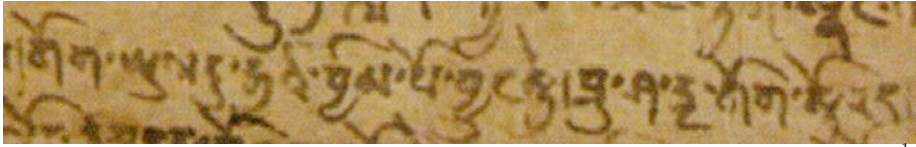


A Tibetan Toponym from Afghanistan

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The Old Tibetan Annals (OTA) provide us with a record of 8th century toponyms that have persisted to the present day. Written in Old Tibetan and sent from central Tibet to Dunhuang, the OTA recorded Gog and Brusha as the names for what we now know as “Wakhan” and “Brushal” (the land of the Burushaski-speaking Burusho people of Hunza and Yasin):



gog. yul. du. rgya'i. byim. po. byungtse/ bru. sha. dang. gog. stord/
“The Chinese *byim-po* (army) arrived at Gog-yul (Wakhan).
Bru-sha and Gog were lost.”²

This brief entry for the year 747-748 CE records the Tang Empire’s campaign against Imperial Tibetan force in Wakhan, in which General Kao-Hsein Chih’s 10,000 Tang troops defeated a Tibetan army near present-day Sarhad-e Broghil in Wakhan District of Afghanistan’s Badakhshan province, an event more fully recorded in the Tang Annals, as would be expected (Chavannes 2006a:186-89; Stein 1922:117-22; Beckwith 1987:130-33).

The Tang Annals transcribe the name of Wakhan as *Hu-k’an*, and Christopher Beckwith (1987:133 fn) notes that the Tang pronunciation of *Hu*³ would have been /ɣwak/ or /ɣwag/, both of which would have been transcribed in Old Tibetan as *gog*. *Gog*, or *Gog-yul*, he notes, is the Old Tibetan transcription of the native name for

¹ Old Tibetan Annals II, OR.8212.187, line 10. Dotson, 2009:315 Plate II.i OTA images © British Library Board. Available online at: <http://otdo.aa.tufs.ac.jp/>

² Dotson 2009:128-9. Also available online at: <http://otdo.aa.tufs.ac.jp/>

³ Schuessler’s recent study confirms that Old Chinese *hü* (GSC 2-8; GSR 784) was pronounced as *gwâkh* (Schuessler 2008:67).

Wakhan. The Old Chinese toponym *gwâkh*, preserved in Old Tibetan *gog*, is remarkably close to Wakhan, which is derived from *wuxh*, the toponym used by Wakhi people today. (The phoneme *xh* is a palatal fricative, difficult to pronounce for non-native speakers of Eastern Iranian languages, who often transcribe it as /k/ or /kh/).⁴

On several trips to Wakhan, I located a previously unknown site where rock carvings and inscriptions give ample evidence of Tibetan occupation over time (the site is discussed at length in Mock 2013). At this site, in the center of a large boulder with a glacially-polished surface, are Tibetan characters, bruised into the surface, that spell *gog*. Immediately following *gog* is an amorphous bruised area, which is quite illegible and may be an artifact. In any case, the characters appear in isolation. This inscription appears to be an on-site confirmation of the toponym *Gog* in Old Tibetan.



In the OTA, the toponym *Gog* occurs in the years 745, 747, 756. *Bru-sha*/*Bru-zha* (with which *Gog* is closely associated) occurs in the years 737, 740 and 747. Both are mentioned more frequently in the Tang Annals, where the toponym *Balur*⁶ is used rather than *Brusha* (Beckwith 1987:30, 116; Chavannes 2006b). The importance of *Balur* is

⁴ For more on the cultural, historical and linguistic background of Wakhan, see Mock 2011:118-20.

⁵ Original photograph © John Mock, 2012.

⁶ The geographical and political extents of both Lesser and Greater Bolor, despite considerable efforts, are not well-defined. See Denwood 2008 and Zeisler 2009.

underscored by the words of the Chinese Imperial Commissioner, when in 722, Tibetan forces invaded Balur. King Mo-chin-mang of Little Balur fled to Tang territory and appealed for aid, to which the Imperial Commissioner replied; “Balur is Tang’s western gate. If Balur is lost, all of the Western Regions will be Tibetan!” (Chavannes 2006a:182 fn, my translation).

The Palola Shahi kings of Balur were wealthy patrons of Buddhism, commissioning sumptuous bronze Buddha images and copying and preserving important Buddhist texts – the famous Gilgit manuscripts. Their “astonishing rich and flourishing Buddhist culture” (von Hinüber 2003:35) also left a legacy of Brahmi inscriptions and Buddhist art on numerous rocks throughout the Gilgit region.⁷ The cultural, political and strategic significance of Balur for the Tang court is undeniable. Therefore, it is not surprising that when, in 740, the ruler of Little Balur married a Tibetan princess⁸ and the Tang Imperial Commissioner’s fears of losing the western regions to Tibet were realized, the Tang Empire sent an army of 10,000 to re-take the “western gate.”

Chinese dominance, however, was brief, and Tibetan control of Wakhan appears to have resumed in 756 CE and lasted until the mid or late 9th century CE (Beckwith 1987:144-5, Denwood 2009:156). The decline of Tibetan power in Wakhan not unexpectedly corresponds with the end of the Imperial Tibetan period and of Tibetan control of Dunhuang in 848 (Dalton 2007:18).

Two interesting points are highlighted by this brief study. First, the emergence of Tibetan influence in Balur corresponds with the decline of Chinese influence and the end of several centuries of Palola Shahi rule (von Hinüber 2004:7), a shift that is reflected in the decline of the toponym Balur in favor of the toponym Brusha.⁹ Second, the ethnonyms and toponyms used by the inhabitants of Wakhan and Brusha, as recorded in the Old Tibetan Annals, are accurate historical antecedents of terms in use by the indigenous population today. Brusha, the toponym recorded in the OTA, persists today in the ethnonym Burusho, the language name Burushaski, and the toponym Brushal. The toponym Gog/γwak, which is recorded in both the Tang Annals and the OTA, persists in the ethnonym Wakhik, the

⁷ In addition to the discussion of the Palola Shahi rock inscriptions in von Hinüber 2004, see also the wider discussion of rock art and inscriptions in Jettmar 1989.

⁸ The Lady *Khri ma lod* married the *Bruzha rje*, or Lord of Bruzha, the title the Tibetans conferred on him. Such marriages resulted in *zhang dbon* relationships, in which the Tibetan king was *zhang* or uncle, and the local king who married the princess was *dbon* or nephew (Richardson 1998:16, Dotson 2009:31-37).

⁹ Jettmar comes to a similar conclusion, linking it to growing influence of Kanjudi/Burusho ministers in the Palola Shahi realm (Jettmar 1993:83-88).

language name Wakhik-wor, and the toponym Wuxh/Wakhan. The Old Tibetan inscription from Wakhan offers *in situ* confirmation of the OTA toponym, and undoubtedly dates from the Old Tibetan imperial period.

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