

The Sumantash Stone



Kyrgyz tombs at the Sumantash site (photo Surat Toimastov)

Sumantash, on the northern bank of the Alichur river, just east of Yashilkul lake, is the site of two brief – but important – military skirmishes: the first, in 1759, ended with the rout by the Chinese of the Khoja (Muslim) rulers of Kashgar, the brothers Burhān al-Dīn and Khwāja-i Jahān, who fled to Afghan Badakhshan. The Chinese commemorated this by a carved rock known as the Sumantash stone. This stone has a long slit on the top that is believed to have served as a primitive letterbox and – according to the British adventurer Lord Dunmore who saw it in 1892 – it originally carried a panel in Chinese with the following text (Dunmore’s translation): “On the crest of the mountains 10,000 men laid down their arms. The Chinese soldiers, coming from the four points of the compass, then went unopposed as if penetrating into an uninhabited country. The two ringleaders, therefore, seeing that further efforts would be in vain, took to flight, whilst our soldiers in pursuit resembled tigers and leopards, chasing hares and foxes. Before our soldiers had advanced far after them, and when they were still crossing the mountains, our men were in good fighting order.”



Sketch of the Sumantash stone *in situ* in 1895

The two Muslim leaders reached Badakhshan but were subsequently killed by Sultan Shah, the ruler there. A legend arose that, in their death throes, they laid a curse on Badakhshan and prayed that it might be three times depopulated. As Sir Henry Yule points out in his account of the incident, “in fact, since then it has been at least three times ravaged; first, a few years

after the outrage by Ahmed Shah Durani of Kabul, when the treacherous Sultan Shah was put to death; in the beginning of this [19th] century by Kokan Beg of Kunduz; and again in 1829 by his successor Murad Beg, who swept away the bulk of the remaining inhabitants, and set them down to die in the marshy plains of Kunduz.”



The Chinese army defeats the Khoja brothers Burhān al-Dīn and Khwāja-i Jahān in Yesil-Kol-Nor 1759
(Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Yesil_Kol_Nor and <http://www.battle-of-qurman.com.cn/e/hist.htm>)

Some years before Dunmore was in Sumantash, another British explorer, T.E. Gordon, reported that the fleeing Muslims “are said to have driven their women and children, mounted on camels and horses, into the lake, to meet their death by drowning rather than that they should fall into the hands of the enemy. The Kirghiz have a legend that the sounds of lamentation, and of people and animals in terror of death, are often heard near the lake.”

Lord Dunmore writes that he saw the inscription in a museum in Tashkent and it must have been separated from the stone by the Russian ‘Flying Pamir Detachment’ under Colonel Mikhail Ionov and taken there after the campaign (the stone itself being too heavy to transport easily).

The stone itself is reliably reported by local inhabitants to have remained in Sumantash until the early 1960s, when it was removed to Khorog and placed in front of the local museum in Lenin Street. It was feared in Tajikistan, however, that this stone might be used at some time by China as evidence of historical Chinese sovereignty over the Alichur Pamir. In 1969 – at a time of border tension with China – it was replaced by a bust of Lenin and buried next to the pedestal. In 2004, when the main road in Khorog was widened, this important historical monument of the Pamirs was dug up and unceremoniously dumped in the street near the offices of the Aga Khan Foundation (photos below). It is reliably reported to have been placed subsequently in the garage of the Khorog Museum, but some secrecy still attaches to its location because of local sensitivity about its potential importance in future Sino-Tajik relations, despite the border agreement signed between the two governments in 2002 and ratified in 2011.



The second skirmish took place between Russian and Afghan soldiers on 12 July 1892, and effectively ended Afghan (and Chinese) presence in the eastern Pamirs. It was followed in the summer of 1893 by the construction of the Russian base 'Pamirsky Post' on the Murghab river (site of present-day Murghab town). In 1896, the Russian base in Khorog was built and became the Russian headquarters in the Pamirs in the following year.

The fixing of boundaries and determination of historical claims to territory was one of the major stakes in the 'Great Game'. Lord Dunmore recounts that shortly after the British had subdued Hunza in December 1891, the Chinese had prepared a boundary stone, with appropriate ancient-looking inscriptions asserting that it marked the Chinese frontier, and had buried it with an image of Buddha at the top of the Minteke pass leading into Hunza, where – if there were ever a boundary dispute – it could conveniently be 'discovered'.

In 1889 the British Viceroy, the Marquess of Lansdowne, sent Francis Younghusband, an enthusiastic participant in the 'Great Game', to explore the extent of Chinese authority in the region and the chances it might give to hold off the Russians. There he played hide and seek with Russian patrols and attempted (unsuccessfully) to motivate the Chinese and Afghans to make claims of sovereignty in the area.

The British Ambassador in St. Petersburg wrote to the Foreign Secretary in January 1892:

I perceive from the correspondence that the Indian government seems desirous to induce the Chinese and Afghans to meet north of Lake Victoria on the Alichur Pamiir, and that it would appear that Captain Younghusband actually invited the Afghans to occupy Yashil Kul. Now, it appears to me that this would be a most dangerous policy to follow. It would be acting in flagrant disregard of the engagement of 1872-73; it would give a most legitimate "casus belli" to the Russians against Afghanistan, and we could not honourably encourage the Afghans to carry out such a plan unless we were ready to give them physical support. It seems to me absolutely necessary, if we are to enter upon these negotiations, that we should rigidly adhere to the binding character of the Agreement of 1872-73.¹

¹ Postnikov, p. 251.

In correspondence with the Foreign Secretary a month earlier, the Ambassador had also confirmed that the Russians were aware that Younghusband and his companion, Davison, were fishing in troubled waters:

I ought to say that in the course of conversation M. de Giers [the Russian Foreign Minister] mentioned in explanation of Colonel Yonow's [Ionov's] high-handed treatment of Captain Younghusband, that he had come across, almost everywhere he went, the traces of that officer's handiwork in exciting the Chinese against Russia. A statement made by Mr. Davison to Mr. Eliot at Margilan would seem to a certain extent to corroborate this assertion. Mr. Davison said that Captain Younghusband had in the first instance invited the Afghans to take possession of the Alichur Pamir, but on meeting with no response to his overtures had urged the Chinese to strengthen themselves there in view of a possible invasion by the Afghans.²

Although he had invaded and subjugated trans-Oxus Shughnan and Rushan in 1883 'with characteristic brutality',³ even the new Afghan Amir, Abdur Rahman Khan, was uncertain about the actual limits of his territory. To the embarrassment of the Indian and British authorities, Younghusband had exceeded his instructions in the Pamirs: in addition to attempting to mobilise a Chinese presence in the Pamirs, he had written to the Afghan governor in Shughnan saying that the Chinese had heard he had occupied Sumantash and wished him to withdraw. As a result, in October 1891, the Amir requested "the exalted Government of India to send me a correct map, which may have been prepared with the inquiries and surveys of the English Surveyors made in those regions, showing how far the limits of the Afghan territory extend and how far those of the Chinese and Russians, so that I might be able to know about it, and with due knowledge, be able to send instructions to the Sarhaddar [governor] of Shighnan."⁴

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² Postnikov, p. 248.

³ The words chosen by the distinguished Central Asian scholar the late Paul Bergne.

⁴ Postnikov, p. 232.