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The toponym *Takla-makan*

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Takla-makan, the name of the great Central Asian desert is not an old name. It appeared for the first time in 1865. Its present-day official form is Taklimakan. Several interpretations of this toponym, more or less substantiated, have been made in the course of time. The author of this article discusses the historical and toponymic material available together with a critical review of the etymological theories so far presented. His own suggestion is *Takla-makan* < *taqlar makan*, an interpretation expounded in detail in the article.

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In my *Central Asian Turkic place-names* I state: “*taqla makan, Takla-makan* ‘desert’ < *taqlar makan*; *taq* < A. *ṭāq* ‘an arch, ruins with arches’, -*lar* plural suffix; *makan* < A. *makān* ‘place, habitation’, thus, ‘the place of ruins’” (Jarring 1997: 447).

How I have arrived at this conclusion needs an elucidation. *Takla-makan* as a place name is not old. It is mentioned in the literature for the first time by a British surveyor and explorer, W. H. Johnson, who paid a visit to Khotan in 1865. In his *Report on his Journey to Ilchí, the Capital of Khotan, in Chinese Tartary* he mentions the great desert in the following terms:

“At a distance of six miles to the north-east of Ilchí is the great desert of Taklá Makán (Gobi) which, with its shifting sands that move along in vast billows overpowering everything, is said to have buried 360 cities in the space of 24 hours. The edge of this desert has the appearance of a low range of broken hills, and consists of hillocks of moving sand, varying in height from 200 to 400 feet. Tea, of which I have brought away a sample, was dug out of one of these entombed cities while I was at Ilchí, and was believed by the natives to be of great age. Gold coins, weighing 4 lbs., and other articles, are

also reported to have been found in some of them, but the positions of these cities are only known to a few persons, who keep it a secret in order to enrich themselves. The only one that is well known is that in which very large quantities of brick tea are found, and which commands a ready sale in the markets, now that all trade with China is stopped. The site of this buried city is a mile to the north of Urangkásh." (Johnson 1868: 5)

The fact that no instance of Takla-makan is to be found before 1865 does not imply that the name did not exist earlier. It may have been in use years, or even decades, earlier but probably not much more. Takla-makan is not mentioned by the preceding travellers who content themselves with the designation 'desert'. Marco Polo for example evidently describes what later on is to be called Takla-makan when he reaches Lop. I quote:

"Lop is a large town at the edge of the Desert, which is called the Desert of Lop, and is situated between east and north-east ... The length of this Desert is so great that it is said it would take a year and more to ride from one end of it to the other. And here, where its breadth is least, it takes a month to cross it." (Yule 1903, 1: 196)

The *Tarikh-i-Rashidi* relates as follows about this desert:

"To the east and south of Káshghar and Khotan are deserts, which consist of nothing but heaps of shifting sands, impenetrable jungles, waste lands and salt-deserts. In ancient times there were large towns in these (wastes), and the names of two of them have been preserved, namely Lob and Katak; but of the rest no name or trace remains; all are buried under the sand. Hunters, who go there after wild camels, relate that sometimes the foundations of cities are visible, and that they have recognised noble buildings such as castles, minarets, mosques and colleges, but that when they returned a short time afterwards, no trace of these was to be found; for the sand had again overwhelmed them. On such a scale were these cities of which, nowadays, neither name nor vestige remains!" (Elias 1898: 295)

It is evident that the desert of Takla-makan until it received its present name had no name of its own. The desert was quite simply called *gobi*, *čöl*, or *qum*, sometimes in the plural *qumlar*, and sometimes because of

its perils *šajtan qum* (cf. Lansdell 1893, 2, map *Shaitan Kum* 'The devil's desert').

The Western interest in Eastern Turkestan¹ begins with Johnson and is followed up by such explorers as Shaw, Bellew and above all by the two Forsyth expeditions of 1870 and 1873 (cf. Forsyth 1887: 54 sq. and 90 sq.) The exploration of Eastern Turkestan is then especially active during the following decades up to the First World War. It is carried out not only by British researchers but also by other Europeans.

The first comprehensive account of Eastern Turkestan is Robert Shaw's book *Visits to High Tartary, Yârkand and Kâshghar* (Shaw 1871) in which the toponym *Takla-makan* appears as follows:

"There stretch out two great arms of habitable country embracing between them the impracticable Desert of Gobi (or the *Takla-Makân* of the Toorks)" (1871: 34); "The great Desert of *Takla-Makân* or Gobi" (1871: 37); "This was also bare sand, communicating, I was told, with the great '*Takla-Makân*', the central desert of Asia, which, under the name of Gobi, stretches eastward into China" (1871: 155); "Crossing an arm of the great *Takla-Makân* desert" (1871: 168); "This desert is connected with wonderful superstitions" (1871: 169); "In the sand of the *Takla-Makân* in the neighbourhood of Aksoo" (1871: 233).

Bellew, who visited Eastern Turkestan in 1873-1874 and published a book about his experiences there with the title *Kashmir and Kashghar* (Bellew 1875) mentions *Takla-makan* only once, namely in the form "Takla":

"The joint streams are further on lost in the desert of Takla, which is a wide spread of sand in whose loose heaps are buried the ancient cities of Khutan." (Bellew 1875: 228)

There are however some instances evidently referring to this desert or parts of it:

¹ I use the terms Eastern Turkestan and Eastern Turki which were current in those days.

“Beyond it we passed amongst scattered homesteads to Cara Cum [qara qum], or ‘Black Sand’”—no doubt a part of Takla-makan; “The latter is built over the head of Arslan Khan of the Baghra Khan family, whose body lies under the shrine of Ordam Padshah at the Cum Shahidan or ‘Martyr’s Sands’.” (Bellew 1875: 287, 310)

The same Cum Shahidan (*qum šahi:dan* ‘the martyr’s desert’) is mentioned again on page 364 and on page 370: “the sand-dunes at Cum Shahidan”. It evidently refers to the westernmost part of Takla-makan (cf. Bellew 1875: 367-377 and Jarring 1935), and deals with the legend of the introduction of Islam into Eastern Turkestan.

In the important source of our knowledge of Eastern Turkestan at the middle and the end of the nineteenth century *Report of a Mission to Yarkund in 1873* Forsyth often mentions the desert under the different names “Táklamakán”, “Takla Makan”, “Táklá Makán” and “Taklá Mukán” but adds no information beyond that given by Shaw and Bellew. Of special interest is however a passage on page 148 (originally by Bellew): “The wind sometimes blows away this sand, and exposes to view domes and minarets”.

Hayward who was in Eastern Turkestan at the same time as Shaw also reports on the secrets and perils of Takla-makan, adding a few details not found elsewhere (cf. Hayward 1870: 78).

The last testimony to the secrets of Takla-makan comes from Skrine who in 1922 was able to interview at Guma a man who had been lost in the desert of Takla-makan without water to drink:

“Suddenly I saw before me great walls in the sand and a gateway in the midst of them. I passed through the gateway and found myself in the outer court of a huge *yamen*² (any palace or large Chinese house is called a *yamen*). I went through more doors and courtyards and at last I entered a great hall (*aivān*) which was full of treasure, gold and coral and pearls. But there was a huge tiger on guard there; flames issued from his mouth and I knew he was an evil spirit. I fainted from fear, and when I came to my senses I was among the sands and there was no *yamen*. Next day I came upon the tracks of wood-cutters and found my way home.” (Skrine 1926: 190)

² Cf. *The Pinyin Dictionary* (1979: 791): *yámen* ‘government office in feudal China’.

The Russian exploration of Eastern Turkestan was from 1867 onwards mainly devoted to the north-western part of the country. The most interesting statement regarding Takla-makan belongs to M. V. Pevcov who speaks of the great Kashgarian desert also called Takla-makan, a name used by the inhabitants of Western Kashgaria, while those of Southern Kashgaria as well as the Chinese have no name for the desert (cf. Pevcov 1892-1896, 1: 62). "Takla-makan", alternating with "Takla-makan kum" [qum] is used constantly by Pevcov and by other Russian explorers and travellers. Kornilov (1903) repeats Pevcov's statement that in Southern Kashgaria, and with the Chinese there is no comprehensive name for the whole desert, different parts of it having different names, such as *šamal qum*, *ala qum* and *qara qum* (Kornilov 1903: 148-149). Pevcov furthermore has the normal information of towns that have disappeared in the desert (Pevcov 1892-1896, 1: 110, 121).

Sven Hedin is the traveller who has devoted more time to the exploration of the desert Takla-makan than any other explorer. In his report on his first exploration trip to Eastern Turkestan in 1891 Hedin only casually mentions the desert Takla-makan. However, it gets much more space in his elaborate description of his second journey performed in the years 1893-1897, which received world-wide attention. The references to Takla-makan in his *Through Asia* (1898) are numerous. But I have found the following instances of special interest:

"They [the begs] told me, that there once existed a large town called Takla-makan in the desert midway between the Yarkand-daria and the Khotan-daria; but for ages it had been buried in the sand. The whole of the desert was now known by this name, although it was sometimes shortened to Takan. They reported further, that the interior of the desert was under the ban of *telesmar*³ (an Arabic word, meaning 'witchcraft', 'supernatural powers'); and that there were towers and walls and houses, and heaps of gold tacks and silver *jambaus*⁴ (*tack*⁵ and *jambau* being Chinese coins). If a man went there with a caravan

³ *Telesmat* < Arabic *ṭilsim*, *ṭilsam* 'talisman, magical image'.

⁴ For *jambau*, cf. Jarring (1964: 147): "*jambu* (< Ch.) a lump of silver, somewhat in the shape of a shoe and stamped on the top with a Chinese stamp"; cf. further Raximov (1970: 267) *yambu*; *The Pinyin Dictionary* (1979: 852) *yuánbǎo* 'a shoe-shaped gold or silver ingot used as money in feudal China'.

⁵ *Tack* 'ingot'; in the original Swedish edition *guldtacka* 'gold ingot', not coins.

and loaded his camels with gold, he would never get out of the desert again; but be kept there by the spirits. In that case there was only one way by which he could save his life, and that was by throwing away the treasure." (1898, 1: 450)

"Some of them [the men in Masar-aldi] called the desert Dekkan-dekka,⁶ because a thousand and one towns are said to be buried under its wastes of sand. Moreover vast stores of silver and gold might be found in them. It was possible to reach them with camels; and probably water would be found in the depressions." (1898, 1: 452)

"An old man of eighty, who heard that we were going to try and cross the Takla-makan Desert came to my house, and told me, that in his youth he had known a man who, whilst going from Khotan to Ak-su, lost his way in the desert, and came to an ancient city, where he found innumerable pairs of Chinese shoes⁷ in the houses; but directly he touched them, they crumbled to dust. Another man started out into the desert from Aksak-maral, and by pure chance stumbled upon a town, amid the ruins of which he unearthed a quantity of gold and silver *jambaus* (Chinese coins). He filled his pockets with them, as well as a sack he had with him. As he was going off with his booty, a pack of wild cats rushed out upon him and frightened him so much that he threw everything away, and took to flight; when, some time afterwards, he plucked up courage to venture his luck a second time, he was unable to find the place again. The mysterious town was completely swallowed up in the sand.

A mollah from Khotan was more successful. He had fallen into debt, and went into the desert to die. But instead of dying, he discovered a treasure of gold and silver, and was now an exceedingly rich man. The number of those who had gone into the desert with the same design, and never returned, was legion. The old man solemnly assured me, that the evil spirits must be exorcised, before the hidden treasure could be sought for with any likelihood of success. The spirits bewitch the unhappy beings who venture thither, so that they become confused and bewildered and without knowing what they are doing they go round and round in a circle, retracing their own footsteps, and

⁶ *Dekkan-dekka* an enigmatic name; could it be *Terke-terken*, name of a desert? Cf. Jarring (forthcoming: 462): *terke* with comparative material; or, is it the same as *Takkan*, a contracted form of *Takla-makan*?

⁷ Perhaps the Chinese coins were in the shape of shoes, cf. note 4.

go and go until they fall down from sheer exhaustion, and die of thirst." (1898, 1: 455-456)

"They [the people of Merket] called the desert Takla-makan; and the general consensus of opinion was, that given strong camels we ought to be able to cross right over it to the Khotan-daria." (1898, 1: 478)

"... the beginning of the desert proper, which is known under the names of Takla-makan, Jallat-kum,⁸ and Adam-öllturgan-kum [adam öltürgen qum], or the Sand that Slayeth Men." (1898, 2: 732)

"As for the ancient kingdom of Tu-ho-lo, and its buried cities, I will merely state that, according to the Chinese rules of transliteration, Tu-ho-lo is the same word as Tukhari (or Tokhari), and that Tukhari was used to indicate the people who in the year 157 B.C. dwelt at Bulunghir-gol, but subsequently migrated to West Turkestan, where the existing name of Tokharistan perpetuates their memory. Further, the word Tu-ho-lo is the same word as Takla; and there can be hardly a doubt, that the towns which I discovered, and which the indigenous inhabitants call, as indeed they call the entire desert, Takla-makan, were inhabited by this people. Finally, the little village of Tokhla near Khotan, the place in which the inhabitants of the buried cities found refuge from the invading sand, also keeps alive the name, if not the memory, of that once powerful people, a race who, according to Klaproth and Vivien de S. Martin, were of Tibetan origin." (1898, 2: 784-785)

Chapter LXIII (Hedin 1898, 2: 788-805) entitled "The Buried City of Takla-makan" is in its entirety devoted to the desert and its buried habitations. I only quote the following passages:

"This city of Takla-makan, for that is the name my guides gave to it—we will retain the name, for it is instinct with a wealth of mysterious secrets, of puzzling problems, which it is reserved for future inquiry to solve." (Hedin 1898, 2: 801)

Hedin's theory of a connection between Tu-ho-lo and Takla-makan was summarily dismissed by Aurel Stein:

"That the term Taklamakān, by which all desert ground within the central area of the Tārīm Basin is popularly designated, can neither on linguistic nor on

⁸ I.e. *ḡalla:d* [< Arabic *jallād*] *qum* 'the executioner's desert'.

historical grounds be derived from the name *Tu-huo-lu* scarcely needs to be demonstrated to critical students" writes Stein for well-founded reasons (Stein 1907, 1: 435).

The main point of all these descriptions of Takla-makan here referred to, is that this desert is the abode of mysterious vanished cities together with a wealth of gold and precious stones, all of them possessed by supernatural powers and therefore dangerous for all visitors. Only ruins are left, consisting of walls, gateways, domes and the like.

In modern Uighur Takla-makan is rendered with Taklimakan⁹ but one as often meets the form Təkliməkan. It is a form never heard by the explorers of Eastern Turkestan who always keep to Takla-makan. There is no reason to believe that the early explorers such as Johnson, Shaw, Bellew, Hedin or Le Coq would have neglected to register an *i* if they had heard the name pronounced as Taklimakan. As modern normalized Uighur is based on the dialect spoken in northern Sinkiang, this way of writing does not represent the factual pronunciation in southern Sinkiang, at least not as it was a hundred years or more ago. The *-i-* would never appear in the southern dialects although it may have been accepted now after decades of linguistic indoctrination. I have however noted one exception to this rule in a geography textbook,¹⁰ published by the Swedish Mission in Kashghar in 1927 where it is written تكلې مەكان i.e. *tekli meka:n*. On the other hand in an Eastern Turki manuscript dating back to the beginning of this century¹¹ the name is written تكله مەكان. It is tempting to understand *tekle* as *tekle* but there is no *tek* with a meaning that would suit the desert name. More as a curiosity I refer to a form *Texitimakan* in a collection of folk tales published in Almota which is said to be the same as Taklimakan (cf. Qadiri 1958: 93).

The main question is: Do we have a palatal *k* or a velar *q* in Takla? Is it *takla* ~ *tekla* or is it *taqla*?

Johnson in his report writes the name Taklá-makán and states that "The first vowel sound in *mama* will be indicated by *a*, the second by *á*." (Johnson 1868: 47). That would mean *tekla: meka:n*. The long *a:* in *tekla:* probably indicates the rising tone in the second syllable of Eastern

⁹ Cf. *Atlas of the People's Republic of China*, map No. 29.

¹⁰ *İlmi Qo'ra:fija*, p. 15; cf. further Jarring (1991: 73).

¹¹ In the Lund University Library, Manuscript Division, Prov. 207:II:9.

Turki words which he has understood as a prolonged *a*. But as will be seen from other examples of the pronunciation of Eastern Turki words given by Johnson on page 47, his linguistic credibility is poor. Shaw has another way of writing the name, viz. *Takla-Makân* or *Tâkla-Makân*, i.e. *takla maka:n* or *ta:kla maka:n*, where long vowels are clearly indicated. Menges (1968:14) for unexplained reasons uses the form *Taqlamaqan*. The second part of the word is of course Arabic *maqâm* which in Eastern Turki sometimes is confused with Arabic *makân* and receives a final *-n* instead of *-m*. Both forms are semantically very close which explains the confusion.

There are a few instances where *tak* (*taq*) or *takla* (*taqla*) appear as place names. Bellew as quoted before gives *Takla* as the name of the desert but it is probably only a shortened form of *Takla-makan*. Johnson (1868: 3) mentions a town in Khotan called *Ták*. Hedin (cf. Jarring, 1997: 446) has *Tak* [*taq*] as the name of a village, but it is a quote from a Russian source, not his own observation. Deasy (1901: 209-210) noted *Takla* as the name of a village in the mountains south of Yarkand but it is hardly likely that it is related to the desert name *Takla-makan*. I suspect that the little village *Tokhla* near Khotan, registered by Hedin (1898, 2: 785) may be the same as *Takla*. The non-existence in the present literature of place names such as *Tak* [*taq*] or *Takla* [*taqla*] does not exclude that such names exist. A careful inventory of the place names of Eastern Turkestan may well reveal surprises.

Over the years there have been several attempts at an interpretation of the toponym *Takla-makan*. I list them in chronological order.

1. Hoernle in his report to the Government of India on a collection of Central Asian antiquities says that "The *Takla Makan* desert appears to have received its name from the large quantities of broken pottery, which are found strewn about in many places" (Hoernle 1899: XXIV). It is a statement based on information he had received from the Swedish missionary Magnus Bäcklund¹² who is quoted by Hoernle (1899: XXIV, n. 16) as follows: "*Takla Makan* is a peculiar word which the natives apply to places covered with pottery. Such places are very numerous. Also many skeletons can be found in those places." That Bäcklund has understood *takla* as a plural of a word *tak* is evident from a letter published in

¹² Regarding Bäcklund see my paper "Silent Helpers" (Jarring 1983). Bäcklund was proficient in the Eastern Turki spoken in those days.

Stockholm in 1897 where he gives the name as Taklar Makan (Bäcklund 1897: 228).

My feeling is that Bäcklund is on the right track, but his "places covered with pottery" implies that his interlocutors have paid more attention to the pottery than to the ruins surrounding them, including for example *taq*, in the meaning 'arches'.

2. Hedin (1900: 366): "*Takla-makan* Wüste, *taklamak* sich bewegen, vorrücken, z.B. *kum taklap juradi* [*qum taqlap jüredur*] der Sand bewegt sich vorwärts; auch schütten, z.B. wenn Mais in einem Sieb gereinigt wird; *makan* = Haus, Station".

Hedin's interpretation is not acceptable. The verb *taqla-* does not mean 'to move forwards' but 'to thin' (Jarring 1964: 295). The movement aspect is to be found in the second verb *jür-* 'to go, to move'. Thus the meaning would be "the sand moves thinning out", an observation which the practically-minded Eastern Turkestanians scarcely would have paid attention to.

Hedin's theory of Takla-makan having a Tokharian origin has been dealt with above and is not to be taken seriously.

3. Albert von Le Coq, who spent a long time in Eastern Turkestan doing archaeological and ethnological fieldwork, understood the name as *taqla makān*, putting a question mark on its Arabic or Turkic origin (Le Coq 1922: 116). This name of the desert was according to him entirely unknown to the people of Turfan who only called it *čöl* or *gobi*. On the other hand it was current among the inhabitants of Kucha, Yarkand and Khotan. Le Coq leaves the question open whether it has to be translated with 'pottery fragments'. He adds that it might be of Jungar origin, a rather ambiguous supposition which I feel can be left aside. The most important thing is that Le Coq has understood *tak* as *taq*.

4. In 1961 Tenišev presented a new interpretation of Takla-makan in its modern Uighur form *täklimakan*, assuming that the first part of the word was Arabic *tark*, in its Uighur form *terk* ~ *tek* (loss of *r* often produces a preceding long vowel) meaning 'abandoning'; *-li* a shortened form of the Turkic *-lik* suffix. The meaning would then be 'the abandoned place or, land' (cf. English 'bad land') (Tenišev 1961: 90). It is quite a plausible theory, especially with reference to the meaning of the place name. But there is a snag in it: The *k* in *-lik* would disappear only if the next word begins with a *k* or *q*; the next word is *mekan*, which does not belong to the required phonetic juxtaposition.

5. Murzaev (1966: 350-351) dealing with the place name *Takla-makan* considers that the name is neither of Uighur, or Mongolian nor of Chinese origin. He does not present a theory of his own but refers to Tenishev's theory without objection to it. I understand it to mean that he leaves the question open.

I now come to my own interpretation of *Takla-makan*. For *taq* there are two possibilities:

(a) < "P. ... *tāq*, A tree, a fire of which will burn for seven days." (Steingass 1957: 276); "tak ... der Name eines Baumes (Holzes), der langsam brennt" (Radloff 1893-1911, III: 778). It is no doubt the same tree as (Aitchison 1890: 202) تاغ or تاك the white tamarisk *Haloxylon Ammodendron* (further explained in Aitchison 1890: 203); cf. Doerfer (1963-1975, entry 858): "... *tāg* 'Saksaul, *Haloxylon*'" This word pertains to the Persian-speaking area, its Central Asian Turkic equivalent is *julγun*. The existence of saksauls or tamarisks in the *Takla-makan* desert is never mentioned in the material which I have examined. The main interest concentrates on the existence of ruined towns in the desert. This *taq* is therefore out of the question.

(b) < "A. ... *tāq*, An arch; an arched building, cupola or any kind of vaulted work ... " (Steingass 1957: 806). The ruins in the desert often must have looked to the visitors like arches or entrances to ruined houses.¹³

My theory is, as said at the beginning of this paper, that *Takla-makan* has to be understood as *taqlar makan* < Arabic *tāq* (the loss of vowel length in Arabic and Persian loanwords is a common occurrence) + the Turkic plural suffix *-lar* (with the usual loss of final *r* > *-la*); *makan* < Arabic *makān* (also with loss of the long vowel in loanwords); *taqlar* > *taqla* in *taqla makān* has an adjectival function. The same phenomenon can be observed in for example *muztay ata* where *muztay* stands as an adjective forming an attribute to *ata* 'the ice-mountain father', in its modern form *Muz-tagh-ata*.

The fact that the components of the toponym *Takla-makan* are of Arabic origin points to an intellectual source for its genesis. It is not the language of illiterate peasants, hunters or caravan people who for one reason or another lived near the desert or somehow got acquainted with all its perils and dangers.

¹³ Cf. the rich pictorial evidence in, for example, Stein (1907).

The appearance of Takla-makan as a place name coincides with the rule of Yakub Bek over Eastern Turkestan (1864-1877), when the Andijani¹⁴ influence became pronounced.¹⁵ The toponym Takla-makan may well have been created or invented by some of Yakub Bek's Western Turkestan followers and advisers who no doubt were more literate than the inhabitants of Eastern Turkestan of those days. But this is only a conjecture.

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¹⁴ Andijan, a town in present-day Uzbekistan.

¹⁵ Cf. Shaw (1871: 163, 468): "The administration is at present chiefly carried on by Andijānees". The Andijani influence continued also after the fall of Yakub Bek (cf. Bruce 1907: 99).

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