat silver bowl with an out-turned rim, with, on the inside of the base, the impressed image of a sea-horse or Hippocampus, its curled tail terminating in a crescent-shaped curve.

Among the sculptures from the deposit, many depict Zoroastrian priests, figurines, gold plaques, rings, and intaglios from the Hellenistic period. A repoussé intaglio depicts a galloping *biga*; two repoussés show the Greek god Hermes wearing a conical helmet; two carnelian intaglios depict a standing helmeted Athena holding a long spear and a shield in typical Greek style. The jewelry in the hoard, in particular pendants, earrings, and bracelets, amounted to several kilograms in weight!

The numerous coins in the Mir Zakah II hoard were mainly early Indian bent-bar and punch-marked coins from Greek, Graeco-Bactrian, Indo-Greek, Indo-Scythian, Indo-Parthian, and Kushana origins. Coins of the Indo-Scythian King, Azes II, and posthumous imitations of coins of Hermaeus comprise the largest portion. The hoard also brought to light an unprecedented number of new varieties, such as a *tetradrachma* of Attic weight standard struck for King Menander I with unknown type and legend arrangement.

The most sensational numismatic discovery was a coin of Nasten, a hitherto unknown Iranian ruler in India. On the obverse, within a bead-and-reel border, the coin carries a bust of the diademed king to right wearing a helmet with a long, flowing crest and a mantle. The reverse shows the king on a prancing horse riding to the right. He wears a helmet with a long, flowing crest. The Greek legend reads *Nastenes / Xatrannou*, "Nasten, son of Xatran". Judging by his name, Nasten was presumably not a Greek, but an Iranian, probably a Bactrian Iranian.

The reconstruction of the history of the Greeks and their nomadic successors in Bactria and India depends mainly on the evidence offered by numismatic finds such as these.

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