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Kanum, the Village of Alexander Csoma de Körös *A Narrative of Werner Hoffmeister*

Bernard Le Calloc'h

Werner Hoffmeister was a German physician. He was born in Braunschweig on the 14th of March 1819. He studied natural history and medicine at the University of Berlin, where he took his doctorate in 1843. Being fond of travelling and determined to visit India, he went to London in the hope of embarking for Bombay, Madras, or Calcutta, as a naval surgeon. But, however great his desire was to set out for Asia, he failed in his attempt; hence from England he went to France with the same hopes. He tried unsuccessfully to embark for any French overseas territory.

Deeply disappointed, he went back to Berlin and intended to open a consulting room in the German capital when he heard from the famous geographer and naturalist Alexander von Humboldt, that the royal Prince Waldemar of Prussia, nephew of king Friedrich-Wilhelm IV and cavalry officer, was preparing a geographical expedition to the East Indies, and was looking for a young doctor who would be willing to accompany the travellers for more than a year. Hoffmeister applied immediately for the job, and owing to Humboldt's warm recommendation, his candidacy was easily approved of by the royal prince.

The expedition left Trieste on the 16th of September 1844 and crossed the Mediterranean. Through Egypt and Aden, they first reached Ceylon, then Madras and Calcutta. Everywhere they were received with open arms by the British Indian authorities, first of all by the Governor General himself, Lord Hardinge.

From Calcutta they travelled to Nepal, where, by a rare favour due to Prince Waldemar's royal lineage, they were permitted to stay several days and were solemnly introduced to the rajah.

Leaving Kathmandu, they went to Benares, Lucknow and Delhi. By Meerut, Saharanpur and Simla, they penetrated the Himalayan mountains along the upper valley of the river Sutlej up to the Tibetan borderline. During this excursion, they spent two days at Kanum, the village where Alexander Csoma de Körös lived between May 1827 and October 1830, working hard on his Tibetan grammar and dictionary.

On their way back, the German explorers visited the Punjab, where the English were waging war against the Sikhs. This was the so-called second Anglo-Sikh war.

Chivalrously, Prince Waldemar decided to join the British army and to take part in the battle on the field as cavalry colonel and foreign

volunteer. On 21st of December 1845, he was riding with Lord Hardinge near the town of Firozshah, accompanied by Dr Hoffmeister, acting as aide-de-camp, when suddenly the latter was struck on the temple by a bullet from a sniper and shot dead, a falling victim of his master's temerity. He was only 26 years old.

On the following day, he was buried in the Christian cemetery of Firozpur, in the presence of the Prince and all the members of the expedition.

During the journey, Dr Hoffmeister sent to his family several letters which are in fact actual geographical documents, written with the highest precision. In his correspondence to his parents, he gave a very circumstantial account of the events he lived through, and a remarkably detailed picture of the scenery he had the opportunity to see. One of these letters was sent from Simla to his brother A. Hoffmeister, and dated September 10th 1845. It is a masterpiece, not only as the pleasant narrative of a rather difficult journey across the gigantic mountain range of the Great Himalaya, but also as a particularly vivid description of the little village of Kanum and its surroundings.

In the first half of the 19th century, ten British explorers have published narratives (both short and long) of their journeys into the Western Himalaya. They mentioned the name of Kanum but did not describe it. Sometimes they gave us one or two details, but nothing else. It is well known, for instance, that in his famous report, dated 21st January 1829, James Gilbert Gerard wrote more than eight pages on his conversations with Csoma de Körös, but did not refer at all to the village where his Hungarian friend was living.

Indeed, Hoffmeister's letter is the best description of Kanum we can dream of, and surely the most complete in our possession. Nevertheless, we must acknowledge that the French naturalist Victor Jacquemont, in his posthumous diary entitled *Voyage dans l'Inde* (Paris, 1841), had also given us a general picture of the village, though more particular attention was paid to giving the reader a detailed account of his talks with Csoma de Körös.

In any case, it is surprising that Hoffmeister's full description of Kanum has passed completely unnoticed till this day. No quotation of it can be found in any historical work relating to Kinawar or Bishawar, even in German orientalist literature. No biographer of the Hungarian Tibetologist refers to it. No bibliographical compilation mentions it. In a word, it remained unknown to all.

Our researches on Alexander Csoma de Körös led us to discover this important geographical document, and for the above mentioned reasons, we felt it was important to draw attention to it.

Hoffmeister's letter of September 10th 1845, being rather long, due to its

description of not only Kanum but of also of the whole of Bishawar, we present underneath only the main passages which concern the village directly, constituting its actual description. Every quotation is followed by our own comment, or by a quotation from Victor Jacquemont's diary.

Dr Hoffmeister's Letter -> A. Hoffmeister

September 10, 1845 (Shimla)

1. At last the beautiful village came into sight itself. At the same instant, we forgot the steep, barren cliffs of scree.

(Endlich erschien das schöne Dorf selbst. Zugleich verliessen wir die düre, steile Geröllwand).

This is to be compared with what Victor Jacquemont writes in his book (p.238 of the second volume):

The mountains which overlook the left bank of the Sutlej are exceedingly steep. Their slopes are almost everywhere covered with scree.

2. That was Labrang, situated on this side of the deep ravine separating us from Kanum.

(Es war Labrang, welches noch diesseit der tiefen Klust lag, die uns von Kanum trennte).

Jacquemont:

"The village of Kanum and that of Labrang are situated one opposite the other, on the slope of a small dale where runs a streamlet" (p.238). "Kanum and Labrang, are, so to speak, two parts of the same village, within rifle range" (p.420).

3. Hardly had we passed round a large projecting rock when a high building, a kind of tower, attracted our attention and surprised us unexpectedly

(Kaum hatten wir eine vorspringende Felsenecke umgangen, als uns ein grossartiges, hohes Gebäude, eine Art Thurm, überraschend in die Augen fiel).

Jacquemont:

This is a kind of square tower, twelve to fifteen meter high, surrounded by a small drystone wall with several loopholes. (p.238).

4. On the terraces, the apricot trees were full of ripe fruits

(Die Aprikosenbäume auf den Terrassen hingen voll reiser Früchte).

Jacquemont:

The apricot tree is very common. Its fruits are near Kanum like near all the other villages, rather small and untasty; the sweetest are always acid, though they look very ripe. They are ready for picking just now (on the 1-st of August) in very large quantities. After exposure to the

sun on the roofs of the houses, they are put by for the winter, when they are a considerable section of the inhabitants' food. (p.264)

5. Quite deep in the ground numberless watermills
(Ganz tief im Grunde unzählige Mühle).

Jacquemont gives us in his book full particulars about these primitive watermills of Kinawar.

The cog-wheel being unknown to these highland people, he writes, they cannot use the usual crankshaft, so that they put the mill wheel in the stream horizontally and its axle is vertical...Each village has several mills of that kind. (p.406)

6. Shortly afterwards we reached the beginning of the irrigation canals
(Bald erreichten wir den Anfang der Wasserleitungen).

Jacquemont:

There are white and weeping willows along the irrigation canals, which come from the streamlet running in the bottom of the dale (p.239)

7. Kanum is one of the biggest villages we have visited in the mountains...it holds almost the rank of capital in Kinawar
(Kanum ist eins der grössten Dörfer, die wir im Gebirge besucht haben...er fast den Rang einer Hauptstadt in Kunauer einnimmt).

Indeed Kanum is generally regarded as the capital of Kinawar, though it is only a small village. According to another traveller, Thomas Thomson, Chini is the actual capital of that section in the principality of Bishawar. Sometimes, Songnum is also called the capital. Nevertheless, Kanum is well placed geographically, halfway between Bishawar and Tibet.

8. From everywhere in the neighbouring country the inhabitants of the villages come here together
(Weit und breit kommen die Bewohner der entferntern Dörfer hier zusammen).

On the contrary, Jacquemont asserts that the inhabitants live in a few small villages which are very near to Kanum (p.238).

9. In this place there is also one of the largest lama monasteries, and two important temples
(Auch befindet sich in diesem Orte eins der grössten Lamaklöster und zwei bedeutende Tempel).

The origin of the monastery of Kanum can be traced to the 11th century. It is said that it was originally built by the famous Lotsava (translator) Rinchen-bzang-po (in Sanskrit Ratna-bhadra) who lived from 964 to 1054, and the village owes its birth to this pious foundation.

However, the building existing in Hoffmeister's time was not so ancient.

It was probably rebuilt during the 15th century and was restored at the beginning of the 18th century. The monastery stands above the village, where its imposing white rectangular bulk looks like a stronghold, without any outer decoration. The flat roof gives access to a terrace, from which the view is splendid. Monks lived in this building. Contrary to what is generally written, Alexander Csoma de Körös never lived in it. He had his own house, the same as the natives', rather small and low, but as regards to the furniture, it was a little more comfortable. Victor Jacquemont writes:

Seen from outside, his house is exactly the same as the houses of the highlanders. It was so low that I could not stand, but it is high enough for Csoma's small height. There is also a fireplace with a smokepipe, the only one in the village. (p.254).

As for the "two important temples," it is worthy of note that the one which is in the monastery, where the monks used to assemble every morning, is insignificant from the artistic point of view. There is another one which is called Lha-brang and is situated out of the village. Victor Jacquemont lived in this monument in July and September 1830, when he resided in Kanum. Though it is sure that it's origin is not from Rin-chen-bzang-po's time, it is supposed to be very ancient. Perhaps it was built in the 13th century.

Mention will be made of the third temple in a further paragraph.

10. The houses are put in ranks, one upon the other, on the slope of the mountain, forming a succession of terraces
(Die Häuser liegen in verschiedenen Absätzen treppenartig am Berge übereinander).

Jacquemont:

Kanum is situated tier upon tier on the slope of a very steep mountain, the ranks of houses being supported by many arduous terraces. The broader tiers are cultivated, the narrower are built (p.238)

and

The site of Kanum is the most picturesque I saw in Kinawar. Its houses, arranged in groups of different stages on the hillside, formed a very pleasant picture. (p.393).

11. A kind of bad raisin
(Eine Art schlechter Rosinen)

This is at variance with Jacquemont's statement according to which "there is no vineyard in Kanum" (p.416). On the other hand he admits that "there are many vineyards everywhere in Kinawar, but exceedingly neglected," and that "a substantial proportion of the vintage is sundried, but without care, so that many grapes are acid" (p.417).

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12. The first row of houses was very high. They were built in a strange bulky style, with a framework of cedarbeams

(Die erste Reihe der Häuser war sehr hoch und in einer seltsamen, plumpen Bauart aus dicken Cederstämmen errichtet).

This description is confirmed by all the travellers who give us some details about the village (Thomson, Herbert, Jacquemont). It is still valid nowadays, as we can see on the photographs taken by modern tourists. All the houses are half-timbered and built of cedarbeams.

13. In the winter the inhabitants settle in the dark rooms which are in the inner part of the houses

(Die Menschen begeben sich...im Winter in die dunklen Räume des Inneren der Häuser).

That links up with what Victor Jacquemont says about the life at Kanum during the cold season:

The smallness of their houses, where they live huddled together, is a good protection against the severe part of the winter. (p.246)

14. I went up a kind of hen-ladder to reach the terrace on the roof

(Auf einer Art Hühnerleiter erreichte ich die höher liegende Terrasse).

The houses in Kanum are generally two-storeyed, owing to the slope of the hill, but they have no spiral staircase, only a roughly-made ladder, which really looks like a hen-ladder.

15. I saw several women with the same red-brown gown. They were sisters from the monastery

(Mehrere Weiber mit den nämlichen rotbraunen Kapuzen gesellten. Es waren die Schwestern...aus dem kloster).

In Hoffmeister's time there were two nunneries in Kanum. Owing to polyandric customs, usual in Kinawar among Buddhist people, many women could not get married. Condemned to celibacy, no other route existed for them except to enter a nunnery. This is the reason why they used to gather in a sisterhood where they lived, worked together, and shared everything. They were rather poor, but not reduced to destitution. Jacquemont writes:

These poor women are not enclosed, like the nuns in Europe. If their community has some field of wheat, some vineyard, they work at them. At home, they spin and weave like any other woman in this country. (p.247)

16. The language of this people is called Kinawari. It is totally different from the hindi as from the hindustani languages

(Die Sprache dieser Leute ist durchaus abweichend vom Hindi sowohl als vom Hindustani und wird Kunauri genannt).

The inhabitants of Kinawar belong to the cultural sphere of Tibet and they practise Tibetan Buddhism, but they usually do not speak Tibetan. Their language is not of the Tibetan type, this is the reason why, in Csoma's time, the monks of Kanum, even their prior, were of no use to him in his linguistic researches. They could not read the canonic scriptures gathered in the library of their monastery; moreover, the sacred books were in classical Tibetan, a literary language in every respect different from the colloquial. August-Hermann Francke, who was in Kanum in August 1909, writes:

Tibetan is well understood here, but it is not spoken by the peasants themselves. They speak another language called kinawari. (*Antiquities of Indian Tibet*, Vol.I, p.16).

17. On a large threshing floor one was busy treading grain by horse
(In einem weiten Tennenraum, war man beschäftigt, das Getreide durch Pferde ausdreschen zu lassen).

Jacquemont: "Here, there are a lot of horses. They tread the grain" (p.245). On the other hand, as Hoffmeister points out, the horse is not used as a means of transportation, because there is no wheeled vehicle, owing to the very bad footpaths of the country. The horse is not sure-footed and cannot cross the rope bridges, the only bridges existing in Kinawar in these times. The beasts of burden are the yak, the dzo, or the sheep.

18. A row of tombstone-looking monuments formed the borderline of the village
(Eine reihe grabähnlicher Monumente bildete die Grenze des Ortes).

Jacquemont:

On a hill rising just above the village of Kanum, there is a row of small monuments... which are very common in Kinawar after Pangui. They are simply a basket full of whitewashed mud, put on a little pedestal, and covered by a thatched roof or a terrace. As a rule, there are three such altars together, the middle one being larger than the other two. At Kanum...these simple monuments form a rather long alignment on the top of the hill which is covered in tiers by the diverse parts of the village. (p.336)

19. One of the last and biggest houses, particularly caught our eye. It was a four-cornered building that enclosed a small open courtyard
(Eins der letzten und grössten Gebäude zog besonders unsere Aufmerksamkeit auf sich. Es war im Quadrat gebaut und umschloss einen kleinen offenen Hof).

It is an outbuilding of the main monastery (situated a bit below) of heavy cubic form, which the monks called bKa'-gyur-dgon-pa, or Kanjur monastery, because it was the place where the 325 volumes of the holy scriptures were housed and sheltered. This sacred collection has been stamped on woodcut (xylographs) in 1738 at sNar-thang, then sent to bKra-shis-lhun-po, and from

there to Kanum in 1820 by a rich Kinawari landlord, a man of great piety, who hoped that this good action could win him the regard of the poor people, whereby he could take great credit for it himself.

When Alexander Csoma de Körös lived in the village, he used to fetch the volumes from there for his lexicographical researches. Dr James Gilbert Gerard, the British friend of the Hungarian scholar, in his letter to William Fraser, dated 21st January 1829, indicates that Csoma de Körös "was permitted to visit the library of the monastery," but that the monks distrusted this strange-looking foreigner so that "they allowed him to carry away at once only one or two volumes, and no more" (quoted by Theodore Duka, p.89)

20. On the second floor..we found a room, to all appearances his drawing room. We could see in it two roughly made chairs and a table, of which he was very proud.

(In dem zweiten Stockwerke...fanden wir ein Zimmer, anscheinend sein Prachtsalon; denn es enthielt zwei roh gezimmerte Stühle und einen Tisch, Gegenstände auf die er sehr stolz war).

Chairs and tables of European style were unknown in those times in Kinawar. The inhabitants used to sit and lie on the ground. The only pieces of furniture they had were carpets, cushions, and small low tables. Therefore, it is a wonder that such things could be in the possession of a Tibetan monk in 1845. The clue to the riddle is probably to be found in Jacquemont's diary, in which he writes: "I found him (Csoma de Körös) in an armchair of the roughest make, transcribing a Tibetan text on a long table" (p.254). We may assume with a good probability that during his sojourn at Kanum, the Hungarian Tibetologist had ordered a local joiner to make this European furniture, so as to be able to work in the best conditions. After his departure, it might have been retrieved or bought by the prior of the monastery, so as to embellish his drawing room.

21. Light got in only through a hole in the ceiling .

(Das Licht fiel nur durch eine Oeffnung in der Decke ein).

Jacquemont uses almost the same words: "The sanctuary...was lighted by a hole cut in the roof". (p.244)

22. The main piece was a big gilt idol representing Mahavedi

(Die Hauptsache war ein grosses vergoldestes Götzenbild, den Mahavedi vorstellend).

It is obvious that we must read Mahādevī, instead of Mahavedī. Besides, Hoffmeister writes, several pages below Mahadö, which is nearer to the correct transliteration from the Sanskrit.

According to the Hindu tradition, Mahādevī is one of the names of Indra's wife, known also as Pārvatī, Durgā, or Kālī. Jacquemont confirms that in Kinawar "blending of Buddhism and Brahmanism is total" (p.247).

23. We found there a high, long vestibule
(Wir fanden dort ein hohes langes Vorzimmer).

During his stay at Kanum Jacquemont was offered hospitality by the monks in this temple. He writes:

The place put at my disposal is a Buddhist temple. It is divided into two rooms, a long, high vestibule, where I live, and the sanctuary.
(p.244)

Therefore it becomes obvious that the French naturalist took his abode in the same place where Werner Hoffmeister stood in 1845, on the 2nd of August.

Moreover, we know that Alexander Csoma de Körös paid his first visit to Jacquemont in the temple's vestibule on the 26th of July 1830. "He came here immediately after my arrival to pay me a visit," he writes (p.253).

24. Then the great Lama came here to meet us...I thought I was in the presence of a Sage of the ancient times
(Hier trat uns der Oberlama entgegen...Ich glaubte, einen Weisen der alten Zeit...vor Augen zu haben).

The lama who came to meet Prince Waldemar of Prussia and his companions in August 1845 is, in all probability, the same one whom Victor Jacquemont described in his diary as "a great old man." Jacquemont, being very young, regarded the Tibetan priest as an old man, in comparison to himself. However, the portrait the French traveller made of him in 1830 (published in his *Voyages dans l'Inde* in 1841) proves that the prior of the Kanum monastery might have hardly been fifty years old. We may reasonably infer this since Jacquemont indicates that the prior had been enthroned only three months before. Hoffmeister describes the great lama he met with as an "an old man of high, superb figure" (ein Greis von hoher stattlicher Figur), who might not be more than seventy years old. This seems to fit with Jacquemont's own description of "the lama of so superb a figure as to be a pope."

25. What would I have given to have found the famous Hungarian scholar Alexander Czosma de Körös alive!

(Was hätte ich darum gegeben, wenn wir den Berühmten ungarischen Gelehrten Alexander Czosma de Körös...noch am Leben getroffen hätten!).

Csoma de Körös left Kanum in October 1830, fifteen years before, and he died at Darjeeling in April 1842. However, both the natives and the English have good memories of him, not only in the hills but everywhere in India where he resided.

26. People often inquired after him, seeking information from us; he is known in the hills under the name of Sikander Sahib
(Man fragte uns oft nach ihm; denn er ist unter dem Namen Sikander Sahib im Gebirge bekannt).

He is also known as Skander beg, the name he took in Persia to make the contact easier with the natives, because his Hungarian name is rather difficult to pronounce. Moreover, Jacquemont shows that "the inhabitants of Kanum call him Sahib"... "His knowledge of the holy language inspires respect, especially since his Tibetan master left, as he is now the only man in the village able to understand it" (p.256).

Csoma's biographers used to complain of the scarcity of documents regarding his life and times. They are often reduced to working out hypotheses because of lack of valuable information. Thanks to Hoffmeister's narrative, after 150 years of oblivion, we can now add a new document to the file of Csoma's biography, whereby the human and natural context of his life in Kanum is better known.

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