

Trip to Pul-i Khumri (part 2 of the original Balkh-Baghlan report)

Although one of Dr. Lee's concerns was to inspect some little known sites around Balkh, the main object of his visit was to track down the famous "Rabatak inscription", a Kushan inscription in Greco-Bactrian script unearthed by accident by some warriors digging a trench on the site of Kafir-Qala near Rabatak. We left Mazar on 17 April.

We stopped at the site of Kafir Qala on our way, and surveyed it quickly. Thanks to an agreement made with the local authorities at the time of the discovery, in 1993, practically no illegal excavations have taken place. Only the regular military defensive positions found at the top of all ancient historical sites scarred the site, and some shallow excavations had been made.

Photo: A military trench dug along the north ridge of Kafir Qala fortress. One can see remains of old stone walls among the more modern kahgil constructions

Given the importance of the inscription, there is all reason to believe that the Kafir Qala site could turn out to be a new Surkh Kotal, so preventive action must continue to be taken to avoid looters destroying the site.

The limestone inscription was finally found in a depot of the local Department of Mines in Pul-i Khumri. They agreed to transfer it to the Kabul Museum (see annex).

Photo: This is the box in which the Rabatak inscription is presently stored. Note its bad condition

After Rabatak we saw Surkh Kotal, one of the most famous archaeological sites in Afghanistan, together with Ai Khanum. For years the French Archaeological Delegation for Afghanistan (DAFA) patiently excavated the site, terrace by terrace, until the whole magnificent site had been exposed. Remnants of the staircase, terrace walls, columns and other adornments, as well as considerable detail of the temple structure on the top of the hill, were exposed to the public, the transportable finds embellishing the Kabul Museum collection.

Photo: The site of Surkh Kotal stripped of all its stone features

Now little is left. All stones have been looted to be re-used elsewhere, the terrace walls and staircase are crumbling, a field has been created on top of the lowest part of the site (near the well), and so many illegal excavations have taken place that it becomes difficult to recognize the site.

Photo: A farmer has installed a field on what used to be a well at the bottom of the monumental staircase. Some remnants of wall remain, however

Only some of the heavy column bases remain, as well as the central altar, for they could not be transported easily. Under the altar excavations have been attempted, and one of the column bases has been turned around to serve as an artillery seat in a dig-out. The whole top of the site had been transformed into a military area with trenches, foxholes, etc. A prison well, where prisoners were kept in inhuman conditions, with snakes, had been dug behind the main temple area.

Photo: Illegal excavations under the main temple at Surkh Kotal. All the walls around the temple area have crumbled or been purposefully removed

Photo: A Kushan column base upturned to serve as artillery seat behind the central temple

The local people accompanying us, one of whom claimed to be the local commander, were persuaded that there was still gold to be found in the site, and reckoned that was the reason of our presence. They were following our every movement and I thought that upon our departure they would start digging in every place we had shown interest in.

I feel sorry for the Afghan and foreign archaeologists who spent so many years unearthing this amazing temple. There is not much to be done to save it now.

After the depressing morning spent at Surkh Kotal, we had a more uplifting experience at Puza-i Shan. The foundation of a bridge which is said to be Hellenistic (according to Fischer, 1960) can still be seen on the left bank of the Baghlan river.

Photo: The only remains of the old Greek bridge across the Baghlan river

Opposite it stand the remains of a huge fortress complex, which must have commanded the entrance to the fertile Baghlan valley since historic times. One fortress standing along the river revealed to us, by its exposed stratigraphic layers, that it had burnt at least twice, and it would seem logical that the site would have been reused by successive military rulers. Beyond it were more ruins composed of mudbrick walls that are probably very ancient. There were not many signs of illegal excavations.

Photo: The tallest standing fortress at Puza-i Alai seen from the other side of the Baghlan river. On the left, in the wooded area, a shrine. In the back and on the right, more ruins of fortifications

We did not extend our trip any further, because limitations of time made us hurry back to Mazar on 18 April, although we would have liked to visit many more sites in the area.