



ISLAM AKHUN

ISLAM AKHUN (Eslām-ākūn), treasure-seeker and swindler active in Khotan and neighboring areas between 1894 and 1901, best known, however, as an adept forger of manuscripts and block prints in various pseudo-scripts. He was eventually unmasked by Sir Aurel Stein (1862-1943) in 1901.

Following the discovery in 1889 of the “Bower manuscript,” a fifth-century medical treatise in Sanskrit, the Government of India and Russia became intense rivals in acquiring manuscripts and other antiquities. Until then manuscripts from Central Asia were virtually unknown; and, when George Macartney (1867-1945), acting for the Government of India in Kashgar, and Nikolai Petrovsky (1837-1908), the Russian Consul, were offered material discovered at remote desert sites, they had little reason to suspect that some of them were not genuine.

Already before 1894, Islam Akhun had been in the habit of collecting coins, seals, and similar antiques from Khotan villagers. When he learned from Afghan traders the price that was being given for manuscripts, he decided to make them himself in preference to the hazardous business of scouring the desert for ancient sites. Between 1895 and 1898 he supplied Macartney, Petrovsky, and several European travelers with a steady stream of books and manuscripts. His collaborators were Muhammad Tari, Mulla Muhammad Siddiq, and Ibrahim Mullah, who apparently specialized in the Russian market (Stein, 1907, pp. 509, 511).

The first manuscript they produced was sold by Islam Akhun in 1895 to



Munshi Ahmad Din, who was temporarily in charge of the Assistant-Resident's office at Kashgar. It was written by hand, and an attempt had been made to imitate the Brāhmī (q.v.) characters found in a genuine, probably Khotanese, manuscript from Dandan Uiliq (q.v.). Since, however, at this time, none of the Europeans could read the scripts, the forgers soon realized that it was unnecessary to bother with imitating genuine manuscripts. Thus each individual freely invented his own characters, as is shown by the diversity of different scripts which were based loosely on Brāhmī, Aramaic (PLATE I), Uighur, Cyrillic, Arabic, and Chinese (see Sims-Williams for examples of these).

Islam Akhun's ingenuity is evident not only from the forgeries themselves, but also from the elaborate details he supplied regarding the provenance and circumstances of each find (Hoernle, 1899, pp. xii-xxiii). His descriptions were passed on with the manuscripts and block prints for decipherment to the Sanskritist Rudolf Hoernle (1841-1918, q.v.) in Calcutta. Hoernle, who by then had started to decipher the genuine Khotanese manuscripts amongst them, nevertheless believed, on balance, that the ones in "unknown characters," were also genuine. Hoernle's article of 1897 discusses the manuscript forgeries (pp. 250-56; plates 17-26), and section 2 of his 1899 report is devoted to block prints (pp. 45-110; plates 5-18).

By 1897, however, Islam Akhun's goods were beginning to be regarded with suspicion. Magnus Bäcklund (1866-1903), the Swedish missionary in Yarkand, had severe doubts as to their authenticity (Hoernle, 1899, pp. 57-58; Deasy, pp. 149-50), and Hoernle had himself written to Captain S. H. Godfrey (1861-1941), Assistant to the Resident in Kashmir, on 21 July 1898 "not to purchase any more Khotan books" (BL/IOR/MSS EUR F 302/13). It seems likely that full-scale production ceased shortly after this.

In the early summer of 1898 Islam Akhun acted as an unwilling guide for the explorer Captain H. H. P. Deasy (1866-1947) on an expedition to look for ancient sites near Guma (Deasy, pp. 150-55). By the third day Islam Akhun had absconded, leaving the travelers to make their own way back. On his return he forged a note in Deasy's handwriting to get money from Badruddin, the Aqsaqal (official who looked after the interests of the Indian traders, reporting to the Consul-General in Kashgar) in Khotan; he was famous for providing Stein and others with numerous manuscripts (Sims-Williams, p. 112). For this, Islam Akhun was sentenced to wear the cangue, a large square board, weighing about 30 lbs., round his neck for a month (see photograph in Deasy, p. 155).



After this Islam Akhun moved to the area south of Khotan and Keriya (Stein 1903, pp. 472-73), where he blackmailed hillmen while masquerading as a British agent searching for illegal slaves. His credentials were two large sheets of a Swedish newspaper, the *Svenska Morgonbladet*, one of which contained the photo of a Swedish missionary in China whom he claimed to be. During the winter of 1901 he practiced as a “hakim” in Chira near Keriya. His bizarre medical kit included several leaves of a French novel, which Stein suggested (1903, p. 473) he might have read aloud as imaginary charms, or even administered in pieces for internal consumption!

In 1900 Stein made a special point of trying to locate, without success, some of the sites Islam Akhun had mentioned in his reports (Stein, 1907, pp. 100-103). Before leaving Khotan in 1901 he spent several days interviewing him, and eventually extracted a full confession (Stein, 1903, pp. 469-81; 1907, pp. 507-14). When Islam Akhun asked Stein to let him accompany him to Europe, Stein refused, and nothing more is known of him after that.

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