

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.

Bactria from Records in Bactrian local Bactrian era Achaemenids
6th century B.C.

Bactrian Greeks
4th century B.C.

Yüeh-chih/Kushanas
2nd century B.C.

Inscriptions from Rabatak and Surkh Kotal Sasanians and Kushano-Sasanians
233 A.D.? year 1

First dated legal document in Bactrian
A.D. 342 year 110

Chionite and Kidarite 'Huns'
ca. 375 A.D.

Document on a gift at the city of Rob
A.D. 389 year 157

Hephthalites
ca. 460 A.D.

Document mentions the Sasanian emperor
A.D. 471 year 239

Documents on taxes paid to Hephthalites
A.D. 492-527 years 260-295

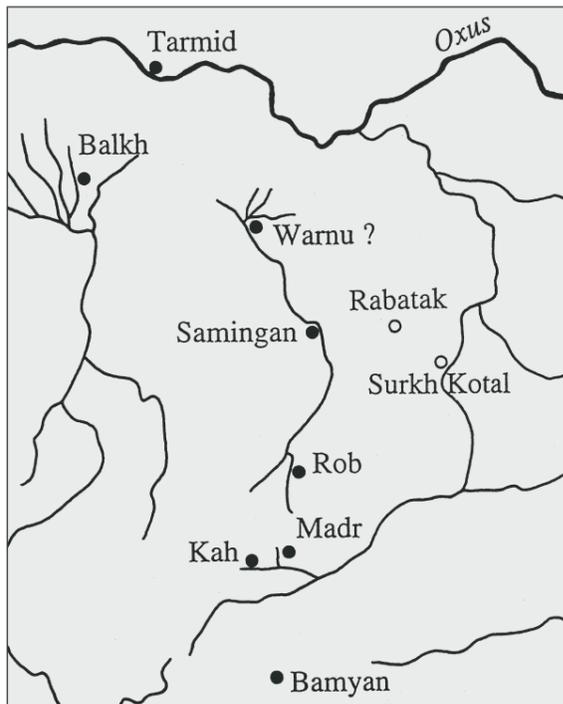
Sasanians and Turks
ca. 560 A.D.

Document mentions Turkish titles
A.D. 639 year 407

Document mentions a 'Turkish princess'
A.D. 710 year 478

Arabs
Early 8th century A.D.

Last dated document in Bactrian
A.D. 781 year 549



A sketch map of Northern Afghanistan showing the principle places mentioned in the Bactrian documents.

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 Maricq, 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 A.D.). 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 Bahglan) 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 A.D. and the Arab supremacy in the eighth century. It seems that many of the texts derive from the Khulm Valley in the northern Hindu Kush, from places which were within the jurisdiction 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 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 A.D. 233. This would put the dated Bactrian documents between A.D. 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 (= A.D. 389) written on cloth, rather

Ancient History of Bactria

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

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 gymnasias, and the Greek language, written in the Greek script, became the exclusive language of culture and administration.

In the second century B.C., 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 A.D., 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 A.D. 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.

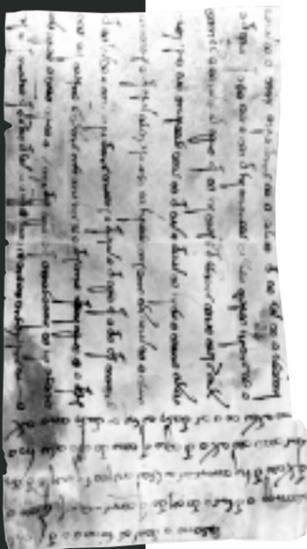
In the middle of the fourth century, Bactria was again invaded from the North by nomads referred to as "**Chionites**", apparently a variant form of the name "Huns". Under their chief, Grumbates, they soon reached an understanding with the Sasanians and fought on the Persian side against the Romans at the siege of Amida in A.D. 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 Hindu Kush. 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 A.D. 651. The conquest of Bactria took much longer, although the city of Balkh was first raided by the Arabs as early as A.D. 653. By the time that Balkh succeeded Marv as the capital of the Arab province of Khurasan (in A.D. 736), the whole area was probably largely subdued. - **NSW** <

> Timeline

Courtesy of Ellen Raven



Courtesy of Dr. N. Khalili