

Kharoshthi Inscribed Copper Plates from Rani Dab at Orakzai Agency in the Northwest Frontier Province of Pakistan

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The most widely known epigraphical records in the Kharoshthi script are mainly found in the Northwest Frontier Province (corresponding to ancient Gandhara) of Pakistan. Besides having a great historical significance, these inscriptions are considered landmarks in the development of epigraphy in Pakistan. The recent discovery of a unique Kharoshthi inscription on copper plates from Rani Dab at the Orakzai Agency is a fresh addition to our knowledge (see Pl.).

The site of the inscription at Rani Dab is situated close to the village of Sultanzai, Sturi Khail, in the Orakzai Agency, which is one of the seven tribal agencies of the Province and is bound on the north by the Khyber Agency, on the east by the Peshawar District, on the southeast by the Kohat District and on the west by the Kurram Agency (see Map). It is a hilly region with fertile valleys having peaks less than 2000m (6,650 ft) high in the east and 3000m (10,000 ft) in the west. The valleys are formed by steep precipitous hills, which make communication difficult. The only pass from the Khyber Agency is via Tirah road. Apart from the two major perennial rivers Mastura and Khanki Toi flowing eastward and fed by numerous smaller streams, there are many seasonal torrents in the area. Small plains with a low gradient form fertile tracts along the banks of the Mastura and Khanki Toi rivers and their valleys.

The inscribed copper plates were found few years back by antique seekers during illegal digging of a mound at Rani Dab. They were brought to the Department of Archaeology, University of Peshawar, for identification. They were eight copper plates, fused together, and which were bound together by rings as suggested by holes on their right side. The plates seemed to be intact, but due to the fusion we could not see their contents. Even, heavy corrosion on the front (exposed) page did not allow the author to read the whole text. Having known the preliminary information about the script (the language and date of the inscription), the dealer hurried to take them back on the same day and left us with a hope to bring them again for cleaning and further study which, so far, he never did. The present information, although fragmentary, is being shared with the scholars.

Transliteration

1. ...kṣatrapasa yodamuṇisa mahipidus(na)e
2. ...apadragaṇi balatepaṣaviha
3.
4.
5.ga
6.pa
7. ...teṇa budhamitraputreṇa +kha/da++ṇa dhitravidasa
8. +++++satana puyae samagu+hanasa khada/nati

Consisting of eight lines, the text on the exposed page is executed with dotted technique and seems complete. Its full decipherment would be possible when the plates are cleaned.

The last letter 'pa' of the first word and the last four words of the first line are readable. The first of the four words is 'kṣatrapasa', which is frequently found in other Kharoshthi texts from Gandhara and other regions in northern Pakistan.¹ It is presented in the genitive case. Ending also in 'sa', the succeeding word could be read as 'yodamuṇisa'. This name of a Kṣatrapa is not otherwise known. The last word of the first line could be read as 'mahipidusenae' without any ascertained etymology.

The reading of the second line is almost certain but etymology of the words is not clear. It might also be possible that either the reading is not corrected or the words are not properly separated and identified.

The letters of lines three and four are difficult to read while the only visible letters of lines five and six are 'ga' and 'pa' respectively.

Contrary to the previous four lines, some of the letters of line seven are readable. The line probably starts with a proper name in instrumental case whereas the ending 'teṇa' is clear. The next word 'Budhamitraputreṇa', also in instrumental case, might be the patronymic of the first name². The succeeding letter is not visible while the next one could be read either 'kha' or 'da'. The two succeeding letters are equally not legible but the last letter of the word written as 'ṇa' might indicate an instrumental case as observed in the previous two words. The last compound-word 'dhitravidasa' ('dhitravi' + 'dasa') means slave of Dhitravi.

The letters (probably five) in the beginning of the first line are not readable. The legible part probably starts with 'satapa' or 'satvaṇa' whereas the word could be reconstructed as 'bodhisatvaṇa' followed by 'puyae', which in combination means 'Bodhisattvas are honored'. After the word 'puyae' and the next word, there is a gape for at least two letters; the reason for the space is difficult to understand. The space might indicate the end of the inscription and the rest of the inscription after the space might be considered as colophon (?) that can be read 'sa(m)magusa sahadasa khada+'. Again there is a space for at least six more aksharas after the colophon.

As we do not know the whole content of all the copper plates, it can be assumed that the above text might be the first page, a kind of introduction to the rest of the unseen text of the remaining plates. The word Kṣatrapa of the line first indicate that the ceremony or the act was performed during the reign of a certain Kṣatrapa called Yudamuṇi. Another important information to be retrieved from the present part of the inscription is that the act was made by an individual whose father name was Buddhamitra³. If the reading of the last line is correct then it would mean that the text is Buddhist in character and by doing certain meritorious work, the nature of which is not yet clear, all the Bodhisattvas were honored.

The palaeographic study indicates that the inscription belongs, most probably, to the 1st or 2nd century AD and the language used in the text is Gandhari.

The inscription is important for more than one reason. First, because it is the longest Kharoshthi inscription available on copper plates. Secondly, so far, no such document on copper plates in a book form is reported. Third, although not properly surveyed, it is the first ever recorded Kharoshthi inscription from the Orakzai tribal area. The very few inscriptions found in the adjoining tribal areas, e.g., the Tochi Valley bilingual inscription⁴, Mir Ali inscription⁵, Spinwam inscription⁶ and the Spina stone inscription from South Waziristan⁷. Keeping its importance in view as mentioned above, it is badly needed to preserve and study the inscription, otherwise it would disappear in any private collection like other important materials smuggled from the region without leaving any trace.

Notes

¹ Konow 1929: 23-29, 81-82; Salomon 1981: 11-20

² Similar name is already attested in the other Kharoshthi inscriptions discovered in the region (see e.g, Konow 1929: 94; 109)

³ Name of similar genre is mentioned the ninth Buddhist Patriarch who was a disciple of Vasu-Bandhu.

⁴ Dani 1964

⁵ Nasim Khan et al 2000

⁶ Salomon 1981

⁷ Nasim Khan 2001

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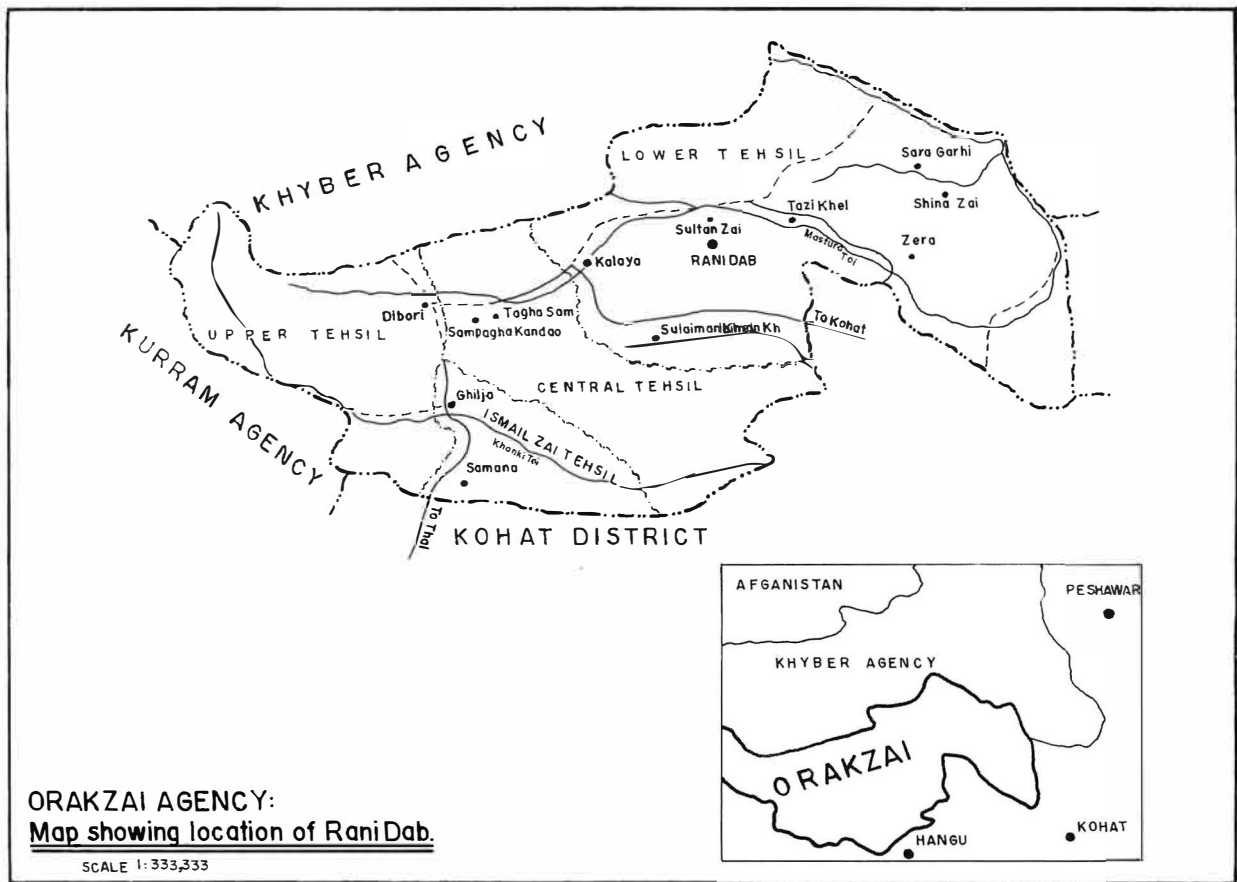
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Rani Dab (Orakzai Agency) Copper Plate inscription