

The Language of the Surkh Kotal Inscription

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In 1951 an inscription was found by road workers in the province of Baghlan (Takharistan) 15 km, from the town of Pul-e Khumri in Surkh Kotal. The inscription attracted the interest of archeologists to the area and a French mission led by Daniel Schlumberger found a large temple with several inscriptions as well as statues. The mission leader theorized that the temple made for fire worshiping was from the Koshanid period and was destroyed by fire in 230 A.D.

According to Schlumberger the temple does not resemble other Greek temples in the area and unlike other temples found in Afghanistan there were no statues of Buddha in this temple. In the temple the holy fire was kept burning six to seven centuries after Zoroaster. The Tukhari word for fire, *eir* (the Pashto *aur*), found on the inscription shows that this fire had a history older than the faith of Mazidisna of the Sassanids.

The Surkh Kotal fire temple is the first and only temple of its kind that has been discovered in Afghanistan. Historians and scholars have come to the conclusion that this inscription represents the culture, art and literature of the Koshanid era and the language of the inscription originated in Afghanistan.

The most important and complete stone tablet, found in Surkh Kotal on May 8, 1957, is a huge cube slab. The side of the stone is 117x110 cm. while the face is 132x125 cm. Its surface is flat and plain. The condition in which the inscription was found makes it evident that the stone contained certain marks before the inscription was carved. The inscribed words have not been damaged and 25 lines can be read with ease. There are a total of 947 letters in Greek script, 25 to 48 in a line.

During the excavation of the Koshanid Fire Temple a huge stone and several smaller ones were found. They all have similar inscriptions. The largest of these stones, or the first tablet, has 947 letters. It is evident that this was the original tablet of the inscription. Two similar tablets were inscribed later.

The second inscription contains 21 pieces of different sizes some of which are lightly damaged, but with the help of the first tablet the lines are readable. It has 27 lines with a signature similar to the first tablet. The writing on this stone is similar to the first one but not as elaborate as the first inscription.

The third tablet is composed of 32 pieces, many of which are broken. The letters on this

stone are not proportionate, and are unreadable. In the beginning the letters are large, in the middle small while toward the end they are medium sized. The inscription does not carry a signature. There are 27 lines altogether.

The three inscriptions found in the Baghlan ruins contain the same text. It appears that the first manuscript was made under the supervision of those building the temple. The writing on the first stone was inscribed by a skilled calligrapher while that on the other two by less talented persons. It is certain the three stones were not inscribed by the same person and at the same time since the style of writing varies considerably. The second and third tablets were found in 53 pieces, along with other ordinary stones, lining the wall of a well.

It is possible the three tablets may have been taken from their original location and used in the lining of the well. Another possibility is that the smaller stones were originally intended for display but Nokuzok, the supervisor of the construction team (whose name is inscribed in the inscription), later decided to discard them and instead used a better one, the first tablet. The discarded stones were then used in the well, and have now fallen into our hands after 1800 years.

Letters 68 to 74 of the tablet state: PID I-IWD ODOHRIC XSHON NEICAN MA MAL (During the 31st year in the month of Neican).

From numerous inscriptions, which remain from the time of Kanishka and his ancestors, we know that the year of his coronation was recognized as the beginning of that era. In other inscriptions, the year of his coronation is used for dating the year after his death. The year of his coronation is not known, however, opinions differ among present day historians. The date is usually set at 120 CE. Sten Konow in an article states that Kanishka reigned between 123 to 152 CE. Christensen agrees but the author of History of Afghanistan has placed the reign of Kanishka between 120 and 160 CE. This estimate is worth considering, because some Indian inscriptions appear to corroborate it. One is dated the 23rd year of the first month of summer, which is equivalent to 151 CE. While another is dated as the 24th year of the month of summer, which coincides with the rule of his heir, Huvishka. From this it is clear that the death of Kanishka occurred between the summer of the year 151 and 152 A.D. According to the book, Khorushti Inscriptions by Sten Konow, the belief that Kanishka lived until 160 CE is incorrect.

Moreover, Sten Konow, referring to the Chinese author, Hu Huan Sho, states that Kanishka went to Khotan in 152 CE and died the same year. The writer believes he was probably murdered. The author has placed the beginning of the era of Kanishka as 128-129 CE.

If the reign of Kanishka began in 129 CE then the month of Neican of the 31st year would be 160 CE, eight years after the death of Kanishka. From this we can conclude that the Baghlan inscription was written during the reign of Huvishka, the ancestor of Kanishka in 160 CE in the month of Neican (March).

European orientalists who have studied these inscriptions say the language of the inscription is Bakhtari, but since Baghlan was situated in Tukharistan, it is better to call the language Tukhari. In my book about the inscription I have called it the Koshanid language, which is its actual name. The prominent authors, Al-Beruni and Al-Bashari, has called the language of Balkh and Badakshan as Tukhari and have said that this language has many similarities to the Balkhi language. It appears to be more correct if we call this language Tukhari.

We have not come across any documents from pre-Islamic period indicating a language which could be the mother of Dari language. Although southern Pahlavi in Pars and northern Pahlavi in Khutan and Torfan had spread and was used as a court language in the Sassanid kingdom. However, in Khorasan, extending from the Hindu Kush slopes to the province of Gandahara (present day Kandahar), and in the court of the Koshanids and of such local rulers as the Hepthalites, a language existed which we can now call the mother of the present Dari of Afghanistan. The oldest remnants of this language were discovered in the Surkh Kotal inscription dating to the second century CE.

The analysis of the inscription indicates there is a close relation between this language, whether we call it Tukhari or Koshanid, and that of present day Dari and Pashto. In spite of the fact that most of its words and verbs are common to Pashto, we cannot consider it as Pashto. It is rather the ancient structure or an older feature of current Dari. Meanwhile, the origin of some of its words can be found in old Persian, Pahlavi, Sughdi, Khotani and other languages which were spoken in the region.

In accordance to a philological analysis, it may be argued that this language belongs to a large isogloss, an area where two languages or two dialects mix together, and construct one common language or dialect. It may be that the Pashto speaking Pakhats of ancient Aryan race, reported in Veda and Avesta, lived in southern Hindu Kush, while another group of people of the Aryan race, who spoke a language which may have been the mother of present Dari, lived in northern Hindu Kush. These two languages, as a result of close economic, social and cultural relations of their speakers, may have mixed together and created an isogloss on the slopes of the Hindu Kush in the province of Tukhar, as suggested by the inscription, which contains elements of both languages.

Until now it was commonly believed that after the Arab invasion the Pahlavi language gradually developed into present day Persian. Currently another view has appeared which suggests that Dari, or the Persian spoken in Afghanistan, existed along with Pahlavi in pre-Islamic period. Several reasons have been forwarded to support this view but none is as comprehensive nor as important as the existence of the Baghlan inscription. Now that we have witnessed the inscription we are convinced that present day Dari, spoken in Afghanistan, is by no means branched from Pahlavi, but it existed 1800 to 2000 years ago in Tukhar as a language of court and literature, both written and spoken. The Balghlan inscription is testament to this revelation.

According to the recorded date of the inscription we can say that the mother of Dari language existed around the first or second century CE. From its early form the language developed in five or six centuries into the Dari of early Islamic period. The Shahnama of Abu Mansur is an extant example of the language.