

# BACTRIAN HISTORICAL INSCRIPTIONS OF THE KUSHAN PERIOD

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Of all the Bactrian inscriptions of the Kushan period the richest in historical data is that of Rabātak (translated below as No. 2), which describes events of the early years of Kanishka I and the extension of his power over northern India as far as the Bay of Bengal. The statement that Kanishka “inaugurated the year one” evidently refers to the beginning of the “era of Kanishka” or “Kushan era,” which Falk (2001; 2004) has convincingly placed in 127/8 CE on the basis of a synchronism with the Śaka era in a Sanskrit astronomical treatise. The inscription seems to mention the third and sixth years of Kanishka, in which case it cannot have been written earlier than 132/3 CE, but much of the text is devoted to the events of his first year. One phrase, the exact interpretation of which is somewhat elusive, could be understood to allude to a decision by Kanishka to employ the “Aryan” language, i.e. Bactrian, instead of Greek, a change attested on the Kushan coinage very soon after the beginning of the reign of Kanishka, quite possibly during his first year (cf. Cribb 1996, pp. 110–11).

The Rabātak inscription includes several important lists: of the cities of northern India over which Kanishka claimed sovereignty; of the gods worshipped in Kanishka’s dynastic temple at Rabātak; and of Kanishka’s predecessors, his great-grandfather Kujula Kadphises, the founder of the Kushan dynasty, his grandfather Vima (I) Taktu and his father Vima (II) Kadphises. The name of Vima Taktu is also attested, presumably as that of the ruling monarch, in a Bactrian inscription at Dasht-e Nāwūr, where several inscriptions in Bactrian, Kharoṣṭhī and an undeciphered script are all inscribed on the same rock. The Bactrian inscription DN 1 (No. 1 below) and the Kharoṣṭhī inscription DN 4 are both dated in the year 279 of an unnamed era. Salomon (2005) has plausibly attributed this date to an “era of the Greeks,” which probably began in 175/4 BCE (Falk and Bennett 2009). If so, year 279 of this era would correspond to 104/5 CE.

The place which has yielded the largest number of Kushan Bactrian inscriptions is Surkh Kotal, the site of another dynastic temple founded by Kanishka. One of these, the so-called “unfinished inscription,” appears to be dated in the year 279 like the inscription

of Dasht-e Nāwūr (cf. Bihar 1963; 1976). It is not translated below, since nothing can be clearly read apart from the date. The fragmentary “Palamedes inscription” (No. 3 below) is undated, but the fact that it is “signed” in Greek suggests that it is probably not later than the earliest years of Kanishka. The most important inscription of Surkh Kotal (No. 4 below), which survives in three versions with slight variants, records building and restoration works begun in the year 31 of the era of Kanishka (i.e. 158/9 CE, early in the reign of Huvishka) and was presumably erected in or soon after that year.

Most other Bactrian inscriptions of the Kushan period, such as those of Ayrtaṃ (of which the only edition, that of Harmatta 1986, is based on unduly speculative readings) and Dil’berdzhin (Livshits and Kruglikova 1979), are poorly preserved or incomprehensible and do not seem to offer usable historical data.

## NO. 1. DASHT-E NĀWŪR INSCRIPTION (DN 1)

Apparently a royal proclamation of Vima Taktu, one of a group of inscriptions on a boulder near the peak of Mt. Qarabāy. Dated in the year 279 of an unnamed era, perhaps equivalent to 104/5 CE (see discussion above).

**Editions:** Fussman 1974, pp. 2–50; Davary and Humbach 1976; Sims-Williams 1996, pp. 95–96 (lines 1–7 only).

### Translation and notes:

[Date (line 1)]: (Year) 279, (day) 15 of (the Macedonian month) Gorpaios.

While the rest of the inscription is in Bactrian, this date is expressed in Greek. The adjacent Kharoṣṭhī inscription DN 4 confirms the reading of the numeral 279 and the month-name (*gapiu*) (Fussman 1974, p. 20).

[Titulature of Vima Taktu (lines 2–7)]: The king of kings, the great salvation, Vima Taktu the Kushan, the righteous, the just, the god worthy of worship, who has gained(?) the kingship by his own will ....

Many words are scarcely legible and can only be read in the light of the parallel titlature of Kanishka in the Rabatak inscription (see below), but the name of the king is read *ooēmo tak...o* by all editors. The Kharoṣṭhī inscription DN 4 also contains the name *Vhama* (for *Vh<e>ma?*), the title “king of kings” (*rajatiraja*) and perhaps the epithet “righteous” or “just” (*dhrami[ka]*) (Fussman 1974, p. 21). Of particular interest is the title “the great salvation” (also used of Kanishka in the Rabatak inscription), which seems to be equivalent to the Greek title *Sōtēr Megas* “the Great Saviour.” Cribb has argued that the “anonymous” Kushan king who issued coins under this title was in fact Vima Taktu (Cribb 1996, pp. 97–99, 111–23; disputed by MacDowall 2002).

[Lines 7-13: largely illegible and/or incomprehensible, apart from the very last word of the inscription]: ... was proclaimed.

NO. 2. RABĀTAK INSCRIPTION

A temple foundation inscription on a stone plaque, found at the site of Rabatak, Baghlān province, Afghanistan, and now in the National Museum in Kabul (Fig. 1). Undated, but probably not earlier than the year 6 of the era of Kanishka, i.e. 132/3 CE.

Fig. 1. The Rabatak inscription. Tracing made by Nicholas Sims-Williams.

ΑΙ Λ ΒΟΒΩΓΟΓΤΟΡΓΟΚΑΝΚΡΚΕΙΚΟΦΑΡΟΡΑΥΤΟΓΟΛΑΔΕΙΓΟΧΟΑΖΑΟΑΡΓΟΒΑΓ  
 ΖΝΟΓΟΚΙΔΙΑΓΟΝΑΝΔΟΔΑΓΟΟΙΓΠΟΑΝΟΜΙΒΑΓΑΓΟΙΡΑΟΔΑΝΙΑΒΟΡΔΟΚΙΔΙΙΛΓΟΧΡΟΚΟ  
 ΝΟΒΑΓΤΟΣΑΓΩΗΑΙΒΑΓΑΝΟΓΙΝΑΔΑΔΟΟΤΗΑΙΙΩΗΑΓΓΟΟΑΓΟΟΖΟΔΓΤΟΤΑΔΚΙΑΔΡΙΑΩΩΓ  
 ΖΑΔΟΑΒΟΙΩΓΟΧΦΟΗΟΑΒΟ ΙΥΗΔΟΦΡΟΑΓΔΑΖΟΑΒΟΡΑΤΡΙΑΓΓΕΡΑΟΡΕΔΓΙΤΑΙ  
 5 ΔΑΡΑΓΟΟΔΟΙΩΖΟΓΟΟΔΟΓΑΓΗΔΟΟΔΟΙΚΩΖΑΜΒΟΟΔΟΙΓΑΛΑΒΟΥΤΡΟΟΙΡΑΔΔΑΒΟΙΖΙΡΗ  
 ΑΜΒΟΚΙΔΗΙΑΗΟΠΡΟΒΔΟΟΔΟΜΑΝΔΑΡΓΙ ΔΟΡΑΝΟΑΒΟΙΓΙΗΔΟΩΓΤΑΔΟΟΤΗΙΑΔΡΟΥΓΟ  
 ΙΥΗΔΟΑΒΟΙΓΙΗΔΟΩΓΤΑΔΟΤΑΔΙΡΑΙΚΑΝΚΡΚΕΑΒΟΡΑΦΑΡΟΚΑΡΔΛΡΑΓΓΟΦΡΟΜΑΔΟ  
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 10 ΓΑΟΜΜΑΔΟΡΟΜΟΖΔΟΜΟΖΔΟΟΑΠΟΓΡΟΦΑΡΔΟΝΑΡΑΓΑΟΛΚΑΤΙΡΟΟΤΚΙΑΟΥΖΟΔ  
 ΝΟΓΙΑΔΓΙΡΒΟΦΡΟΜΑΔΟΚΙΡΔΙΓΜΟΑΦΟΒΑΓΑΝΟΚΙΔΙΑΜΑΓΚΑΚΙΒΙΧΤΙΓΕΗΔΙΟΤ  
 ΚΙΑΦΡΟΜΑΔΟΑΒΕΙΜΟΔΑΝΟΡΑΔΟΝΑΝΟΚΙΡΔΙΑΒΟΚΟΖΟΥΛΟΚΑΔΦΙΟΡΑΟΑΒΟΙΦΡ  
 ΟΝΙΑΓΟΟΔΑΒΟΟΚΛΟΤΑΚΤΟΟΡΑΟΑΒΟΙΝΙΑΓΟΟΔΟΑΒΟΟΚΜΟΚΑΔΦΙΟΡΑΟΑΒΟΙΦΡ  
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 15 ΡΑΚΑΝΚΡΚΕΦΡΟΜΑΔΟΚΙΡΔΙΤΑΔΙΡΑΦΑΡΕΚΑΡΑΛΡΑΓΓΕΚΙΡΔΟΘΟΒΑΓΟΛΑΓΓΟ  
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 ΟΓ ΙΝΔΙΟΥΤΙΡΑΟΙΒΑΓΕΠΟΟΡΑΓΟΙΩΓΟΧΡΟΝΟΑΒΟΙΟΧΟΧΡΟΜΟΙΥΗΔΟΑΡΟΥΓΟΚ  
 20 ΔΑΝΙΟ ΒΑΓΟΛΑΓΓΟΑΒΟΙΩΓΟΧΡΟΝΟΑΓΓΑΔΟΤΑΔΙΑΒΟΙΑΡΗΜΓΟΟΧΡΟΝΟΑΓΓΑ  
 ΓΑ ΓΙΔΟΡΑΦΕΦΡΟΜΑΝΑΑΒΙΓΓΑΡΚΚΑΛΑΔΑΒΙΓΓΑΡΚΔΓΕΛΑΔΑΒΙΓΓ  
 Κ ΒΑΙΜΑΝΙΖΓΑΑΒΟΒΑΓΑΝΟΛΑΔΟΟΔΟΦΑΡΕΜΟΔΑΝΟΑΖΑΔΑΝΟ ΑΓΑΒΟΜΙΒΑΓΕ,  
 ΔΤΙΑΝΟΣ

**Editions:** Sims-Williams 1996; 1998; 2008. Cf. also Fussman 1998 for a sceptical view of Sims-Williams’ readings and interpretation. The edition of Mukherjee (1997) is epigraphically worthless.

**Translation and notes:**

[“Year one” of Kanishka (lines 1-7)]: ... of the great salvation, Kanishka the Kushan, the righteous, the just, the autocrat, the god worthy of worship, who has obtained the kingship from Nana and from all the gods, who has inaugurated the year one as the gods pleased. And he issued(?) a Greek edict(?) (and) then he put it into the Aryan (language) (i.e. Bactrian). In the year one there was proclaimed to India, to the cities of the *kṣatriyas* (or *kṣatrapas?*), the capture(?) of [...]*adra(g)o* and *ōzopo* and *Sāketa* and *Kauśāmbī* and *Pātaliputra*, as far as *Śrī-Campā*; whatever (cities) he and the other generals(?) reached(?), (he) submitted (them) to (his) will, and he submitted all India to (his) will.

[Foundation of a temple (lines 7-19)]: Then King Kanishka ordered Shafar the lord of the marches to make in this

place the temple which is called 'God's water,' in the Kasig plains, for these gods who have come hither into the presence of the glorious Umma, that(?) (is), the above-mentioned Nana and the above-mentioned Umma, Aurmuzd, the Gracious one, Sroshard, Narasa, (and) Mihir. [*In smaller letters above the line: 'who in the Indian (language) is called Mahāsenā and is called Viśākha.'*] And he gave orders to make images of the same, (namely) of these gods who are inscribed hereupon, and he gave orders to make (images of) these kings: King Kujula Kadphises (his) great grandfather and King Vima Taktu (his) grandfather and King Vima Kadphises (his) father, and himself, King Kanishka. Then, as the king of kings, the son of the gods Kanishka had given orders to do, so Shafar the lord of the marches made this sanctuary, and Pyash the lord of the marches, and Shafar the lord of the marches, and Nukunzuk the *ašto-wa[lgo]* carried out] the king's command. May these gods who are inscribed here [keep] the [king] of kings, Kanishka the Kushan, for ever healthy, fortunate (and) victorious!

[*Chronological summary (lines 19-22)*]: And the king, the son of the gods, was pacifying(?) all India from the year one to the year six(?). [So] the temple was founded(?) in the year one; then in the third(?) year also ... according to the king's command, many rites(?) were endowed, many attendants were endowed, many ... [were endowed. And] King [Kanishka] gave the fortress to the gods, and for these freemen [who] ... in 'God's water' ....

#### NO. 3. PALAMEDES INSCRIPTION (SK 3)

A building inscription on a stone plaque, found at the site of Surkh Kotal, Baghlān province, Afghanistan; present location unknown (perhaps National

Museum, Kabul). Undated, but probably early in the reign of Kanishka.

**Editions:** Curiel 1954, pp. 194-7; Benveniste 1961, pp. 150-51; Humbach 1966, p. 102.

#### Translation and notes:

[*Complete text (lines 1-3)*]: ... the chief [...], the chief of the armoury, the *ašto-walgo*(?) ...] made this temple [...]. (Written)(?) by Palamedes.

The title *ašto-walgo*, partially restored both here and in the Rabatak inscription, is unambiguously attested in a later Bactrian document. The last line, which is written in Greek, may name the mason who carved the inscription rather than its author.

#### NO. 4. THE GREAT SURKH KOTAL INSCRIPTION (SK 4), IN THREE COPIES (M, A, AND B)

A building inscription on a stone plaque (copy M), found at the site of Surkh Kotal, Baghlān province, Afghanistan, and now in the National Museum in Kabul. Copies A and B, on two series of building blocks found at the same site were formerly in the National Museum, but at least some of the blocks have been plundered. Undated, but not earlier than the year 31 of the era of Kanishka, i.e. 158/9 CE.

**Editions:** Maricq 1958 (first edition of M); Benveniste 1961, pp. 114-40 (first edition of A and B); Humbach 1966 (a fantastic interpretation of the text as a Mithraic hymn, which its author has since disowned, cf. Humbach 2003); Davary 1982, pp. 53-64 (most convenient synoptic edition, but without translation). Editions with translation: Gershevitch 1980, pp. 64-65; Lazard et al. 1984, pp. 226-30.

#### Translation and notes:

[*The earlier history of the temple (lines 1-6)*]: This citadel (is) the temple of Kanishka the victorious, which was named(?) by the lord king Kanishka. When the citadel was first completed, it did not require(?) (an) internal water (supply), but the citadel was waterless, and when there was an attack(?) by enemies, then the gods were displaced from (their) seat, then they were taken to the stronghold (of) Lraf and the citadel was abandoned.

Lraf has been identified with Greek Drapsaka, the name of a city not far from Surkh Kotal. (See most

recently Grenet 2005, p. 47 n. 4.)

[*The building works of Nukunzuk (lines 6-20)*]: When Nukunzuk the lord of the marches, the lord's favourite, who is most dear to the king, the son of the gods, the second-in-command(?), the beneficent, the compassionate, who is pure-minded towards all living creatures, came here to the temple in the year thirty-one, (in) the month Nisan, then he surveyed(?) the citadel, he dug this well, and he brought out the water, and he fitted it with stones, so that water should not be lacking to the people in the citadel, and when there might be an attack(?) by enemies the gods might not be displaced from (their) seat and the citadel might not be abandoned. And above the well he made a winch(?) (and) he installed a beam(?), so that by means of this well (and) by means of this winch(?) the whole citadel fared(?) well.

Nukunzuk may well be the same person as the Nukunzuk of the Rabatak inscription, by this time promoted to the higher rank of "lord of the marches," perhaps even "second-in-command, deputy" (if this is the meaning of *loixobosaro*, see Sims-Williams 2008, p. 65).

[*Conclusion of version M (lines 20-25)*]: And this well and *mašto xirgo* were made by me, Burzmihir the son of Kuzgashk, the inhabitant of Astilgan, the servant of Nukunzuk the lord of the marches, according to the lord's command. And this (inscription) was written by me, Mihraman the son of Burzmihir: [*monogram 1*]. Mihraman: [*monogram 2*].

Version B concludes with a shorter version of this statement, while version A has only "[*monogram 1*]. Mihraman: [*monogram 2*]." The most recent discussion of this paragraph is that of Humbach 2003, pp.162–65.

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