
News from Ancient Afghanistan

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Years of war and instability have led to profound damage to Afghanistan's cultural heritage, with the accidental or deliberate destruction of ancient monuments and works of art, the looting of the Kabul museum and the pillaging of sites such as Aī Khanum by treasure-seekers. At the same time, a huge number of remarkable and important antiquities have come to light, some no doubt as the result of unofficial digging, others perhaps chance finds resulting from the displacement of peoples to remote mountain refuges. These discoveries include documents from all periods of Afghan history, of which I would like to mention a few outstanding examples (in approximately chronological order):

- A group of nearly fifty Aramaic documents from the archive of the last Achaemenian satrap of Bactria, ca. 353-324 BCE. The documents date from the reigns of Artaxerxes III, Darius III, and Alexander the Great — who is referred to exactly as if he were a legitimate successor of the Achaemenids. This discovery was made public by Shaul Shaked in recent lectures in Paris (Shaked 2004); an edition by Shaked and Joseph Naveh is in press.
- An administrative document in Greek, a tax receipt dated in the 4th year of the Graeco-Bactrian king Antimakhos I, perhaps equivalent to 170 BCE. This document, supposedly found at Sangcharak in north central Afghanistan and now in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, was first published in 1994 and most recently edited by Claude Rapin (1996).¹
- An acrostic inscription from the Kandahar region in Greek verse

with Homeric allusions (Bernard et al. 2004). This inscription of about the 2nd century BCE tells the life-story of Sophytos son of Naratos, who lost his fortune and then made another as a merchant in distant lands before returning home to the delight of his friends. Perhaps the most remarkable feature of this inscription is that the author of these highly sophisticated Greek verses seems to have been of Indian ancestry, as his name and patronymic suggest.

- Next in chronological order (15 CE) is a Kharoshti reliquary inscription of Vijayamitra, king of Apraca in NW India, which contains a synchronism between the Azes era, usually identified with the Vikrama era of 58/57 BCE,² and a previously unknown 'Indo-Greek era' beginning 128 years earlier (Salomon 2005). According to Richard Salomon many well-known inscriptions with dates in the 200s and 300s can plausibly be assigned to this era of 186/5 BCE. On this reckoning, for example, the trilingual Dasht-i Nawur inscription of Vima I, the grandfather of Kanishka I, may be dated to about 93 CE.

- Though the document itself is not a new discovery, I must mention here a Sanskrit astrological text, the *Yavanajātaka* of Sphujiddhvaja, which also contains a synchronism, this time between the Saka era of 78 CE and the Kushan era. According to the interpretation recently proposed by Harry Falk (2001; 2004), the synchronism establishes that the famous 'era of Kanishka' began in 127 CE. If this is accepted, it must rank as one of the most important of recent discoveries, since the date of Kanishka is a

fundamental point in the chronology of ancient Afghanistan and India.

- The Bactrian inscription of Rabatak, discovered in 1993 and first published by Joe Cribb and myself in 1996,³ which describes events of the first year of Kanishka and traces his genealogy back to his great-grandfather Kujula Kadphises.

- A group of about 150 Bactrian documents from northern Afghanistan, which date from the 4th to 8th centuries CE (to be discussed below).

- The Bactrian inscription of Tang-i Safedak (Lee and Sims-Williams 2003), which recounts the foundation — or re-foundation — of a stupa in Yakaolang district, Bamiyan province, probably in 714 CE, demonstrating the persistence of Buddhism in Afghanistan well into the Islamic period.

- Finally, I may mention a group of Arabic administrative documents, chiefly tax records, dated between 138 and 160 AH (= 755-777 CE). These documents, which will soon be published by Geoffrey Khan of Cambridge University, mention some of the same families and individuals as the latest Bactrian documents and seem to form part of the same archive.

I do not have time today to talk about all of these new documents, which cover almost all periods of Afghan history from the Achaemenian period to early Islamic times. Instead, I shall restrict myself to those that I know best, the Bactrian letters and documents which have come to light during the past fifteen years and which appear to have been written in northern Afghanistan during the 4th to 8th centuries CE. I first reported on these discoveries in 1996, in a paper published in various forms in English, French, Russian and Japanese.⁴ Since then, the number of Bactrian documents has continued to rise and now stands at more than 150. These

documents are written in a cursive script derived from Greek, mostly on parchment or leather, occasionally on cloth or wood. Apart from a couple of Buddhist texts, the find consists of legal documents, letters, and economic documents. Many of them are dated according to an era whose starting-point was almost certainly the accession of Ardashir I, the first emperor of the Sasanian dynasty of Iran, in 223 CE.⁵

Although we have no reliable information on the discovery of the Bactrian documents, it seems from their contents that most of them derive from just one or two sources. In previous presentations I have described in some detail those which appear to come from the kingdom of Rôb (now Rui) in the northern Hindukush, some of which were written in places which can be identified: Rob itself; Samingan; Malr or Madr; Kah (modern Kahmard); and Warnu, which may correspond to modern Qunduz, mediaeval Warwaliz [Fig. 1].⁶ On this occasion I would like to concentrate on a group of seven or eight recently-discovered documents which originate in a slightly different area, the province of Gôzgân (Gûzgân, Jûzjân), to the northwest of Rob.⁷ These are all legal documents: a deed of sale, a loan contract, a deed of gift, a receipt, and several documents regarding the settlement of disputes. Both in their physical form and in their formulation they are very similar to documents of the same type from the kingdom of Rob. Almost all of them refer to the rulers of Guzgan and to places in Guzgan; all but one are dated, and the dates fall within a period of 65 years beginning in the year 436 of the local era, i.e. 658/9 CE.

Luckily we possess a number of other sources for the history and geography of Guzgan during this period. Amongst the geographical works one must give pride of place to the *Hudûd al-'Âlam* 'The Regions of the World,' a Persian work of the late 10th century,

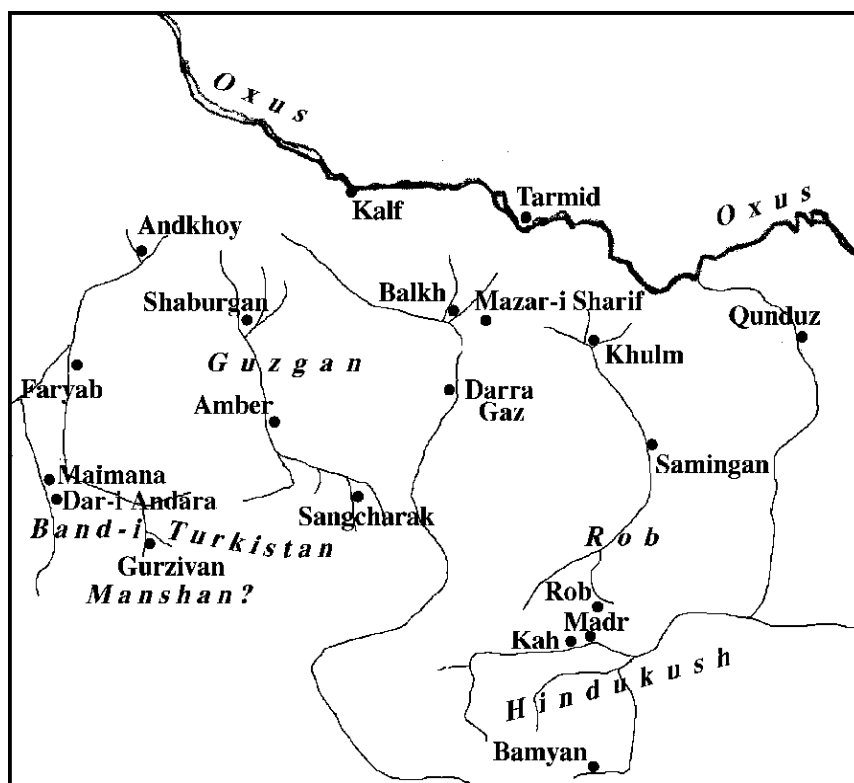


Fig. 1. Northern Afghanistan

which was written at the behest of a ruler of Guzgan. As Edmund Bosworth has written (in Minorsky 1970, p. viii), the anonymous author of this book 'was essentially an armchair geographer,' but 'the description of Guzgan and its dependencies ..., the one section of the book which must depend on personal observation and experience' is exceptionally detailed and authoritative. Another important source is the history of Tabari, who recounts various episodes in the history of Guzgan, some of them in considerable detail. Tabari's account of Guzgan begins with the first Arab invasion in the year 32 of the hijra, i.e. 652/3 CE, just a few years before the earliest of this group of Bactrian documents. Chinese sources too preserve some relevant information, since Guzgan came under the nominal suzerainty of the Tang dynasty after the final defeat of the Western Turks in the late 650s. Finally, we have at least one other source which is actually contemporary with these

documents: a series of coins bearing Bactrian legends which include the name and titles of a ruler named 'Zhudad Gozgan, king of Gar'; they also name the city of Amber, presumably as a mint-town [Fig. 2, next page].

The city of Amber, nowadays Sar-i Pul, is well known from Islamic sources. One of the new Bactrian documents, a poorly-preserved loan-contract, was written in Amber [Fig. 3, next page]. Both the lender and the borrower are identified as 'market-traders of Amber,' which fits well with the description of Amber in the *Hudud* as a 'residence of merchants and the market of Balkh.'

Another of our documents contains the statement that it was written 'in Sozargan, in Kalf, in the city which they call Astof, in the presence of the god Wakhsh, the king of gods, whom they worship in Stof.' I cannot identify the names Sozargan and Astof, but it seems likely that Kalf is the Kalif or Kelif of the Islamic geographers.



Fig. 2. Coin of Zhulad Gozgan, King of Gar (obverse and reverse).
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Kalif lay on the River Oxus, which formed the northern border of Guzman; it was an important crossing-point, since it lay on the road from Balkh to Bukhara and Nasaf. Nowadays the principal settlement named Kelif is that on the north bank, in Turkmenistan, but there is also a village named Kilif or Kilift on the Afghan side. In mediaeval times Kalif was counted as occupying both banks of the Oxus, being likened to Baghdad in this respect.

No less than five of our documents were written either in Gaz or in Lizg. These seem to be, in effect, two designations for the same place. Probably Lizg, which means 'the fortress,' was originally an epithet used to describe a city whose proper name was Gaz. A couple of documents provide some details which may help to locate the fortress of Gaz. One is said to have been written 'in Gaz, at Wanindan, the court of the fortress,' which suggests that the ruler of Guzman may have held court at Gaz.

Another refers to 'Gaz, in the district of Andar.' The *Hudud* gives the name Dar-i Andara to a military camp where the ruler of Guzman had his residence; it is described as being at the foot of the mountains, close to the town of Jahudhan (modern Maymana). If the name Dar-i Andara means 'the court of Andara,' it may well be the place which once bore the name Gaz and which our documents refer to as 'the court of the fortress' ... 'in the district of Andar.'⁸

I turn now from the place-names mentioned in our documents to the personal names

and titles, in particular, those of the rulers of Guzman.

At least three rulers of Guzman are named in the documents: Kanag Gozgan, Skag Gozgan and Yan Gozagan. I take it that Kanag, Skag and Yan are the personal names of the ruler and that the name of the country, Goz(a)gan, is here used as a kind of family or dynastic name for its rulers. A similar usage is attested in Tabari, who (unfortunately for us) never names the ruler of Guzman but refers to him only as 'al-Juzjani' or 'al-Juzjan b. al-Juzjan.'

Kanag Gozgan is mentioned in the earliest document, a purchase-contract dated in 658/9 CE, in which both the vendors and the purchasers are described as 'servants of Kanag Gozgan.' The name of Skag Gozgan occurs in a document of 674/5, which specifies the payment of a fine for breach of contract to 'the treasury of Skag Gozgan.' Finally, the name of Yan Gozagan is found in the very last document of this group, dated in 722/3. This is a declaration intended to settle a dispute between a number of persons who are all described as 'inhabitants of Lizag' and 'servants of Yan Gozagan, king of Gar.'

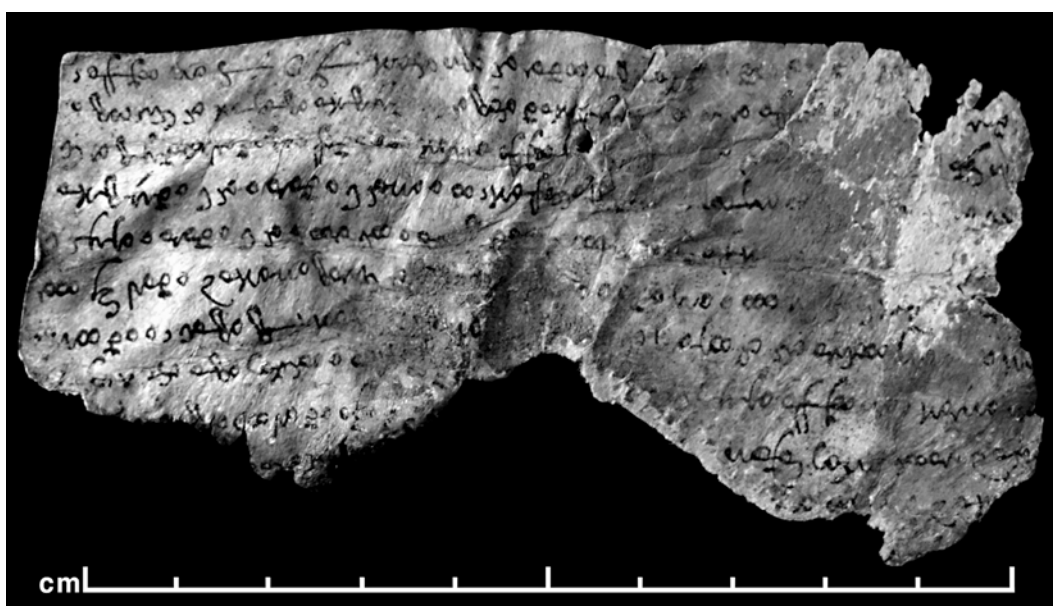


Fig. 3. Bactrian loan-contract written in Amber (Sar-i Pul).
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The significance of the title 'king of Gar' is obscure. I have not been able to identify a specific place named Gar; possibly it is merely the Bactrian word for 'mountain.' The same title reappears on the coins mentioned earlier, which bear the name of yet another member of this dynasty: 'Zhulad Gozgan, king of Gar' or 'king of the mountain country.' These coins bears dates in Pahlavi, but they are practically illegible. Doubts about the era used add a further element of uncertainty, so that we cannot at present be sure of Zhulad's place in the sequence of rulers. As it happens, the name Zhulad Gozgan also occurs in a document of 705/6, a deed of gift issued by the 'lord of Lizg' in favour of three brothers, 'Babay, Abgas and Zhulad Gozgan, sons of Kanag,' whom he describes as 'my own servants.' It is not very likely that the three brothers are the sons of Kanag Gozgan, the ruler named 47 years earlier in the document of 658/9. Even if they were, one would hardly expect that Zhulad, the last-named and therefore presumably the youngest of the three, would have become king. It seems more likely that this Zhulad and his father Kanag belong to later generations and perhaps to a junior branch of the royal family and that they were named after their illustrious forebears, the rulers Kanag Gozgan and Zhulad Gozgan.

To judge by their names, the kings of this dynasty were of Iranian stock. Although they seem to have ruled Guzgan without interruption throughout the period covered by our documents, it is clear that they did not wield absolute power. During the early part of the 7th century, Guzgan was tributary to the *khaghan* of the Western Turks. This must still have been the case at the time of the earliest document, a purchase-contract dated in 658/9, which refers specifically to the 'khaghan's tax.' No such tax is mentioned in the other documents, all of which date from the period after the Western Turks

were finally defeated by the Tang at the very end of the 650s. However, China was too far away for the Tang to exercise effective power in this region, and our documents do not contain any direct reference to the Chinese. So far as I can see, the only trace of Chinese influence is to be found a receipt which ends with the phrase 'this is your *tsak* [σακο],' using a Chinese word for 'document' ([𐰽𐰺𐰍]ce/chai [Early Middle Chinese — *tsəijk/tʃə:jk*]) in a context where earlier documents of the same type use the native Bactrian word *tsirg* '(proof of) receipt.'

The real nature of political power in this region is clarified by a letter to the Chinese emperor preserved in an 11th century encyclopaedia. The author of the letter was a Turkish prince named Puluo, a younger brother of the hereditary ruler of Tokharistan, who had his principal residence at Qunduz, to the east of Balkh. Puluo was sent to live at the Tang court in 705. In this letter, which was written in 718, he mentions the king of Guzgan as one of the '212 kings of various kingdoms, governors and prefects' who recognized the authority of his brother, the ruler of Tokharistan; at the same time he emphasizes the loyalty of his brother to the Tang. This state of affairs is described as having existed since the time of his grandfather, that is, one may presume, during the sixty years or so since the Chinese destroyed the power of the Western Turks and incorporated their dominions into their own administrative framework: 'Since the time of my grandfather and my father up to that of the present ruler, the kings of Tokharistan have always been the overlords of these various countries ... The rulers of Tokharistan, from several generations ago up to the present, have been sincerely devoted to the great Tang dynasty; they have come constantly to pay homage and to bring tribute.'

A Bactrian document dated in 692/3 CE refers to two noblemen

or officials with Turkish names and titles. One is named as 'Ser the Turk, *tudun* of Gaz,' the other as 'lord Magatur Bukla.' It is interesting to note that the title *tudun* is that given by the *khaghan* of the Western Turks to the officer whom he sent to oversee the local rulers who had submitted to him and to control the payment of taxes. In the light of Puluo's letter one might guess that the *tudun* here carries out a similar function on behalf of the ruler of Tokharistan, the immediate overlord of the rulers of Guzgan. Even more interesting is the name of 'Lord Magatur Bukla.' Magatur is no doubt a variant of the Turkish *baghatur*, attested as a personal name and later as a term for a 'hero' or 'warrior,' the source of Persian *bahâdur* and Russian *bogatyr*. As for Bukla [βοκολαυο], I am grateful to Yutaka Yoshida for the very plausible suggestion that this name may be identified with the name transcribed into Chinese as Puluo (僕羅 [Early Middle Chinese *bəwk-la*]). As Prof. Yoshida points out, it is even possible that the Bukla in the Bactrian document of 692/3 is the very same person as the Turkish prince who arrived in China thirteen years later, the author of the letter to the Chinese emperor.

The historical information preserved in the Bactrian documents is of course fragmentary, but I hope that these few examples will be enough to demonstrate that they contain fascinating and important information, which can be supplemented and elucidated with the help of historical and geographical literature in Chinese, Persian and other languages. Together with the Aramaic, Greek and Arabic documents from Afghanistan which I referred to at the beginning of this paper, not to mention data from archaeology, numismatics, art history and other disciplines, they promise to make possible a substantially new synthesis of the early history of Afghanistan.

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About the Author

Nicholas Sims-Williams is currently Research Professor of Iranian and Central Asian Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. His main interest is the medieval languages of Eastern Iran and Central Asia, especially Sogdian and Bactrian, and the history of their speakers. He has just completed the second volume of his edition of the recently-discovered Bactrian documents (to appear in 2007), and is now working on a project on Bactrian chronology.

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Notes

1. For references to the earlier editions see Rapin 1996, 458 n. 1.
2. For a different view see Cribb 2005, 213-14.
3. Sims-Williams and Cribb 1996; revised edition in Sims-Williams 1998. In 2003 I finally had the opportunity to visit Kabul and to

examine the inscription with my own eyes; as a result, a third edition is now in preparation.

4. Sims-Williams 1997a-d; see also <http://www.gengo.l.u-tokyo.ac.jp/~hkum/bactrian.html>. Sims-Williams 2001 is the first volume of a comprehensive edition of the documents.

5. This important point has been established by François de Blois (see de Blois forthcoming).

6. I previously accepted the alternative identification of Warnu (Greek Aornos) as Khulm, but the newly-discovered Aramaic documents name both Khulm and Warnu, almost certainly implying that they are different cities.

7. This group of documents is now edited and translated in Sims-Williams 2005. For a more detailed version of the following discussion see Sims-Williams 2004 (in French), but the dates of the documents given there now need to be corrected.

8. Some other indications might lead one to seek Gaz further to the east, in the mountains to the south of Balkh. Sources from the 14th to the 19th centuries mention here a valley and a village called Darra Gaz, which may be identical with the Gazzah or Jazzah of early Islamic sources. Jazzah is frequently mentioned in Tabari's account of the events of the year 119 of the hijra (i.e. 737 CE), when the Turgesh *khaghan* was defeated in battle by Asad b. 'Abdallâh. From Tabari it appears that Jazzah was a fortified place with a garrison; it was counted as belonging to Juzjan, but it is clear from the itineraries of the combatants that it lay in the extreme east of Juzjan, close to Balkh. It seems unlikely to me that such an outlying fortress would have been a major administrative centre, or that the ruler of Guzgan would have held court there; but I have to admit that this is the only place within the confines of Guzgan which is definitely known to have borne the name of Gaz.

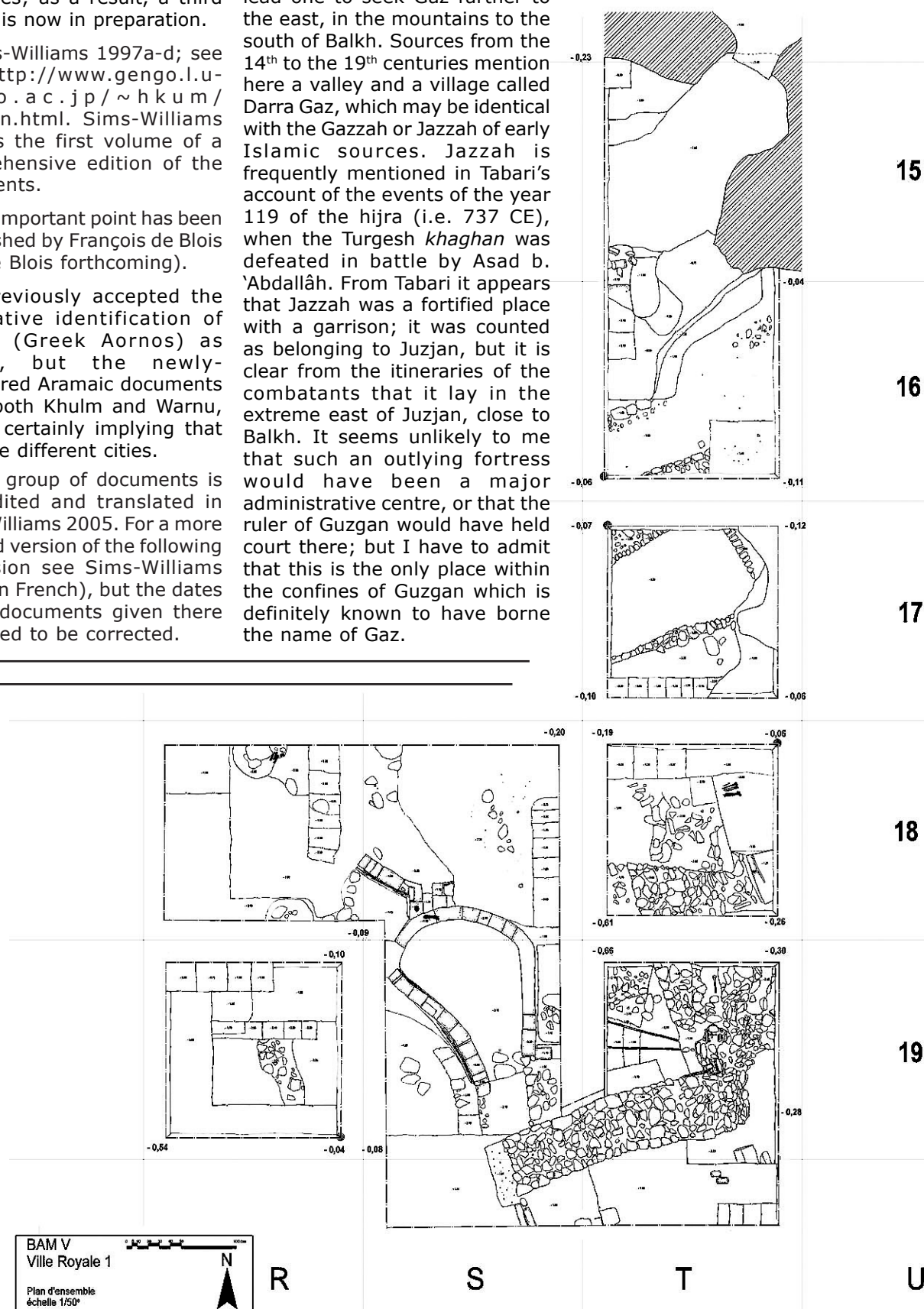


Fig. 1. Bamiyan VR1= Royal City site no.1, overall plan of excavations. Copyright © 2006 DAFA; Zemaryalai Tarzi.