

Two Kharoṣṭhī Inscriptions from Takht-i-Bahi

Stefan Baums

Abstract

This article examines two Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions on architectural elements from Takht-i-Bahi dating to the mid- to late Kushan period, one kept in the Islamabad Museum, the other in the Museum of Art and Archaeology of the University of Missouri. It offers a new interpretation of the Islamabad inscription, identifying the personal names of the donors and clarifying linguistic details of the formula. It then demonstrates that the Islamabad and Missouri inscriptions in all likelihood belonged to the same structure, or to two structures built on the same plan, at Takht-i-Bahi, and were donated by members of the same family.

Keywords: Takht-i-Bahi, Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions, Buddhist donations.

1. The Islamabad Museum Inscription

The Islamabad Museum houses a small piece of stone (49 cm wide × 6.8 cm high × 5.9 cm deep), apparently an architectural element, bearing a Kharoṣṭhī inscription (CKI 596). It was reportedly discovered in 1977 as a chance surface find on the western side of the Takht-i-Bahi site, and published with a reading in Nadiem 1989. On receiving the stone, apparently broken on the right side, Nadiem unsuccessfully searched for further parts near its reported findspot. The piece received the accession number SRP-623 in the Inventory Register of the Reserve Collection of the Sub-Regional Office of the Department of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Pakistan. In 1988, it was displayed in the Taxila Museum (Nadiem 1989, 210). It is unclear when it reached its current whereabouts in the galleries of the Islamabad Museum, with a label stating only in Urdu “خروشتی رسم الخط گندهارا (۲۰۰-۳۰۰ء)” / “Engraved Kharoshti Script (Schist Stone), Gandhara (2nd–3rd Century C.E.)”

The reading and translation given in Nadiem 1989 (with help from A. H. Dani) are as follows:

“Udakabhadre Dharma Vadha havi (viha) re bha (bhi?) khuna
Sibena Iphano-putrena iha”

“Here in Udakhbhadra at the Dharma-Vadha monastery (was established) by the bhikhu Siva, son of Iphano.”

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Nadiem took “Udakabhadrā” as the ancient name of Takht-i-Bahi and, assuming a transposition in *havire* for *vihare*, “Dharmavadha” as the name of the local monastery. Further assuming omission of a vowel mark in *bhakhuna*, he interpreted Siba, son of Iphano, as a monastic donor. The position of *iha*, taken as “here” at the very end of the inscription is awkward.

I came across the inscription on visits to the Islamabad Museum in March 2024 and in January 2025, and on both occasions took photographs that allowed me to read the inscription differently in several of its akṣaras, and to arrive at a quite different overall interpretation that I would like to present in this article, before making a connection of the Islamabad stone with another inscribed piece kept at the University of Missouri that appears to be from the same findspot at Takht-i-Bahi.

As Nadiem also noted, the inscription seems to be incomplete at its beginning (the right end of the stone). The first preserved word in my reading is *udayabhadreṇa* “by Udayabhadrā,” i.e., not a place name in the locative, but a personal name in the instrumental. The second akṣara is quite clearly a *ya* rather than a (very cursive) *ka*, and the *ṇa* (rather than *dha*, or *a* or *va*) is beyond doubt. The name is attested in the Pali form Udayabhadda as that of the bodhisattva in a previous birth as a king of Vārāṇasī in the Udayajātaka (Fausbøll 1887: IV 104-113), and in the Sanskrit form Udayabhadrā as that of a son of Ajātaśatru in the Saṃghabhedavastu (Gnoli 1978: II 158).

This name is followed by an unusual and difficult akṣara. Nadiem proposed to read it as two separate akṣaras *rma* and *va* written one above the other (possibly as the correction of an omission, though he does not explicitly say so). While the curve on top could be taken as a *ma* tilted to the right, I fail to see a cross-stroke marking *r*, and the larger shape below, with its very distinctly drooping left side, certainly does not look like a *va*. Instead, I propose to read a single akṣara *pre*, in a very cursive form. The stroke on top in my reading either represents the vowel mark *e* or, less likely, is the upward extension that *pa* usually has, with a vowel mark *e* lost in the surface damage just to its right. If the former is correct, then the body of *pre* has a cursive single-stroke form, with unusually small subscript *r*, and unusually long right arm. The following four akṣaras are very clearly *ṭha*, *va*, *vi*, and *te* (rather than *dha*, *ha*, *vi*, and *re*), and the resultant word is *[pre]ṭhavavite* “is established.”

The usual form of this term marking a donation (or frequently also a relic establishment) is *pradiṭhavidā-*. The contraction of the prefix into a single syllable *pre-* is, however, attested in CKI 116 (Jamalgarhi) *preṭhavide*, CKI 177 (Charsadda) *presthevida*, and CKI 64 (Taxila, eye copy only) *preṭhav[e]tiye* (and an intermediate stage with loss of *d* is attested in CKI 327 *praṭhavedi*, CKI 332 *paṭhavedi*, CKI 256 *-praistavidami*, and CKM 267 *praṭṭha[vamaṇa]*). The additional syllable *va* in our *[pre]ṭhavavite* also occurs in CKI 511 (reportedly from the Jalalabad area) *pradiṭhavavido*. Strauch 2007, 79 calls *va* in the latter a “superfluous syllable,” but it is possible that we have in these two cases a double causative infix *-vavi-* (< OIA *-pāp-ay-* : *-pāp-i-*) rather than just *-vi-* (< OIA *-p-ay-* : *-p-i-*), on the analogy of CKI 15 (Aśoka’s edicts at Mansehra) *ropapita-* (cf. Hultzsch 1925: xcix). The masculine direct-case singular ending *-e* is a common variant of *-o*.

In the following, Nadiem’s emendation of *bha* to *bhi* is unnecessary, and it is not clear where he saw the letter *khu*, which would typically be quite large. I read the name *bhadraśirena* “by Bhadraśira” (instead of *bh(ī)khuna Sibena*). The first element of this name (OIA *bhadra-*) is well-attested in Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions: Bhadrayaśa (CKC 138), Bhadravala (CKI 172, CKI 467), Bhadrasena (CKI 249), Bhadrasoma (CKI 300), as is its second one (OIA *śiras*): Imdraśira (CKI 350), Dhañāśira (CKI 1019), Dhramaśira (CKI 458), Dharmaśira (CKI 1082, CKD 314), Budhaśira (CKI 254, CKI 614, CKI 663, CKI 664), Saṃgaśira (CKD 473). It will also not be a coincidence that the two donors of this inscription share the name element *bhadra* – a common pattern both among relatives and among fellow monastics.

The next word, giving the name of the father of Bhadraśira, I read only slightly differently as *aphanaṇaputre[ṇa]* (rather than *Iphano-putrena*). The etymology of the name is uncertain, but the rare letter *ph* suggests an Iranian or possibly Greek origin. The inscription concludes with *[sa]ha* “together with” (rather than *iha* “here”). The top half of the head of the *[sa]* is lost to surface damage, but the akṣara is otherwise quite clear, and can certainly not be read as *i*.

My complete new reading and translation of the Islamabad Museum inscription from Takht-i-Bahi is thus as follows:¹

/// udayabhadreṇa [pre]ṭhavavite bhadrāśireṇa aphaṇaputre[ṇa
sa]ha

“ ... is established by Udayabhadra together with Bhadrāśira,
the son of Aphaṇa.”

The inscription thus records the installation of some donation by a certain Udayabhadra and Bhadrāśila. The two names appear to be those of lay people. Paleographically, the inscription belongs to the middle period of Kharoṣṭhī, and in view of the cursive shape and advanced sound change in [pre]ṭhavavite probably to the later part of this period, i.e., to Kushan times.

2. The University of Missouri Inscription

The Museum of Art and Archaeology of the University of Missouri is home to another inscribed stone element,² published in Salomon 1985–86 from photographs and a rubbing (CKI 333). This unprovenanced object (accession number L596 g, object ID 88.39) was a donation of Alan and Ann Wolfe, and was acquired by the Museum in 1988 (James Terry, personal communication), though apparently it was already on loan there for some time prior. According to Nagar 1981, v (who does not refer to this object specifically), the Gandhāra collection of the museum was mostly built up in the 1970s, i.e., at roughly the same time as the discovery of the Islamabad Museum inscription at Takht-i-bahi. Salomon read and translated the inscription as follows:

¹ I would like to thank Andrew Glass, who first reread this inscription together with me based on the illustration published in Nadiem 1989, which already allowed us to apply some of the improvements suggested here in Baums & Glass 2002–. Cf. also Baums 2018: 44 and Khan Khattak 2019: 92.

² See the online catalog of the museum under <https://maacollections.missouri.edu/ArgusNET/Portal/Portal.aspx?component=AAER&record=f565c2ef-e1fe-4b8f-9853-921a79dbe541>. I would like to thank Sarah Thomson for providing new images of the object.

/// vite viharaspamimṇa aphaṇa makṣibhavaṇa
bucamaṇeṇapotrakeṇa chapaputreṇa ///

“ ... is (made / established?) by the *vihāra*-master Aphaṇa, of the descendants of Makṣi, grandson of Bucamaṇeṇa(?), son of Chapa, ... ”

The reading is sound. Salomon was rightly uncomfortable with taking *bucamaṇeṇapotrakeṇa* as a single word, but saw now alternative that would not leave *potrakeṇa* “hanging” (p. 285). It seems to me, however, that it is possible to take Aphaṇa as the donor, and his “little grandson” (note *potraka*- rather than simple *potra*-) Bucamaṇa, son of Chapa, as a co-donor, beneficiary, or (less likely if Bucamaṇa was a child) an honoree.

What is immediately apparent is the presence in this inscription of the same unusual name Aphaṇa as in the Takht-i-Bahi inscription edited three years later by Nadiem, though spelled with a dental *n* here and with a retroflex *ṇ* in the latter. Paleographically, this inscription also generally agrees with the one edited by Nadiem (with the important caveat that *pa* here has its usual form), and would likewise seem to belong to the Kushan period. Most importantly the measurements of the inscribed stone in Missouri (58.5 cm wide × 7 cm high × 6 cm deep) agree perfectly with those of the Islamabad Museum piece, and there are four further characteristics that connect them. Nadiem (1989: 210) had noted that the piece now in the Islamabad Museum has five square holes on its bottom, of which the four undamaged ones measure 2.2 cm × 2.2 cm; the piece now at the University of Missouri also has five sockets in a row on its bottom (Fig. 3b), though with slightly different dimensions: four smaller ones measuring 3 cm × 2.5 cm, and one larger one measuring 4.5 cm × 3 cm. The Missouri piece further has a socket on its top right (Fig. 3c) that seems to have accommodated a metal cramp connecting it to another stone; Nadiem had likewise noted one hole on the upper side of the Islamabad piece. According to Nadiem, the Islamabad piece is polished on the front, top, and bottom, but has “clear chisel-marks without an effort on its complete dressing” on the back, which also describes the Missouri piece (Fig. 3a). Finally, Nadiem observed that the Islamabad piece has a “a very slight curve”; the Missouri piece likewise seems to be very slightly

curved, with the inscription on the convex side.³ If this were confirmed, then the pieces would have been attached to the drum of a stūpa. In any case, it seems certain that both pieces hail from the same or two very similar structures at Takht-i-Bahi and were unearthed around the same time.

In light of the Islamabad Museum piece, we can complete the first word of the Missouri inscription and adjust its interpretation as follows:

/// (preṭhava)vite viharaspamimṇa aphanena makṣibhavaṇa
bucamaṇeṇa potrakeṇa chapaputreṇa ///

“ ... is established by the monastery master Aphanā, of the
Makṣibhavas ... (his) grandson Bucamaṇa, son of Chapa ... ”

It is by no means certain that here, too, the word expressing the establishment had the same unusual form as in the other inscription, but the presence of this lexeme seems very likely, and significantly, it had the same variant ending *-e* (rather than *-o*). This was probably preceded by a designation of the object of the donation in the beginning, and an indication of the role of Bucamaṇa (possibly, as in the Islamabad piece, the word *saha*, if he was a co-donor) at the end.

Even though both pieces are physically compatible, it would be textually difficult to link them up into a single inscription (... *(preṭhava)vite viharaspamimṇa a[pha]neṇa makṣibhavaṇa bucamaṇeṇa potrakeṇa chapaputreṇa ... udayabhadreṇa [pre]ṭhavavite bhadrāṣireṇa aphaṇaputre[ṇa sa]ha*) as that would seem to include two (rather than the expected one) verbs of establishment, and even if the first verb were to be reconstructed differently, the position of the two agents with regard to their verbs would be inconsistent (Aphanā following it, Udayabhada preceding it).

3. Conclusions

The two Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions discussed in this article both in all likelihood come from Takht-i-Bahi, and make an important contribution to the small epigraphical corpus from this site (including, besides these two, the Buddha image CKI 54, the pottery fragment 55, the large bowl CKI

³ Unfortunately, Nadiem illustrates only the front side of the Islamabad piece, and the other sides cannot be clearly seen the way it is currently displayed in the museum.

545, and less certainly the stone CKI 53). They probably date to the mid-to late Kushana period. The measurements and physical characteristics of the two stones make it likely that they belonged to the same structure, or two separate structures built using modular elements with identical measurements. The specific structural part may have been a railing, coping, or balustrade according to Nadiem 1989: 210. The inscription now in Missouri records a certain Aphana as donor, and the one in the Islamabad Museum a son of Aphana. As these were members of two successive generations, it is possible that the inscriptions were made at two separate times, but nothing precludes that members of different generations participated in the same donative act. The object of donation, apparently designated by the term *pradiṭha-* that is characteristic of relic establishments, rather than the term *danamuha* that is more typical of the donation of images and similar objects, would appear to have been a stūpa.

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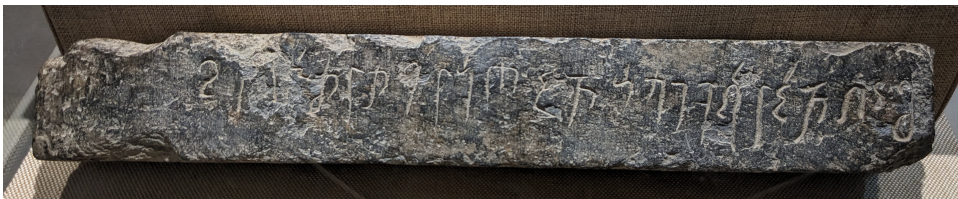
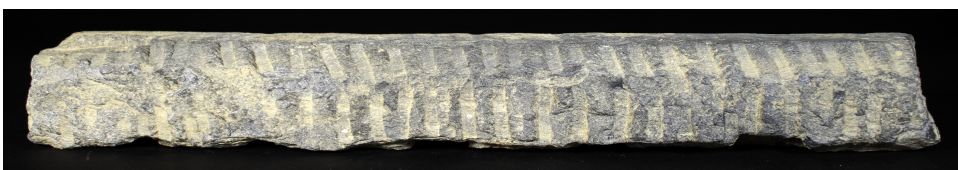


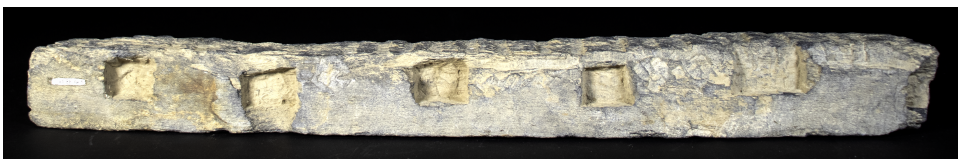
Fig. 1 - Inscription in the Islamabad Museum (Photo by the Author).



Fig. 2 - Inscription in the Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri (Courtesy of Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri).



a.



b.



c.

Figs. 3 - Photos of the other sides of the Missouri piece. From top: a. back side; b. bottom side with a row of five sockets; c. top side, with socket for cramp on the top right (Courtesy of the Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri).