

VII. Ahmad-Shāh's Chronicles of Baltistan

ACCORDING TO G. T. VIGNE

G. T. Vigne visited Baltistan in 1835 A.D., at a time when this state was still practically independent. He gained the confidence of the Dmag-dpon (duke or chief) of the state, and received much valuable information from him. People told him that the chief was in possession of a rare book or MS. (possibly the chronicles). He could, however, not get hold of it, although he repeatedly asked Ahmad-Shāh to let him see it. Ahmad-Shāh assured him that he had always understood that it was destroyed in the great fire during the time of chief Zufur-Khan. Then Vigne says (ii, p. 253): 'He one day produced a book, which he had bought of a travelling pedler, and asked me what it was. It was a testament, highly ornamented with paintings, and the text was, I have no doubt, Armenian, though I do not understand anything of the language.' It must have been the pictures which induced Vigne to believe that the book was a testament. But this short passage suffices to show that in 1835 the chronicles of Baltistan were probably no longer existent at Skar-rdo. The greater is the value of Ahmad-Shāh's account of Balti history, as communicated to Vigne. Ahmad-Shāh may have had to learn the chronicles by heart, just as was the case in the Cig-tan family (see the Chronicles of Cig-tan). In spite of this loss it is very probable that certain historical books are still existent in Baltistan. Not only may several old books have been preserved in the castles of minor chiefs, but also the lost chronicles of Skar-rdo may have been re-written at a more recent time. As I am told, the Baltis make use of a particular kind of script, which runs from right to left. As Professors A. Fischer and Hultsch tell me, it is not based on any form of Arabic character, but rather resembles the Indian form of script. I have, with difficulty, obtained a short specimen of this script. It is found in vol. iii of the *Linguistic Survey of India*, p. 33. But no traveller has as yet succeeded in purchasing an original volume of Balti literature.

It may be questioned whether the Balti chronicles have a right to range among the chronicles of vassal chiefs of the kings of Leh. To this let me reply that the history of Baltistan was for many years bound up with West Tibetan history. During the times of the Great Tibetan empire (before Glan-dar-ma) Baltistan appears to have formed part of it. The foundation of the great monastery of Skar-chun-rdo-dbyin (probably Skar-rdo) is stated to have taken place in the Rgya district, Rgya then being the capital of Ladakh (c. 804 A.D.). The greatest Buddhist priest of Baltistan, Sbal-te-dgra-bcom, who erected the famous Skyor-luñ monastery¹ in the vicinity of Skar-rdo and Śi-dkar (Ba-sho valley) in A.D. 1168, was a regular member of the Lamaist church. It was the introduction of Muhammadanism in particular which alienated the Baltis from their Ladakhi neighbours. But even then the history of both nations remained inter-

¹ Another monastery of the same name seems to exist in Central Tibet.