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**RECENT DISCOVERIES IN THE BACTRIAN LANGUAGE AND  
THEIR HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE**

by

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### SPACH LIBRARY SERIES

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Professor Sims-Williams is one of the world's leading experts on Bactrian and Soghdian texts who has published widely in many internationally accredited publications

He has served on the Councils of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum*, *Societas Iranologica Europaea*, The Philological Society, The Society for South Asian Studies and The Ancient India and Iran Trust.

He is the editor of *Beiträge zur Iranistik* and an Associate Editor of *Encyclopaedia Iranica*.

Prof. Sims-Williams currently holds a major research grant for his work on a Dictionary of Manichaean Texts and a Major Research Fellowship from the Leverhulme Trust. In 1997 he was joint winner of the Hirayama prize for Silk Road Studies.

Amongst his many contributions to Bactrian Studies, Prof. Sims-Williams was responsible for the translation of the Rabatak inscription, which resulted in the rewriting of early Kushan dynastic history. He has also recently published a translation of the late Bactrian inscription from Tang-i Safedak, Yakaolang district of Bamiyan Province, Afghanistan.

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## **RECENT DISCOVERIES IN THE BACTRIAN LANGUAGE AND THEIR HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE**

Today I shall be talking about documents and inscriptions in Bactrian, the language of the ancient land of Bactria in northern Afghanistan, with its capital at Bactra, modern Balkh.

Bactrian is the only language of the Indo-Iranian family which is normally written in Greek letters—a legacy of the conquest of Afghanistan by Alexander the Great in the 4<sup>th</sup> cent. B.C. From this period onwards the Greek language was for a long time the exclusive language of culture and administration in Bactria. When Bactria was overrun by nomadic peoples from the north, its new rulers, the Kushans, at first continued the use of the Greek language for administrative purposes, but soon they came to use the Greek script to write the local language, Bactrian. A crucial moment in the history of this language was the decision of Kanishka, the greatest of the Kushan kings, to adopt Bactrian as the language of his coinage. After the first issues of Kanishka, Greek disappears from the coinage once and for all, to be replaced by Bactrian.

During the first centuries of the Christian era, Bactrian was one of the world's most important languages. As the language of the Kushan kings, Bactrian must have been widely known throughout a great empire, in Afghanistan, Northern India and part of Central Asia. Even after the collapse of the Kushan empire, Bactrian continued in use for at least six centuries, as is shown by the ninth-century inscriptions from the Tochi valley in Pakistan and the remnants of Buddhist and Manichean manuscripts found as far away as the Turfan oasis in western China. The career of Bactrian as a language of culture thus lasted for close to a thousand years.

Until forty years ago virtually nothing was known of the Bactrian language except for the legends on the coins of the Kushans and their successors. The Kushan coins are inscribed in Greek letters of an angular type, apparently imitating a style of writing used for monumental inscriptions. These coin-legends are not particularly difficult to read, but their content is limited to the names and titles of kings and deities. The coins of the later rulers of Bactria—Kushano-Sasanians, Kidarites, Hephthalites, Turks, and so on—are written in a cursive script, imitating manuscript styles, which has proved much more difficult to decipher. Some fragments of manuscripts in a similar cursive script have also been known since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but they were too few and too incomplete to offer any realistic prospect of interpretation.

This prospect was transformed in 1957 by the discovery at Surkh Kotal near Baghlan of the first substantial Bactrian inscription [fig. 1]. The text, written in the monumental script already known from the Kushan coins, could be read without much difficulty; its interpretation was much more problematic, since the names and titles known from the

coins provided only a minimal vocabulary and hardly a hint of the grammatical structure of the language.

Nevertheless, W. B. Henning recognized the essential points immediately: the text refers to the foundation of a sanctuary by the emperor Kanishka, its abandonment as a result of problems with the water-supply, and its re-establishment by a high official named Nukunzuk in the year 31 of the era of Kanishka, that is, early in the reign of Huvishka.

Several further Bactrian inscriptions have been discovered since that of Surkh Kotal, but most of them are too poorly preserved to add significantly to our knowledge of the language. However, in 1993 a new inscription of fundamental importance was discovered by chance at a site named Rabatak, a few miles to the north-west of Surkh Kotal, on the road from Pul-i Khumri to Aybak [fig. 2].

The inscription of Rabatak describes events of the first year of Kanishka. The opening lines refer to the king as “the great salvation, the righteous, just autocrat, worthy of worship, who has obtained the kingship from (the goddess) Nana and from all the gods, who has inaugurated the year one as the gods pleased”. Then comes the important statement: “He issued an edict in Greek and then he put it into the Aryan language”. In principle, any language of the Indo-Iranian family could be called “Aryan”; but when Kanishka refers to “the Aryan language” he surely means Bactrian. It is difficult not to associate Kanishka’s emphasis here on the use of the “Aryan language” with the replacement of Greek by Bactrian on his coinage. The numismatic evidence shows that this must have taken place very early in Kanishka’s reign, quite possibly in his very first year.

The major part of the Rabatak inscription concerns the foundation of a temple, perhaps at Rabatak itself, which seems to have been an extensive site. The list of the deities who are to be worshipped in the temple is very intriguing. On the one hand it includes two Zoroastrian deities who are never portrayed on the Kushan coinage: Narseh and Srosh. On the other hand, it omits many names which are well attested on these same coins, such as Ardukhsh, the goddess of plenty, and Ma, the moon. Above the list of Iranian divinities some words have been added in smaller letters, which seem to identify one or another of them with the Indian god known as Mahasena or Visakha.

Apparently the temple was intended to contain statues of kings as well as gods. Kanishka lists four kings: Kujula Kadphises his great-grandfather, Vima Taktu his grandfather, Vima Kadphises his father, and himself, Kanishka. This list is extremely informative. In the first place, it bears witness to the existence of two kings named Vima, rather than one. Several inscriptions previously attributed to Vima Kadphises can now be ascribed to his father Vima Taktu.

One of the most important of these is the Bactrian inscription of Dasht-e Nawur, which may date from the year 94 C.E. In all probability the coins of the anonymous king Soter Megas “The Great Saviour”, which come between Kujula and Vima Kadphises in the numismatic sequence, should also be attributed to this newly-discovered “Vima the First”. Moreover, the indication that Kujula Kadphises was the great-grandfather of Kanishka evidently has a bearing on the oft-debated issue of the date of Kanishka. The fact that Kanishka belongs to the third generation after Kujula clearly imposes certain limits on the manner in which the chronology of the Kushans can be reconstructed. Although I would not go so far as to say that the new facts are only compatible with a single chronological

system, the genealogy of Kanishka attested in the Rabatak inscription fits very well with the solution recently proposed by Harry Falk, who has found an Indian astronomical text which seems to identify the first year of Kanishka as the year 127 C.E.

Less than a century later, in about 224, the Sasanians came to power in Iran, and within a few years they had also conquered Bactria. Subsequently Bactria was invaded several times by nomads from the north. At different times the invaders are referred to under various names—Chionites, Kidarite Huns, Hephthalites—though it is not entirely clear whether all these names refer to the same or to different peoples. The next arrivals were the Turks, who in the middle of the sixth century allied themselves with the Sasanians to defeat the Hephthalites. Then, finally, all the local dynasties were swept aside by the coming of Islam and the Arabs.

The history of this period, from the Sasanians to the Arabs, is illustrated by a second discovery. In December 1991, I was shown photographs of a newly discovered Bactrian document on leather. The document was inscribed on both sides with 28 lines in cursive Bactrian script, making it by far the most substantial example of cursive Bactrian so far known [fig. 3]. The document was clearly a letter, beginning with conventional phrases of address and greeting almost identical to those used in Sogdian letters: “To your lordship 1,000 and 10,000 times greeting and homage from so-and-so your servant. Having heard that your lordship is healthy I am happy; but I would be still happier if I myself might see your lordship in good health and pay homage...” To judge by personal names such as Ohrmuzd and Khosrow, the document belonged to the Sasanian period. Another striking name was Purlang-zin, evidently meaning “the man with the panther’s skin,” a clear reference to the zin-i palang of Rostam, one of the heroes of the Shah Nama.

This first document proved to be just the tip of the iceberg. During the following ten years the corpus of Bactrian documents has grown to about 150, most of which appeared on the international art market via the bazaar of Peshawar, and thus found their way into private collections in London and elsewhere. These documents have passed through the hands of many different dealers and collectors. Unfortunately, we have no reliable record of their provenance, but internal evidence, especially the recurrence of the same names in several documents, suggests that most of them ultimately derive from a single source.

Many of the documents are letters, some of them still sealed and therefore perfectly preserved. Fig. 4 shows a letter sealed with a clay *bulla*, with a few words of address written on the outside. Fig. 5 shows the same letter after opening, from which you can see the standard layout of the text, with a wide left-hand margin, and the way the seal is attached to a strip of leather cut along the bottom edge of the letter without being completely detached from it.

One of the letters mentions a Kushan-shah. The Kushan-shah, or ‘king of the Kushans’, was a kind of viceroy, often a royal prince, through whom the Sasanians ruled this distant outpost of their empire. This particular Kushan-shah, who is named Warahran or Bahram, is probably to be identified as one of the last of the Kushan-shahs known from the Kushano-Sasanian coins. Other persons mentioned in the letter include a Persian princess, Dukht-anosh, and her eunuch, who bears a Bactrian name meaning “slave of the Creator”. Apart from the high status of the persons involved, the content of this letter is fairly typical, dealing as it does with a quite mundane dispute about a flock of sheep and a quantity of grain.

The letter illustrated in fig. 6 is important for two reasons. Firstly, it is written by a representative of the Shahan-shah, the Sasanian emperor himself, and must therefore belong to one of the periods when Bactria was under Sasanian control. Secondly, it is dated, though the era is not specified.

It seems very likely that the era used here is the same as that of the Bactrian inscriptions of the Tochi valley in Pakistan. These inscriptions are written in Arabic, Sanskrit, and Bactrian, and contain dates expressed in three different eras. The vital evidence for determining the starting-point of the Bactrian era is provided by two bilingual inscriptions, the first being in Arabic and Sanskrit. The Arabic text is naturally dated by means of the Hijri calendar. This unambiguous Hijri date makes it possible to interpret the date of the Sanskrit version, which is expressed in an abbreviated form omitting the thousands and hundreds. The second bilingual is in Sanskrit and Bactrian. Again the Sanskrit date is abbreviated; but, if one assumes that this inscription belongs to the same century as the Arabic-Sanskrit bilingual, the missing figures can be reconstructed, giving a date which can be computed as 863 C.E. The Bactrian version is dated with Greek numerals. Helmut Humbach, the first editor of the Bactrian texts, read these numerals as 632. On the basis of newly-discovered materials I would interpret the last digit as 1 rather than 2, but a difference of one year is of minor significance. In either case, the Bactrian date indicates the existence of an era beginning early in the Sasanian period, in 232 (according to Humbach) or 233 (according to me). I am inclined to follow Humbach in regarding this as a “Kushano-Sasanian” era, whose starting-point was probably the Sasanian conquest of the Kushan empire.

Let us return to the Bactrian letter, whose date can be read as 239. If the era began in 233, the year 239 will correspond to 471 C.E., during the rule of Peroz, who spent much of his reign fighting the Hephthalites in the east of his empire and who eventually perished in battle against them. Is it a coincidence that the word preceding the title Shahan-shah in the Bactrian letter is in fact Piroz? Unfortunately the Middle Persian word *peroz* is not only a personal name but also a common adjective meaning ‘victorious’, so that it is difficult to decide whether one should translate “the Shahan-shah Peroz” or merely “the victorious Shahan-shah”.

After the letters, the largest group of texts consists of legal contracts and similar documents: deeds of sale, leases, guarantees, receipts, and deeds of gift. One particularly interesting document—in fact the earliest of the dated documents—is a marriage contract, in which one woman engages herself to marry two brothers at the same time. The practice of polyandry, mentioned in slightly later Chinese sources and here confirmed by first-hand evidence, was apparently typical of the region.

Unlike the letters and Buddhist texts, legal documents such as these are always dated. So far I know of about thirty documents with dates ranging from 110 to 549, that is (if we assume that the Bactrian era began in 233 C.E.), from 342 to 781 C.E. This span of more than four centuries covers the Chionite, Kidarite, Hephthalite, and Turkish periods, and extends well into Islamic times. As we shall shortly see, the contents of the documents provide many details against which one can test this chronological framework.

For example, fig. 7 shows a contract for the sale of land dated in the year 295, which I interpret as the year 527 C.E., during the period of Hephthalite domination. This agrees well with the statement of the text that the “Hephthalite tax” due on the property has been



paid. The format of the document is typical, though this example is exceptionally well preserved. There are two complete copies of the text. One copy is left open to be read. The other is tightly rolled, tied with string, and sealed with five clay sealings. The first two sealings bear impressions of the fingernails of the vendors; the others are impressed with the seals of three witnesses. Presumably it was intended that the sealed copy should be opened in the presence of a judge in case of a dispute. On the reverse of the document [fig. 8], the names of the vendors and witnesses are written beside the holes for the seal-strings.

In addition to dates, many of these legal documents contain place-names, including the names of the places where they were written [fig. 9].

Several documents state that they were written in Samangan, Rob (modern Rui), Malr or Madr, or Kah (modern Kah-mard). All four places are apparently within the jurisdiction of a ruler who is referred to in many documents as “the ruler of Rob”. On the other hand, Tarmid (or Termez), to the north of the Oxus, and Bamiyan, which is separated from Kah and Madr by a considerable ridge of mountains, may well have been outside his kingdom. The ruler of Rob is no doubt to be identified with the Ru’b-khan, the lord of Ru’b and Siminjan, who helped Qutayba b. Muslim to defeat the Hephthalite rebel Nezak Tarkhan in the year 91 of the Hijra, as mentioned by the historian Tabari.

Another document is written in a place named Warnu. This is surely to be identified with Aornos, which Arrian, the Greek historian of Alexander the Great, mentions as one of the two chief cities of Bactria. According to many scholars, Arrianos/Aornos is to be located near Khulm or Tashkurgan, where the valley of the Khulm river, in which Rob and Samangan are situated, opens out into the plain. Since the documents which I have been describing almost certainly represent the royal archive of the king of Rob, the mere presence of this document in the archive would suggest that Warnu too formed part of his dominion.

The next document which I would like to describe is a contract for the sale of a slave, which begins: “It was the year 446, the month Ab, the day Wahman, when this sealed document, this purchase contract, was written here in the district of Samangan, at Marogan, the court of the ruler of Rob”. The year 446 should correspond to 678 C.E. By this time Turkish names and titles are common, as can be seen from the witness-list which follows: “Under the protection of the god Ram-set, the granter of favours, the granter of wishes, the wonderful, who is worshipped here at Marogan, at the court, under the protection of Zhun-lad son of Shabur, the successful, prosperous qaghan, the tapaghl•gh iltsbir, the ruler of Rob, and in the presence of Khusaru the tarkhan, and in the presence of Dev-raz, the brave chief justice of the rulers of Rob, and also in the presence of the other noblemen who were present there amongst them and who bear witness concerning this matter”. This document too was originally sealed with five seals, whose owners are named on the back: remarkably, the seals of the witnesses include that of the god Ram-set, who was presumably represented by his priest. In the same way, other documents include amongst the witnesses the god Wakhsh, the deified River Oxus.

The text continues: “Now, I, Yaskul, and I, Yezdgird, the sons of Kaw, inhabitants of Khost, who are now present here in the district of Samangan, and our brothers and sons, have sold to you, Fanz, and to you, Winamarg, and to you, Pusk, the sons of Bag-mareg, you whose estate is called Gabaliyan, and to your brothers, sons and descendants, a certain boy belonging to us as brothers, this same boy who is called Khalas, for three Persian

drachmas, since we are unable to keep him in plenty and famine. So now, may the boy mentioned above belong properly and well to you, Fanz, and to you, Winamarg, with your brothers, sons and descendants hereafter, from now to eternity”.

I hope that these quotations may give you a flavour of the legal terminology of these documents for which, incidentally, one can find many parallels both in documents written in other Central Asian languages such as Sogdian and Turkish, and in the 5<sup>th</sup> cent. B.C. Aramaic documents from Elephantine in Egypt.

Another interesting document is dated in the Bactrian year 478, that is, 710 C.E., in the month “Second New Year”. The document is a deed recording a gift of land and of a slave girl to the god Kamird and his ked or priest, apparently in return for the healing of a member of the donor’s family. Kamird means literally “head” or “chief”; it is perhaps the god’s title rather than his name. The word ked is almost certainly the source of the Chinese term *ji-duo*, older *kej-ta*, mentioned by the famous Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang as a name of the worshippers of Zhun, the god of Zabulistan, to the south of the Hindukush. This god was also known in the Kingdom of Rob, as we can see from the name of its ruler in the previous document: Zhun-lad, literally “given by Zhun”. In that case it is quite likely that Zhun is the god referred to by the title Kamird “the chief (god)”.

The donor in the present document, the queen of a ruler with the Turkish name Qutlugh Tapaghligh Bilgä Sävüg “fortunate, possessing service, wise, beloved”, is also referred to as “the princess of the Khalas”. Khalas, which was also the name of the slave-boy in the previous document, probably represents the Turkish tribal name Khalach, of which this would be one of the earliest occurrences.

One of the very latest Bactrian documents is a deed of sale dated in the year 525, that is 757 C.E. I just want to draw attention to a couple of passages in this contract. The first is the series of clauses which describe the rights of the new owners of the property: “to have and to hold it, to sell it, to give it away, to pawn it, to offer it for rent, to exchange it for another piece of land, to give it for a son’s wedding or a daughter’s dowry, to build a monastery or temple, to make a “cemetery” or “crematorium”. Here the Indian term for a Buddhist monastery, *vihara*, is contrasted with the Bactrian word for a “temple”, presumably referring to a non-Buddhist shrine. A similar contrast can be seen between the following pair of nouns, both of which may refer to places for disposal of the dead: *lakhmig* would correspond to the Avestan *daxma*-, Middle Persian *daxmag*, terms which usually refer to a structure used for the Zoroastrian rite of exposure, but sometimes also to a grave, while *lakhshatanig* probably derives from a root meaning “to burn” and refers to a non-Zoroastrian, perhaps Indian, rite of cremation. These terms, together with the numerous theophoric personal names found in the documents, give us a glimpse of the variety of religious belief and practice in this area before the coming of Islam.

While earlier contracts had expressed prices in gold dinars or in Persian silver, the latest texts refer to “Arab silver dirhams”. In addition, the present text refers, for the first and last time, to the payment of taxes to the Arabs. Soon afterwards, Arabic must have replaced Bactrian as the written language of the area; and indeed, a small number of Arabic documents have come to light, which appear to form a continuation of the same archive [fig. 10]. In fact, we can be sure that the Bactrian and Arabic documents are connected, since they mention some of the same families and individuals.

The last document which I want to talk about today is a Bactrian inscription which also belongs to the early Islamic period, but which is entirely Buddhist in content [fig. 11]. This inscription was discovered in 1996 at Tang-i Safedak, about 30 km west of Yakaolang. It consists of 13 lines of cursive Bactrian script inscribed on a single block of stone which was found in situ in the wall of a chamber about 3 meters square. As we shall see, the inscription shows that this square chamber was the base of a Buddhist stupa, and in fact a number of objects typical of stupa deposits were found inside the chamber: a book (now lost), a gold ring, coins, a glass bottle, and so on. Like the inscriptions of Surkh Kotal and Rabatak, the inscription of Tang-i Safedak is now safely preserved in the national museum here in Kabul, where I have been able to study it during the last few days, thanks to the kindness of the General Director, Mr Masoudi.

The inscription is dated in the month Sbol—literally “the jar”, like the modern month-name Dol—of the year 492, which corresponds to the year 724 C.E. In this year, it tells us, the Lord of Gazan, Alkhis son of Khuras, established this stupa (as) a (pious) foundation on the plain (of) Zamagan. It continues as follows: “(At that time) when there was a Turk (?) ruler and an Arab ruler, the meritorious gifts made by me were taken..., and afterwards I made this (stupa called) Zinalaka (as) a meritorious gift in the willing(?) belief which I had towards the teaching of the Buddha and in great faith... And whatever merit may arise hereby, now and in the future, may I, Alkhis, and my parents and wife and brothers (and) sons and (other) relatives too may each (and) every one (of us) attain (his) own desire.” The inscription ends with the phrase: “Homage to the buddhas.”

Although much of this text is quite conventional, it also contains several interesting pieces of information, such as the name of the place, Zamagan, and the names of the ruler, Alkhis, and his father Khuras. Alkhis calls himself “the lord of Gazan”. It is tempting to assume that this name refers to the city of Ghazni, though more historical research is needed to establish whether it is plausible to suppose that the area where the inscription and stupa were found would have been within the realm of Ghazni at this period. But above all, the Tang-i Safedak inscription is important as evidence for the persistence and strength of Buddhism, despite persecution, as late as the eighth century.

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**Further Reading**

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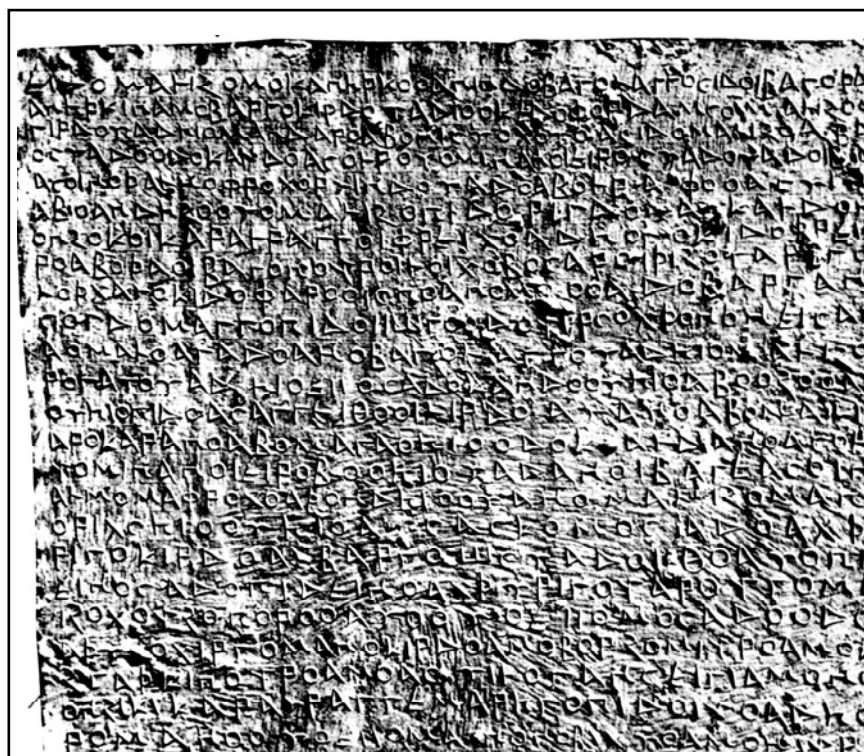


Figure 1: Bactrian inscription from Surkh Kotal.

تصویر ۱: کتیبه باختری از سرخ کوتل.

لو مری انخوړ: د سرخ کوتل ډبر لیک.

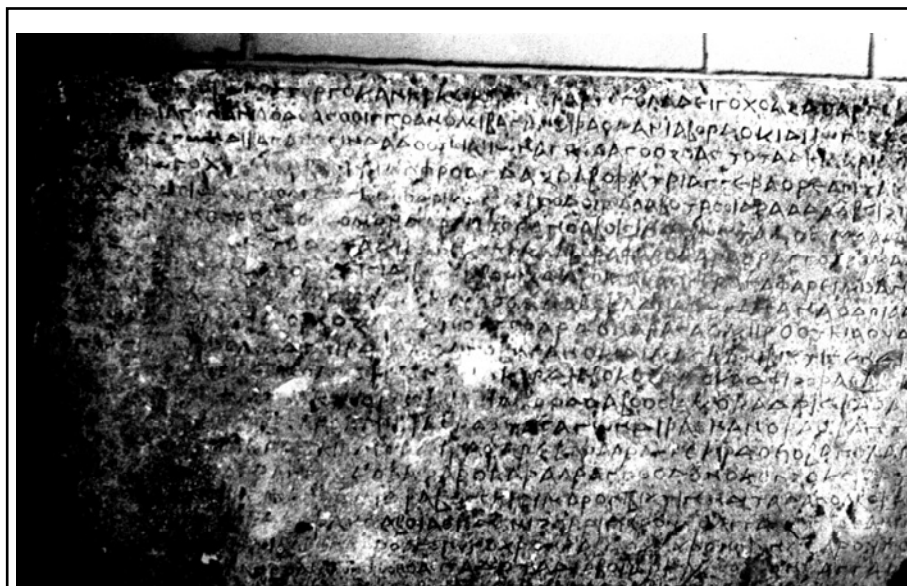
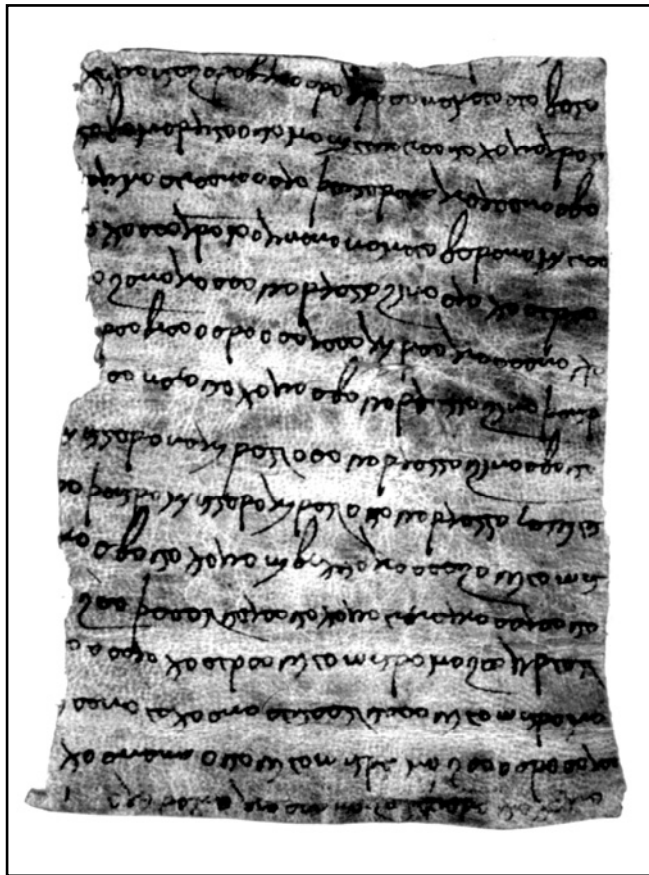


Figure 2: Bactrian inscription from Rabatak.

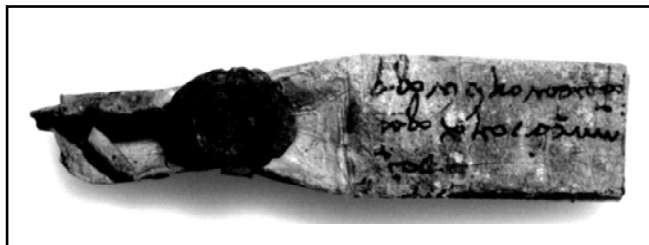
تصویر ۲: کتیبه باختری از رباطک.

دویم انخوړ: درباطک ډبر لیک.



**Figure 3:** Bactrian leather document.

تصویر ۳: نامه ای به زبان باختری که روی چرم نوشته شده است.  
در یم انخور: دیو سکی پر مخ لیکل شوی دباختري ژبي لیک.

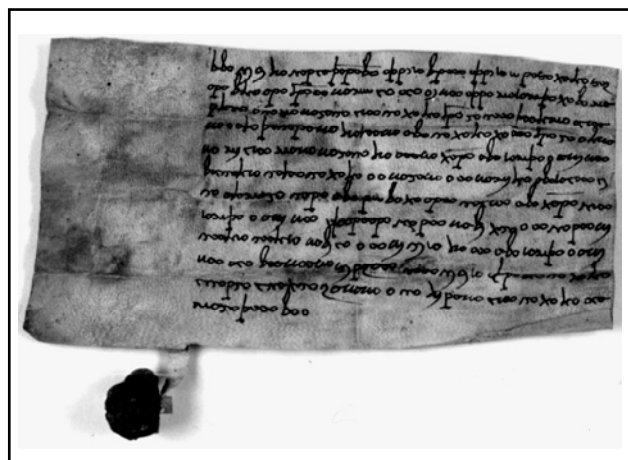


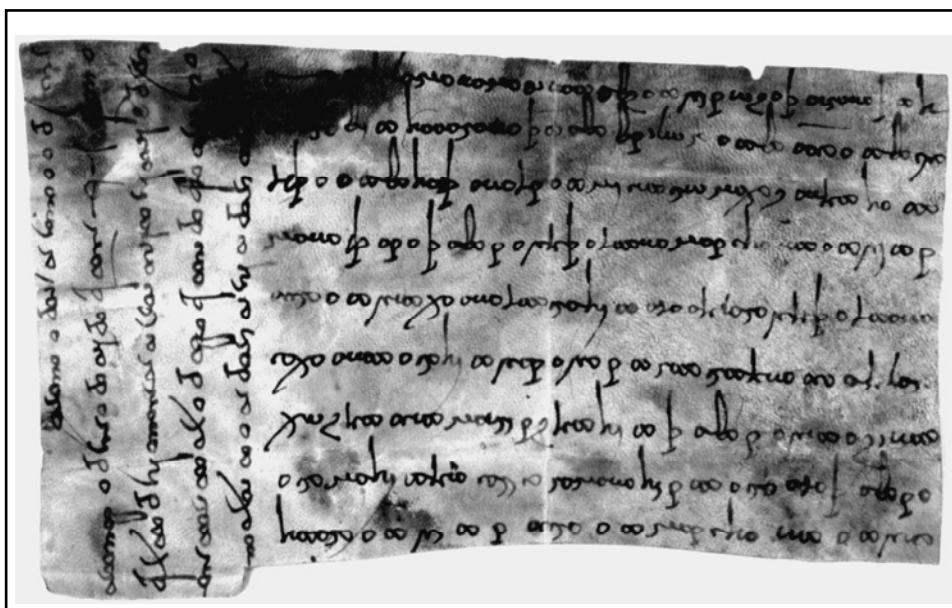
**Figure 4:** Letter sealed with a *bulla*.

تصویر ۴: نامه ای که توسط یک مهر گلی ممهور گشته است.  
خلورم انخور: یو لیک چي په ختین مهر تاپه شوي دی.

**Figure 5:** The same Bactrian document after being opened.

تصویر ۵: همان نامه ء تصویر شماره ۴، بعد از باز شدن.  
پنجم انخور: دخلورم نومره انخورلیک په بیر ته شوي حالت کې.





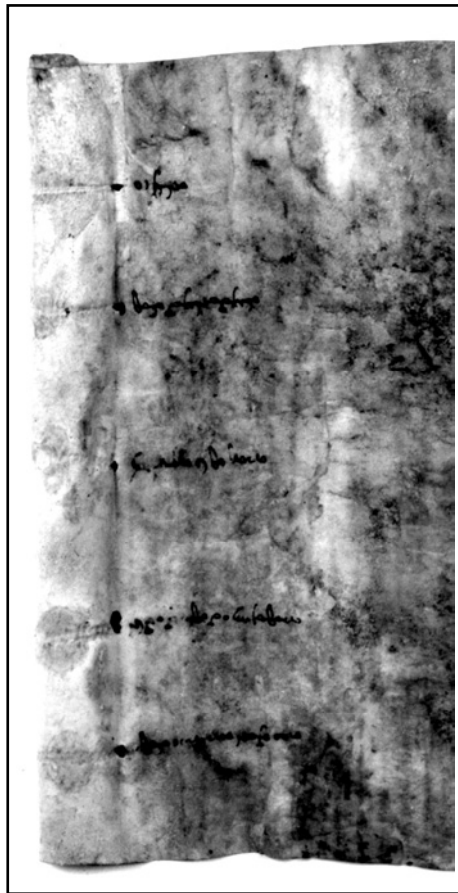
**Figure 6:** Dated letter written by a representative of the Sasanid Emperor.

تصویر ۶: نامه‌ای یکی از نمایندگان امپراتوری ساسانی.  
شپرم انخور: دسانیانو دامپراتوری دیوه استازی لیک.



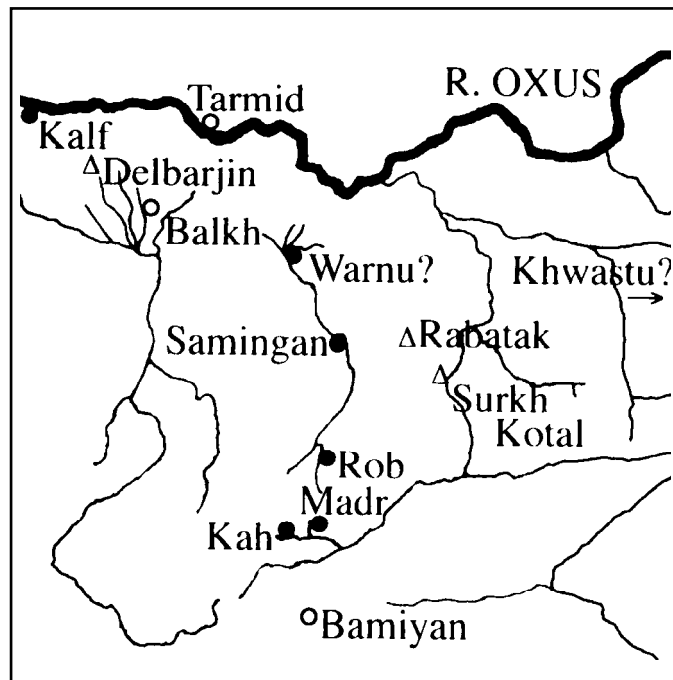
**Figure 7:** Contract for the sale of land.

تصویر ۷: قرار داد فروش زمین.  
اووم انخور: دخمکی دیلو رلو قرارداد.



**Figure 8:** Document for sale of land with names of witnesses (reverse of Fig.7).

تصویر ۸: جزئیات یشت قرارداد فروش زمین.  
اتم انخو: د ځمکې دپلورلو د قرارداد د شاتني مخ جز بیات.



**Figure 9:** Map showing places mentioned in Bactrian legal documents.

تصویر ۹: اسامی بعضی مناطق افغانستان که در مدارک دفتری باختری ذکر شده اند.  
نهم انخو: دافغانستان دځینوسیمو نومونه چې په باختری مدارکوکې لیدل شوي دي.



**Figure 10:** Arabic document similar to Bactrian legal documents.

تصویر ۱۰: سند عربي.  
لسم انخو: عربي مکتوب.





**Figure 11:** Bactrian inscription from Tang-i Safedak (copyright, J.L.Lee, 2002, all rights reserved).

تصویر ۱۱: کتیبه تنگ سفیدک.  
یوولسم انځور: دسفیدک تنگي ډ برلیک.