Darkot Revisited:
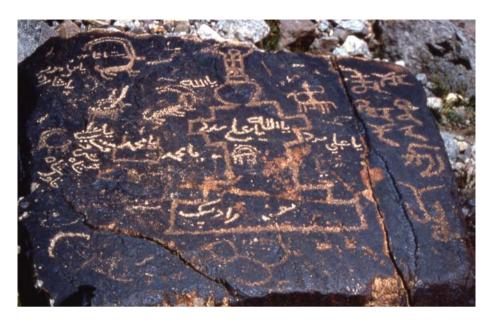## New Information on a Tibetan Inscription and *mchod-rten*

John Mock

Despite being well-known, the Tibetan inscription and associated *mchod-rten* outline incised on a boulder south of the Darkot pass in present-day Gilgit-Baltistan (Pakistan) has remained unexamined since Aurel Stein's visit on August 29, 1913. Subsequent scholars have relied on Stein's black and white photograph (Stein 1928: Fig.46, reproduced in Denwood 2007:51), A.H. Franke's translation of the inscription (Francke 1928:1050-51), and Stein's description and analysis linking the *mchod-rten* and inscription to the period of Tibetan imperial power in the Wakhan-Balur region from roughly the late 7th century CE to the mid-9th century CE (Stein 1928:44-47, Jettmar 1993:95, Denwood 2007:45-46).

I visited the Darkot Pass in 1994 and photographed the 45-degree angle rock in color (Mock and O'Neil 1996:facing p.225). The rock appears much as Stein described. The dark surface patina is an inscribed palimpsest with long-horned ibex figures as perhaps the oldest depictions, the Persio-Arabic phrases and names as the newest, and the Tibetan inscription and associated *mchod-rten* dating from some time in between. The singular rider above and to the right of the *mchod-rten* Stein judged to be from about the same time as the *mchod-rten*.[1]

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[1] Stein based his chronology on "weathering" and "difference of colouring" (1928:46), which is today termed repatination, or the gradual return of the weather-induced patina to the rock surface. It offers a relative chronology for rock palimpsests such as this, but gives no indication of the time interval between the layers of composition. Fortunately in this case, historical and orthographical evidence allows for more accuracy in the dating of the inscriptions and the *mchod-rten*.

Darkot Pass boulder, John Mock 1996

In Stein's black and white photograph, taken from a position to the photographer's left of the rock, the inscription, especially the final line, is, as Denwood (2007:45) noted, "certainly difficult to make out". Nor does Stein's image clearly show the ibex figures, the Persio-Arabic writing, or the rider on horseback.

However, by using both photographs, it is possible to offer a new reading of the inscription. This can be compared with a newly-discovered Tibetan inscription from nearby Wakhan (Afghanistan). The locations of the Darkot and Wakhan sites, their historical provenance, and the relationship of the rock carvings with the landscape can be combined to offer new information on the Tibetan imperial period in the Wakhan-Balur region.

Enlarged view of inscription, John Mock 1996

Francke read the first three lines of the Tibetan inscription as:

rMe-'or
lir ni
dor

with *rMe-'or* as the clan name and *lirni dor* as the personal name of the "erector" of the *mchod-rten*. The name *lir ni dor* is difficult to read in both photographs, due to the angle, weathering, and a large crack along the left edge of the inscription. In particular, the character "la" is unclear, and an alternate reading of "wa" cannot be ruled out. The vowel "i" (*gi gu*) above the "la" appears to be a reversed *gi gu*, an archaic orthographic variant that was very common in Dunhuang manuscripts but gradually fell out of use by the 12th century (Den-

wood 1980:161; van Schaik n.d.). Howsoever we may read the second line, it does appear to be a name, following a typical inscription formula in which clan name (*rus*) precedes personal name (*mying*) (Francke 1928:1050; Richardson 1998:18; Tsuguhito Takeuchi personal communication). This inscription is similar to inscriptions from Ladakh,[2] which follow the clan name – personal name formula.

Francke read the fourth line as *gyi*, which the color photograph confirms. However, Francke read the final line as *om*, noting that "the *om* is extraordinary". He ascribed this extraordinary quality to the two characters in the final line, which he interpreted as "*o* above the *m*", noting that "the *Anusvara* [was] not being used."

In Stein's black and white photograph, the final line is not clear and so could be misread as the vowel "o", which when written with the *a-chen*, is similar in shape to the consonant "ya" with *na-ro*. The final character "na" is even more difficult to read in Stein's photograph, due to the odd angle from which the photograph was taken and the low contrast of the black and white image. Syntactically, however, Francke's reading is improbable ("the *om* of lir ni dor"), which may have prompted Denwood (2007:45) to suggest that the inscription is "probably fragmentary".

The more recent color photograph clearly shows that the final line of the inscription is better read as *yon*. The phrase *gyi yon* is a typical offering phrase in which the possessive/genitive case marker *gyi* and the noun *yon* ("gift") follow a name (Karmay 1998:327, 330). Francke notes that similar inscriptions recording the donations of *mchod-rten* are found throughout Ladakh and that most show the name of the donor in instrumental case, but "only the most ancient inscriptions show the name in the genitive case", which, he notes, follows "the example of Indian inscriptions of a similar type … written in Brahmi, Kharosthi, and Sarada" (Francke 1928:1050-51). The last syllable *yon*, not *om*, is the appropriate grammatical and semantic ending for a *mchod-rten* offering inscription, which in this example may be rendered in English as "the gift of *rMe-'or Lirnidor*" (with alternative readings of the personal name possible).
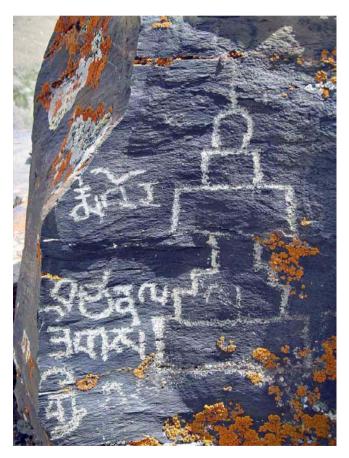
The onomastics of the names deserve comment. Although the clan name *rMe-'or* does not appear in any known lists of Tibetan clan names,[3] Francke (op.cit.) remarks that it is "distinctly Tibetan". Nor is the name *lir ni dor* attested in any Old Tibetan documents. Denwood (2007:45) comments that "*li* suggests a person from Khotan" and

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[2]   Published examples from the ruined fort (*mkhar 'gog*) on the left bank of the Indus near Saspol on the road to Alchi are found in Denwood 1980 and Francke and Jina 2003. Orofino 1990 has examples from beyond Alchi.

[3]   A similar clan name, *rMe-u*, is well-known as one of the founding clans of Bonpo (Karmay 1998:120; Karmay 2007:73).

suggests the inscription and *mchod-rten* may have been made by "a passing Tibetan trader" (2007:50). The previously mentioned uncertainty in the reading of this name leaves open the question of whether it is a Khotanese name.

The clan name *rMe-'or* can now be accepted with greater certainty, as it also appears in a similar *mchod-rten* donation inscription in Wakhan (Mock in press 2013). The Wakhan inscription reads: *rMe-'or btsan la gzigs gyI* [*yon*], with the final syllable illegible, but one may assume it follows the similar pattern where *yon* ("gift") would be expected. The genitive marker has a reversed *gi gu*. The *ga* preceding *zigs* appears at the end of the preceding line, faintly apparent inside the *mchod-rten* structure. *btsan la gzigs* appears to be a title (*mkhan*) rather than a name, possibly from Ladakh (Francke 1914:40, 51; Richardson 1998:17-20).

Wakhan *mchod-rten* and inscription, John Mock 2013

The design of the two *mchod-rten* also deserves comment. They share an unusual shape, which Francke (1928:1051) first termed "cross-like". Denwood noted that this design is typical of the western Himalaya and Karakoram,[4] and that Jettmar considered the design to be an innovation made during the time of imperial Tibetan rule in the region (Denwood 2007:45). Denwood published a similar design from near Alchi in Ladakh (Denwood 2007:52, fig.5), Tucci photographed similar designs near Alchi and at Khalatse (Orofino 1990:figs. 17, 18, 30, 39, 40), and Jettmar and Sagaster discuss an example from Punyal near Darkot (1993:129, Abb.8).

The shared *mchod-rten* design, inscription formula, and identical clan name, together with the Tang Annals documentation of the Darkot pass as a route from/to Wakhan, link the Darkot *mchod-rten* to the Wakhan *mchod-rten* and site.

I have proposed elsewhere (Mock in press 2013) that the Wakhan site is located on the "Northern Gorge" route taken by three thousand horsemen of the Chinese army to attack a Tibetan force at the *Lien-yün* fort in 747 CE (Chavannes 2006a:183; Stein 1922:118). The Wakhan site was probably the location of a hill-station (*ri-zug*), used for signaling with fire or smoke to raise the alarm if enemies approached. Stein (1912:152-53) described these at Miran near Dunhuang and Takeuchi, who studied them in detail, suggested they may have also existed along the southern route of the Silk Road including "Little and Great Balur … and the Pamirs" (2004:55). Dotson links Tibetan hill-stations with "red fire raising stations" that are mentioned in the Old Tibetan Annals (2009:56-57).

The above-mentioned stylistic and epigraphic parallels of the Wakhan *mchod-rten* and inscription with the Darkot *mchod-rten* and inscription, suggest that the two sites may have shared a similar function. The Wakhan site appears to have been a *ri-zug*, and the Darkot site also may have been near a *ri-zug*.

The inscribed Darkot boulder sits along the trail about 45 minutes below the edge of the Darkot glacier at an altitude of approximately 4000m. The boulder is about 5 minutes below a small level area where even today Wakhi men occasionally camp when traversing the Darkot glacier for purchasing supplies at the road head bazaar in the Yasin valley. This site is on a ridge which is visible from the valley below and is marked by a large stone cairn. From the boulder to Rawat, the first village in the Yasin valley, it is a steep 1 ½ hour descent of 1000m (Mock & O'Neil 1996:177-78). The location is not one that a "passing Tibetan trader", like today's Wakhi traders, might

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[4]   Laurianne Bruneau (personal communication) notes that this design is actually quite rare in the rock art of both Gilgit and Ladakh.

have stopped at for more than one night. The approximately one meter tall *mchod-rten* and inscription, carefully bruised into the rock surface to a depth of approximately 5 cm., could not have been completed in one day; more probably, many days were needed, which raises the likelihood that a person or persons stationed at this high elevation remote post near the base of a glacier inscribed the gift of a *mchod-rten*. Takeuchi has noted that *ri-zug* were typically manned by two Tibetans and two Khotanese (Takeuchi 2004:54), which buttresses Denwood's hypothesis that the individual named in the inscription may have been Khotanese. If the site were used for signaling, then several men would have been present, suggesting that the Darkot *mchod-rten* may have been the gift of a Khotanese man, but the actual rock carving and inscription may have been done by another person literate in Tibetan, possibly a Tibetan man.[5]

Conclusion

The historical associations of the site with both Tang Chinese and Tibetan imperial annals (Chavannes 2006a, 2006b; Dotson 2009) and the parallels with similar *mchod-rten* offering compositions in Wakhan (Mock in press 2013), clearly place this inscription in the Tibetan imperial era. As Denwood (2007:46) observed, the inscription may have been created during an initial Tibetan impulse into Wakhan and Balur in the early 8th century CE, but more likely, it was created after the major Tang – Tibetan conflict at the contiguous Broghil pass region in 747 CE, when Tibetan troops were made keenly aware of the need to guard the routes to and from Balur/Bru-zha.

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[5] Or perhaps the inscriber was not Tibetan but was literate in Tibetan. Scribes from Khotan worked at Dunhuang (Dalton et.al 2007). Rock inscriptions at Alchi, dating from the same time as proposed for the Darkot and Wakhan inscription, were likely made by Central Asians (Denwood 1980:162-163).

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