

New Documents in Ancient Bactrian Reveal Afghanistan’s Past

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.

**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 seals impressed with the seals or fingernail impositions of the contracting parties and witnesses. Their names are sometimes written on the reverse of the document beside the holes for the seal-string. 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 the 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 235. This would put the dated Bactrian documents between AD 342 and 781, and thus during the 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.

**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 Bishtrum, 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, the 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 Yuezhi and to the Greeks as the Tukhans. Amongst these new rulers, the tribe or family of the Kushanach 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 Kushan men was roughly contemporary with that of the Parthian Arsacids in Iran. In about AD 224, the Parthians were ousted from Iran by the Sassanids and, within a few years, the Sassanids had also conquered Bactria, which they ruled thereafter, either directly or through a vice-regent 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 Kushan-shah coins use a cursive form of the script.

Thereafter, control of Bactria passed to a people known as the Kirdarites, or “Kirdarite Huns” (possibly another name for the Chionites), under their chief, Gumbates, who often ruled as a viceroy. Between 50 and 500, the Chinese historian Fan Ye mentions that at one time, Bactria and its territories were divided between Sasanian 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 635. The city of Balkh succeeded Merv as the capital of the Arab province of Khurasan (AD 730), the whole area was probably largely subdued.

**New Documents in Ancient Bactrian**

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 on Surkh Kotal near Baghlan. The text was published by André Marcq, 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 the National Museum of Islamic Art 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 Khaliq Vali family at Balkh, though a few derive from Rob, 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.
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 a Persian name “Shahur Shahrour”. 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 “khan of Roh”, 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, as far as is known, 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 had 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 629). The khan of Roh 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 560), a Turkish ruler is named recording a donation by “Bag-aziyas, the great Turkish princess…” Although she is described as a princess of the Turkish tribe of the Khalkhay, her name is evidently Bactrian. She belongs to the Bredagian family, which is attested as far back as the year 247 (= AD 429) 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 vassal.

Increasing Arab Domination
The Arabs are named in two of the latest texts. The first of these is a copper contract dated in the year 507 (AD 791). While earlier treaties had expressed prices in gold dinars or in Persian silver dirhams, here they are given in “Arab silver dinars”, which are specifically described as locally current. A further stage in Arab economic domination is revealed in a document from the year 545 (= AD 737), 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, Arabics 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 Bactri- an 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 stu- dents of many disciplines, to be com- pared 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.

References
- ———. “From the Kushan-shah to the Arabs: New Bactrian Documents Dated in the Era of the Tochi Inscriptions” in Michael Alram and Deborah J. Kimburg

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.

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, ±3 km north-east of the city of Gardez. The hoard must have consist- ed 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 and, from there, their way to private collections. Among them are the invaluable ivory plaques excavated at Begram by French archaeologists in 1937.

The reconstruction of the history of the Greeks and their influence on many aspects of the history and culture of ancient Bactria and modern Afghanistan.

By Osmund Bopearachchi

N ot 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, Chamani-Hazumi (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, their way to private collections. Among them are the invaluable ivory plaques excavated at Begram by French archaeologists in 1937.

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

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Bactrian 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 informants tend either to exaggerate or to romanticize the event.

Among the artefacts were gold and silver vessels: for exam- ple, 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 Hellinistic period. A repousse intaglio depicts a galloping horse, two repousse show the Greek god Hermes wearing a conical helmet; two carnelian intaglios depict a standing beardless 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 from 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 Hermias answers the largest proportion. The hoard also brought to light an unprecedented number of new varieties, such as a tetradrach- ma of Artic weight standard struck for King Menander I with type and legend arrangement.

The most sensational numismatic discovery was a coin of Nasen, a hitherto unknown Iranian ruler in India. On the obverse, within a beak-and-red border, the coin carries a bust of the diademmed 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 Nasenw / Nāṣanwa, “Nasen, son of Natran”; his inscription, which in any case was probably an Iranian, proba- bly 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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