

## THE RETRIEVAL OF THE RABATAK INSCRIPTION

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### *Prologue*

The inscription found at Rabatak (Baghlan) is an extremely valuable historical document. Engraved in the time of the great Kushan king Kanishka, it contains precious information about the geographical extent of the Kushan empire, its history and the religions practiced at the time. Written in Bactrian language using the Greek alphabet, its value is also linguistic. The 23-line inscription, measuring 98 x 60 cm, on a limestone slab 25 cm thick, complements the Surkh Kotal inscription, found nearby, of the same period and with a similar ceremonial function.

The Rabatak inscription was unearthed by fighters digging a trench in 1993. Sayyid Jaffar Nadiri, then the commander of the area, had it transferred to his residence in Pul-i Khumri. He requested a British aid worker, Tim Porter of the Halo Trust, to make a video of it, which was subsequently sent to London. Nicholas Sims-Williams, working at the British Museum, and one of the only specialists of Bactrian language in the world, translated most of it, but not having the original, parts of the text could not be interpreted.

Dr. Jonathan Lee, a specialist of Afghan history, saw the inscription in 1997. But shortly afterwards heavy fighting took place in Baghlan, as the Taleban wrestled the area out of the Nadiri's control. Sayyid Jaffar's residence in Pul-i Khumri was sacked, and the Nadiri's base in Kayhan was destroyed. Both Sayyid Jaffar and Sayyid Mansur, Jaffar's father, narrowly escaped, apparently with the help of Commander Massud. Sayyid Mansur resettled in Tashkent and his son left to the West. The whereabouts of the inscription were unknown.

### *1: Search*

In April 2000 Dr. Jonathan Lee came back to Afghanistan to do historical research. One of his main programme points was to find the Rabatak inscription and make new, and better, recordings of it. Robert Kluyver, SPACH representative in Afghanistan, accompanied him on his journey to Pul-i Khumri.

Enquiries in the provincial capital gave result to a wide variety of stories. It was not clear whether the inscription had been brought to Kayhan in the early stages of the fighting, or remained hidden in Pul-i Khumri. Some said that it had been destroyed by the Taleban fighters along with the substantial collection of Buddhist artifacts in the Nadiri's possession. Others affirmed that the Nadiri's had taken it along, and either given it to Massud – who might have sold it – or shipped it to Tashkent, or London, where again, it might have been sold. The quest seemed bound to become a wild goose chase, but persistent efforts by Dr. Lee finally revealed it had simply remained in Pul-i Khumri. Indeed, a low-level clerk of the local Department of Information and Culture told Dr. Lee that it might be in a depot of the local Department of Mines.

After receiving the requested authorizations, Dr. Lee hurried to the mentioned depot, and was relieved to ascertain that, although slightly damaged in transfers between Pul-i Khumri and Kayhan, the inscription was still in a good condition. He took several rolls of film of the text. The SPACH representative informed the local authorities that he would try to arrange for the transferal of the inscription to Kabul, for safekeeping and eventual conservation work.

### *2: Transfer*

In the following months the SPACH representative arranged for the transferal of the inscription from Pul-i Khumri to Kabul, where it would be kept at the Ministry of Information and Culture. It was also agreed that upon safe receipt, a press conference would be organized to inform the world of this important retrieval, a turning point in the recent history of the Kabul Museum. Indeed, in recent years this Museum has only suffered loss, through looting, rocket damage and neglect; this would be the first major acquisition of the Museum.

On 7 July Robert Kluyver set out with Mawlawi Ahmadyar, the Director of the Museum, Mr. Masudi, vice-director, and Mr. Zakir, archaeologist attached to the Institute of Archaeology. What would normally have been a simple expedition - drive to Pul-i Khumri, load the inscription, and drive back - was complicated by the blocking of the Salang tunnel. As all the rest of the traffic they had to make the detour through Bamyan valley, over very bad roads. In order to minimize the risk of damaging the inscription during transportation, it was decided to drive it to Mazar-i Sharif and load it on an airplane.

Unfortunately ARIANA, the Afghan airlines, refused to load the inscription, alleging it was too heavy. After arduous negotiations with different authorities, a military cargo aircraft agreed in principle to take it, but fighting around the airport of Kabul that erupted in those days retarded its departure, and the team had to wait for days at the airport, under the merciless Bactrian summer sun. It was not possible to entrust the safekeeping and loading of the inscription to airport officials. Finally the heavy limestone slab was painstakingly lifted into the cargo-plane and flown to Kabul, accompanied by the Museum staff.

### 3: Exhibition

Back in Kabul, the Deputy Minister for Culture, Mawlawi Hotaki, and the Museum directors decided to organize a little exhibition around the Rabatak inscription, showing confiscated items and some artifacts that had escaped the looting of the Kabul Museum. The façade of the building had been repaired to conceal the extremely heavy damage suffered by the Museum when it was in front-line territory, and it seemed an appropriate time to show the people of Kabul, Afghanistan and the World that there was still some cultural activity going on in this war-torn country. This initiative was admittedly a little *risqué* given the misgivings most Taleban have about other religions (such as Buddhism) and the representation of living beings (including statues). But it inscribed itself neatly into the official policy - stated in the Cultural Preservation edict of Mullah Omar reproduced in SPACH newsletter #6 - of respecting and valorizing Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage, including the pre-Islamic period.

Carla Grissmann, who has been working together with the Museum staff since 1996 to complete the inventory of remaining objects, organized the exhibition on behalf of SPACH. After much confusion regarding dates, it was finally opened on 17 August, as part of the Jeshyn (Independence) celebrations. Visitors from abroad, given very short notice, were unable to attend, but part of the expatriate community in Afghanistan, including journalists, came to the opening. The BBC gave full coverage to the event on Television and Radio. Several high-ranking Taleban, including the Ministers of Education and Foreign Policy, also turned up. In that sense it was quite a success, and a moving moment for much of the Museum staff who has labored selflessly for years to keep the Institution open, against all odds.

The Rabatak inscription, surrounded by black velvet and nicely lighted, was the centerpiece of the exhibition and attracted much attention. Dr. Ferowski, the head of the Institute of Archaeology, gave a brief interpretation of its meaning to interested Afghans and foreigners. Another valuable artifact exposed was the clay Bodhissatva of Tepe Maranjan. After the opening most of the people present were invited to a lunch given by SPACH in the Ariana Hotel.

Unfortunately the presence of statues and particularly of the scantily dressed, bejeweled Bodhissatva, shocked some of the more conservative Taleban (most of whom were not present, but heard about it on the radio), reminding all present that however upbeat the moment might seem, any non-Islamic cultural manifestation in Afghanistan must still be very cautious and low-key.

Accordingly, the exhibition did not remain open, and within days all exhibited artifacts, including the Rabatak inscription, were brought to safety within the premises of the Ministry of Information and Culture. There they remain, under the responsibility of several *tawildar* (key-holders), awaiting a more definitive Kabul Museum opening.