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## PREFACE

In the preface to the first volume of my *Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan*, published in 2001, I wrote of “one of the most sensational discoveries of the last decade, a series of more than a hundred Bactrian documents written in cursive script on leather, cloth or wood”. Since that time, the corpus has continued to grow and now consists of well over 150 documents. All of these, with the exception of the most recently discovered, are edited, translated and illustrated in the three volumes of the work mentioned above (*BD1*, 2001; second edition 2012; *BD2*, 2007; *BD3*, 2012). These volumes are complemented by Geoffrey Khan’s *Arabic Documents from Early Islamic Khurasan* (2007), an exemplary edition of 32 Arabic documents which appear to have come to light together with some of those in Bactrian.

Regrettably, none of these documents has an authenticated provenance and it is not known whether they belong to a single archive or to several. It is evident from their contents that they were written in Afghanistan between the 4th and 8th centuries CE and from their often excellent state of preservation that they must have been hidden and stored in extremely favourable conditions for many centuries. It appears that most if not all of them were smuggled into Pakistan during the years of chaos following the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979, after which they passed through the hands of various dealers and were eventually purchased by collectors in many different countries.

Before 1991, when the first of these documents came to light, the usable corpus of texts in Bactrian was effectively limited to a single inscription from Surkh Kotal and the short legends on coins and seals: almost all other texts were illegible or incomprehensible. Inevitably, therefore, the emergence of this material has transformed our knowledge of the Bactrian language. The new documents are equally capable of transforming our knowledge of the history of the region in which they were written, for which we have few contemporary records of any kind; but before they can be exploited as historical sources it is necessary to establish their relative and absolute chronology. This was the aim of the project “The chronology of the Bactrian documents from Northern Afghanistan” (2004–2008), which was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, with a project team consisting of myself, François de Blois and Johnny Cheung. The present volume, together with the prosopographical sections of my *Bactrian Personal Names* (2010), represents the principal outcome of that project. I am happy to express my thanks to the Research Council; to the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, which administered the AHRC grant; and not least to my co-workers, without whose skill and commitment the project could not have been brought to a successful conclusion. Finally, my co-author and I would like to express our thanks to Harry Falk and Dieter Weber for their important contributions to this book, as well as to many other colleagues, amongst them Michael Alam, Hans Bakker, Joe Cribb, Frantz Grenet, Minoru Inaba, Geoffrey Khan, Étienne de la Vaissière, Judith Lerner, Pavel Lurje, Bill Mak, Raymond Mercier, Cameron Petrie, Nikolaus Schindel, Klaus Vondrovec and Yutaka Yoshida, all of whom have kindly taken the time and trouble to provide information, to debate the issues and to answer my sometimes naive questions on matters of history, chronology and numismatics. They will not all agree with all of the conclusions presented below but I hope they will not feel that their time was wasted.

NICHOLAS SIMS-WILLIAMS  
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