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NEW “LATIN” INSCRIPTIONS IN CENTRAL ASIA: LEGIO XV APOLLINARIS
AND MITHRAS?

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LEGIO XV APOLLINARIS AND MITHRAS?

In *Vestnik Drevnei Istorii* 1990, fascicle 4, Yu.N.Ustinova reports the discovery of three inscriptions at Kara-Kamar in Soviet Central Asia, one in Greek and the other two in Latin script.¹ All three come from the same complex, which comprises several caves. It is situated on the borders of Turkmenia and Uzbekistan, in Gagarinskiy region, in the extreme south-west of Surkhandar'inskaya Oblast'. The complex stands on high ground rising above the broad Sherabadskaya valley. Other inscriptions have also been found at Kara-Kamar, from all periods (notably short Arabic and Bactrian texts). This region is perhaps best designated Northern Bactria.²

Ustinova presents the inscriptions as follows (though the letters are evidently rather irregular in size and shape):

1. line 1 ROD
line 2 illegible
line 3 I M

2. line 1 PAN
line 2 G. REX
line 3 AP. LG

3 Ῥίπος ἔθη(κε)

The inscriptions in Latin script were found, cut into the soft sandstone wall, in an entrance to a cave, close together, but with the first roughly 1.5 m. above the second. They are situated high up in what seems to have formed a kind of vestibule to the cave: it seems that they would only have been visible with the aid of artificial light. The higher of the two stands some 5 metres above the contemporary ground-level, and at least 6 metres above the ancient ground-level. The Greek inscription was found, again high up, in another entrance to the same cave. All three inscriptions were scratched in a manner which renders both readings and dates particularly problematic.

Ustinova takes the first and second inscriptions to be Latin not only in script but also in language. The point is of some importance for, if the inscriptions from Kara-Kamar are indeed Latin, then the much-discussed text from the Baku region would no longer be the

¹ Yu.N.Ustinova, "Naskal'niye Latinskiye i Grecheskaya Nadpisi iz Kara-Kamara", *Vestnik Drevnei Istorii* 1990. 4 pp.145-7.

² E.V.Rtveladze, "Iz nedavnikh otkrytiy Uzbekistanskoy iskusstvovedcheskoy ekspeditsii v Severnoy Baktrii-Tokharistanye", *Vestnik Drevnei Istorii* 1990. 4 pp.135-45, esp. 140-45.

most easterly Latin inscription: Kara-Kamar would take its place.³ Indeed, the comparison is apposite, for these new texts, like the Baku text, were found in a place where many inscriptions, graffiti and scratch-drawings had been cut before and after. The walls of the cave at Kara-Kamar are covered with all manner of scratchings, which further complicates the epigrapher's task.

The Baku text was cut by a centurion. Ustinova argues for a military presence at Kara-Kamar too, for she finds mention of legio XV Apollinaris in the third line of the second inscription.⁴ Again, on that argument, the Roman military are seen carrying Latin beyond its normal boundaries. If that is right, one wonders if the REX of the previous line may not be VEX, though Rtveldze and Ustinova are confident in their reading. Moreover, the G might not be an abbreviated Gaius, as Ustinova thinks, though the stops printed in lines two and three of the second inscription are present in the inscribed text. Could this be an abbreviated army rank, another centurion even, as in the Baku text? Legion XV was certainly in Transcaucasia from the late first century A.D., so that it is conceivable that a detachment came even this far east.

Further, Ustinova also finds mention of Mithras: the distance between the letters I and M in the third line of the first inscription is three times greater than the distances between the other letters of that inscription, for which reason Ustinova detects an abbreviated Invictus Mithras, presumably in the dative case, ROD being the name of the dedicant (?). It would be entirely appropriate that a Mithraic inscription should be cut in such a cave.

These readings and suggestions are enticing, for it would be splendid to find Latin inscriptions mentioning Mithras and legio XV Apollinaris well to the east of the Caspian. Indeed, it seems plausible enough to imagine Roman military scouting-parties pushing that far. However, these scratchings require a good deal of caution, not only in reading but also in interpretation. Even the Baku text, which does not present substantial problems of reading, has generated a flurry of speculation: a Roman fort has been imagined and grand strategic schemes devised for the Flavians.⁵ Lest the Kara-Kamar texts suffer the same fate, a few words of caution may be in order.

First, reading. It must be stressed that no single recognisably Latin word can be read, apart from REX, which could as well be an English proper name (not to mention ROD). The problem is fundamental: the case that these are Latin inscriptions has yet to be proved. Further, if they are indeed Latin (which remains in doubt), much is still unclear. Given the damaged surface of the sandstone of the wall around this inscription, line-length, for

³ H.Heidenreich, "Zur östlichsten lateinischen Inschrift", ZPE 52 (1983) pp.213-14, with further comments by D.Braund, "Roman and native in Transcaucasia from Pompey to Successianus (1st. cent. B.C. to 3rd. cent. A.D.)", in V.Maxfield and M.Dobson (eds.) Roman Frontier Studies, 1989 (Exeter, 1991) pp.419-23.

⁴ Ustinova art.cit. 146-7, taking PAN to be Pan(nonici).

⁵ For critiques, see note 3 above.

example, is not clear (at least in the published photograph), so that the nature of the text must remain in doubt: e.g. ROD could easily be pro d... . As to Mithras, the expansion of the third line of the first inscription is very bold, not least in that it depends upon letter-spacing in the rest of the inscription where many letters cannot be discerned and where the text is notable for its irregularity. As to the Roman army, a particular concern is the apparent absence of the legionary number, XV: given this omission, the inversion of the more normal sequence of legio (oddly abbreviated) and Apollinaris (greatly abbreviated) is also disquieting.

Second, interpretation. Even if, despite the doubts and problems, Ustinova's readings are accepted, caution is also required in interpreting these texts. Rtveladze and Ustinova argue that this cave was used as a Mithraeum, though there is no indication of that (or any other) cult beyond their reading of the inscription and the apparent lack of permanent habitation there. However, even if their reading is right, one short inscription (or even a possible three) need show no more than that this cave, which has evidently been sufficiently remarkable to induce generations of mankind to inscribe there, evoked Mithras for a Latin-oriented visitor, conceivably a Roman soldier. As to date, Ustinova places the second inscription in the last third of the first century A.D.: a second century date would be at least as likely,⁶ if legio Apollinaris is rightly detected.

To conclude. The anxiety that the Latin texts may be the work of some modern visitor abides. Without some firmly recognisable Latin word, it is difficult to be confident of the existence of a Latin inscription, especially as far east as Kara-Kamar. Interpretation and subsequent inference seem best resisted. It is to be hoped that further researches in Northern Bactria may shed some light on these problems and perhaps alleviate doubt.

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⁶ Cf. E.Ritterling, R.-E. XII (1925) s.v. "legio", col.1754.