

## The Inscriptions of Begum Sarai

(ATTOCK)

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### Historical Importance of Attock :

The importance of Attock grows in history with the building of the fort at Attock, by Akbar the Great, in the year 989 A.H. From ancient times, it was customary to cross the river Indus at Hunḍ. It was Bābar who for the first time crossed the Indus lower down near the site of the present Fort. Hunḍ lies opposite to Hazro on the right bank of the river Indus. It had been a stronghold even prior to the time of Alexander the Great. In the time of Maḥmūd of Ghazna the Hindu Shāhiya dynasty had its winter capital here and Maḥmūd of Ghazna had to subdue it to cross into the land of the five rivers. The crossing at Hunḍ had several advantages. Firstly, it greatly reduced the length of the route from Kābul to Hazro, as the crossing was advantageously effected on the Kābul River near Jalālābād in Afghānistān. Peshāwar was thus bypassed and a double crossing avoided. Secondly, the tactical route into the plains of the Panjāb from the North Western Frontier lay along a line which passed through Hashṭnagar, Hunḍ, Hazro and Haṭiān—the Hāṭiyah (not Bhāṭiyah) of Utbi; and not along the present Grand Trunk Road over the Attock bridge, which was constructed by the British in the year 1881 A.D.

### The Grand Trunk Road :

The portion of the road stretching from the Water Gate of the Attock fort to Haṭiān through Gondal, was constructed by Akbar. Sher Shāh Sūrī in his short reign during the temporary flight of Humāyun from India constructed the portion from Hazro to Haṭiān and downwards to Rohtas in the plains and beyond. Actually, the road which Sher Shāh Sūrī built was a reconstruction of an ancient highway which had been built in eight stages, from Purushupura in

the frontier, to Pātliputra, the famous Mauryan capital.

The direction of each stage was determined by the nearness of an important stronghold. Akbar extended the road from Haṭiān to the river Indus at the point of the Water Gate of the Attock Fort. We thus see three roads in the area from Haṭiān northwards namely: (1) Haṭiān to Hazro—Sher Shāh Sūrī, (2) Haṭiān to the Boat Bridge and beyond across the Indus to Peshāwar—Akbar and (3) from the Lāhori Gate of the Attock Fort on the main road, to the present Attock Bridge—the British.

After the construction of the lower portion of the Attock Fort, which indeed is the original and the first part of the fort to be built, the Grand Trunk Road was made to run along the fort to the Water Gate by Akbar himself. All along this road, halting places called *Sarāis* were built both by Sher Shāh Sūrī and Akbar and the following emperors. Begum Sarāi is one of them.

#### The Begum Sarai :

Starting from the Attock Fort, Begum Sarāi is the first halting place towards the Panjāb. This highway was a trade route, and hence *cāravānsarāis* were essential along the whole length of the road. They were usually placed at a distance of twelve miles from each other.<sup>2</sup> According to Pope, in Persia, this distance was about twenty miles.<sup>3</sup> They comprised enclosures of various sizes, this one being the biggest on this route. Cells or rooms were placed along the inside of the perimeter, which was strongly walled to ward off intruders, with a small verandah in front of each. Thus it formed an independent cubicle which afforded considerable privacy. In one corner a special apartment was built as a V. I. P. suit for dignitaries. This usually faced the best view of the landscape.

Begum Sarāi is situated about a furlong from the Fort's Water

1. The Grand Trunk Road in The Punjāb, By K. N. Sarkar M.A., Edited by H. L. O. Garrett I. E. S., 1926, Punjāb Government Publication, Lahore. Page, 1.

2. Five Thousand Years of Pakistan. By R. E. M. Wheeler. Royal India and Pakistan Society, London, 1950. Page, 93.

3. An Introduction to Persian Art. By Arthur Upham Pope, Peter Davies. London, 1930. Page 35.

Gate upwards below the P. W. D. Dāk Bungalow. The date of construction of Begum Sarāi is not known, nor is it known as to who built it. There are of course several views. Some have said that it was built by Nūr Jahān, the celebrated wife of Jahāngīr, while others attribute it to the wife of Akbar. In any case, it is not clear from the historical data available to us as to who built it and when. This much is clear that with the shifting of the Boat Bridge, and with the subsequent building of the Fort, *cāravāns* had diverted along this route, and a Sarāi was needed in its vicinity, not only for the travellers, but also for the convoys of crafts and victuals to rest awhile.

#### The Boat Bridge :

Picture No. 1 shows the pillars of the Boat Bridge built by Akbar the Great. This picture was taken from the Begum Sarāi. The distance not only denotes its nearness to the Sarāi but also the breadth of the Boat Bridge, which is assessed by the distance between the two large pillars. This is approximately 150 yards. The length of the present bridge built by the British in the year 1883 A. D. is 300 yards. Akbar's Boat Bridge is located between the villages of Mallāhi Ṭola on the proximal side of the Fort and *Khairābād* on its distal side. The two villages are still inhabited and have many a tale to tell. Akbar imported boatmen from down country and settled them in Mallāhi Ṭola, which literally means 'The Boatmen's Colony.' The length of Akbar's bridge is almost half that of the British bridge. We have reasons to believe that crossing on Akbar's bridge was mostly done during fair weather. The River Indus is rather difficult to cross during the summer months when the monsoons send down torrents of rain from the high hills. We shall further explain our views on this point in the forthcoming paragraphs. A good look at this stage at the accompanying map will help to understand the location.

#### The Baradari :

The Sarāi occupies an area of approximately two-and-a-half acres—Picture No. 2. The courtyard is surrounded by independent cells, as we have described above. The structure is reinforced by a corner tower in which a suit of rooms with overlooking windows towards the river has been very efficiently inserted. This had a dome over it, which is visible from the interior. The ribs of this dome show a very early Mughal piece of architecture.



In the South-Western corner of the Sarāi is placed a peculiar structure which is popularly known as 'the mosque'. This is not correct. We shall presently discuss this point in detail. The structure is symmetrically placed in the courtyard. It is more like a Bārādārī. The building has two platforms on either side, the Eastern and the Western. The Eastern platform faces the main entrance to the sarāi, and has six steps mounting to the platform. This may be seen from Picture No. 2. The Western platform has no steps; this is discernable from Picture No. 3. We contend that this structure is not a mosque, but a Bārādārī, for the following reasons :—

- (1) It is facing East and West, which is not the direction of the Qiblah at this point. The Qiblah is towards the South-West.
- (2) It has no Mehrāb.
- (3) The rooms are peculiarly situated between two platforms, and do not afford accommodation to many people even in a single row, and
- (4) The so-called mosque has itself no courtyard. Picture No. 2 was taken at 2 p. m. in the month of January this year. It shows the shadow of the building towards the North. This structure is evidently facing the West. The picture is taken from the East where the main entrance to the Sarāi is located. What is this structure then? We shall presently see.

#### The Inscriptions :

Picture No. 3 is a close-up view of the mosque-like structure in the compound of the Sarāi. It is taken from the Western side, and is showing the platform on the same side. It can also be seen that the mounting steps are lacking, which are seen in Picture No. 2. Additional steps along the Southern wall can be seen, which appear to be remnants of a complete staircase now extinct. These incomplete steps may have led to a top storey which also does not exist now. There are no rooms in this structure. It is one single hall divided by pillars forming arches which divide it into one large and four small apartments, each in communication with the other. On the walls of this hall, or more precisely, on the pillars, we have discovered about twenty inscriptions, written in the hand of travellers who happened to spend

sometime here. We shall here reproduce a few only for the benefit of our readers as these will be of interest in elucidating our point of view.

A little introduction seems called for on such memorable writing, and before we talk of these inscriptions we feel it necessary to reproduce from a recently published article in the monthly *Yaghmā* (یغما) of Irān. The article is entitled *Tārikh-i-Yādgār* (تاریخ یادگار) and is from the pen of an Iranian scholar Aḥmad Gulchīn-i-ma'ānī (احمد گلچین معانی) who says :<sup>4</sup>

“The custom of writing in remembrance on the walls of the mosques, churches, buildings and shrines has been a habit common among the people of all ranks in ancient times. Perhaps they took the stony foundations more lasting than their own self. During their travels, whenever they came across a building they inscribed a few lines on its walls and re-took the journey. If this custom has proved unwholesome for the ancient buildings, it has at the same time proved useful for recording the different historical events of the past. We have seen some biographies and history books in which the authors have made use of such writings of kings, nobles, captives, travellers, scholars, and poets.”

After this the writer describes a book in one of the local libraries of Irān, in which are described similar writings on the walls of old monuments, whereupon travellers, poets and even Emperors have taken care to leave their impressions. This book has been donated by one General Majid Firūze. One of the monuments described in this book is the Nazār of Shaikh Aḥmad Jām (شیخ احمد جام). Emperor Humāyun, the father of Akbar the Great, during his flight to Irān, while visiting this shrine, wrote down some words in his own hand. The author of this

4 - خط نوشتن برسم یادگار بر در و دیوار مساجد و معابد و عمارات و مزارات ، از قدیم الایام معمول خاص و عام بوده - و عابران سبیل که بنای خشت و گل را استوار تر و پائدار تر از بنای وجود خویش میدیدند ، در سفرها بهر بنائی که میرسیدند سطری چند بیادگار می نوشتند و می گذشتند - این کار اگر برای ابنیه و آثار قدیم تاحدی زیان بخش بوده بعوض در ضبط پاره یی از وقائع و سوانح ادوار گذشته مفید واقع شده و در کتا بها دیده ایم که بعضی مواقع مؤرخان و تذکره نویسان ازین نوشته ها که دستخط سلطانی ، امیری ، اسیری ، جهانگردی ، عالمی یا شاعری بوده استفاده کرده اند -

article describes this episode in the following words<sup>5</sup> :—

“Some of the kings and respectable personages who have visited this holy place, have left brief writings on the walls. One of them is Muḥammad Humāyun Pādshah of Hindostān, who visited Irān in the time Shāh Tahmāsp. He has written these words three hundred and forty-eight years ago, and it is surprising that even the extreme cold weather, rain and snow have not made it illegible.”

What Emperor Humāyun actually wrote was this :

اے ہمت تو ندا پذیر ہمہ کس ظاہر بجناب تو ضمیر ہمہ کس  
درگاہ در تو قبلہ گاہ ہمہ خلق لطف بکرشمہ دستگیر ہمہ کس

And he ended thus with the date, :

سرگشتہ بادیه بی سر انجامی محمد ہایون شنبہ چہاردم شوال ۹۵۱ھ

Having touched upon this aspect of writing on the walls, we will now proceed to examine the material at our disposal obtained from the walls of the Bārādārī of Begum Sarāi.

This structure then, as we have maintained, is a Bārādārī. It was originally meant to be a resting place. A question may now be asked; why was it necessary to have two resting places in one and the same locality—the Bārādārī and the Sarāi? An examination of the situation will show that *when the Bārādārī was built there was no Sarāi. The Begum Sarāi is a later addition built round the Bārādārī. The Bārādārī rose simultaneously with the Fort, while the Sarāi was built quite some time after.* It was necessary to build a resting place for the travellers to wait for the crossing hours. The Boat Bridge was just next door. This resting place was thus an immediate requirement. The date of the construction of this Bārādārī is about 1000 A.H. The main Sarāi may have been built after Akbar by one of the future royal ladies. The reasons for presuming thus are as follows :—

5 - بعضی از سلاطین و بزرگان کہ باین مکان شریف نزول کردہ اند ، مختصری بیادگار در و دیوار و گنبد و محجر مزار نوشتہ اند - از جملہ محمد ہایون پادشاہ ہندوستان کہ در سلطنت شاہ طہماسپ صفوی بہ ایران سفر کردہ بود ، این کلمات را با مرکب بمحجر دور مزار نوشتہ - و عجب است باینکہ سیصد و چہل و ہشت سال است برف و باران برآں ہاریدہ ہنوز خواندہ میشود -

[از یغا - شاہہ ششم سال شانزدہم ص ۲۸۳]

- 1) The Bārādārī is not a part of the main Sarāi. If it was, it should have been properly incorporated and included in the general plan. As it stands today, its position is haphazard.
- 2) The structure is located to one side of the courtyard without any rhyme or reason, and is not related to the main building.
- 3) It has no reason to be there, except that it already was there, prior to the construction of the Sarāi
- 4) An inscription discovered by me is dated 1010 A.H., which is the time of Akbar and not Jahāngir, who came to the throne in 1014 A.H.

It may be of interest to note here, that Sir Mortimer Wheeler has wrongly called this structure a mosque in his *Five Thousand Years of Pakistan* (P. 94). The District Gazetteer of Attock says that it was built during the reign of Emperor Jahāngir (P. 316). One of the Archaeological Reports of Indian Survey of Historical Monuments labels this structure as the work of Nūr Jahān. This site, where the Bārādārī is situated, was probably the best site near the Boat Bridge and the Fort. The later architects, therefore, chose to build the Sarāi around it in later days. The entire area commands an excellent view (see Picture No. 1).

We now come to the inscriptions and try to assess the period of the building. The data discovered by me is the first of its kind, and is of great significance. This writing is fast fading away, and with future repairs and inclement weather, it is likely to vanish. Like my friend Gulchin-i-Ma'ānī, I too am amazed how these writings have survived for three hundred and seventy-four years. It is an occasion for modern manufacturers of ink to ponder over the methods of ancient preparations. The pictures reproduced here were taken in a hurry with an ordinary camera. The Archaeological Department would do well to photograph these inscriptions using expert methods and preserve them for the benefit of future historians. I am still further amazed that the travellers carried their own ink, kept in portable pots, which avoided spilling even during rough journeys on horseback and bullock carts. What a contrast; we today have to empty our fountain pens or put them in plastic bags while travelling by air. And the pens; they too must



have been of unbreakable material, or carried in properly made cases to avoid their breaking. Perhaps they were made of metal. Gold pens are known to have been used by kings ; silver ones may have been used by middle class people, or even by the common man, as it was quite cheap in those days. The price of gold in the days of Akbar was approximately eighty rupees an ounce ! A gold pen therefore could not have cost more than ten rupees. However, there is no likelihood of the writing material being supplied to the travellers on the spot while in transit. Everyone must have carried his own. Now for the inscriptions—

- (1) Picture No. 4. This is dated the 22nd Jamādī-us-thānī, 1081 A. H. It reads as follows :—

گل محمد سهام متوطن چک جلال الدین بتاریخ ۲۱ جمادی الثانی ۱۰۸۸ هـ  
رقم زده خواننده باد والسلام - که این جهان فانی است امید  
باقی است -

- (2) Picture No. 5. It is dated 1088 A.H. and reads as under :—

غریب بیکسی اینجا رسیده فراق دوستان بسیار دیده  
دو حرفی یادگار خود نوشته یکی از خون و دیگر ز آب دیده

العبد محمد فتح ۱۰۸۸ هـ

- (3) Picture No. 6. It is dated Muḥarram-ul-Ḥarām 1028 A. H. and reads as follows :—

در رهگذر باد چراغی که تراست  
ترسم که بیمرد از فراغی که تراست  
بوی جگر سوخته عالم بگرفت  
گر نشنیدی زهی دماغی که تراست

محرم الحرام ۱۰۳۸ هـ شریف حسینی  
ابن فتح خان دراتک آمده بود تحریر یافت

- (4) Picture No. 7. It is dated in two places differently :—

(i) Rabi'-ul-Awwal 1081 A. H.

(ii) Ziqa'd 1010 A. H. and it reads as follows :—

دزدیده دیده آمد و دزدیده دید و رفت

دزد عجب به بین که چه از دیده دید و رفت

ذیقعد ۱۰۱۰ هـ

این نوشته فقیر حقیر امیر خان ولد مظفر خان ساکن دارلسلطنة  
لاهور بتاریخ چهاردهم ذیقعد ۱۰۱۰ هـ -

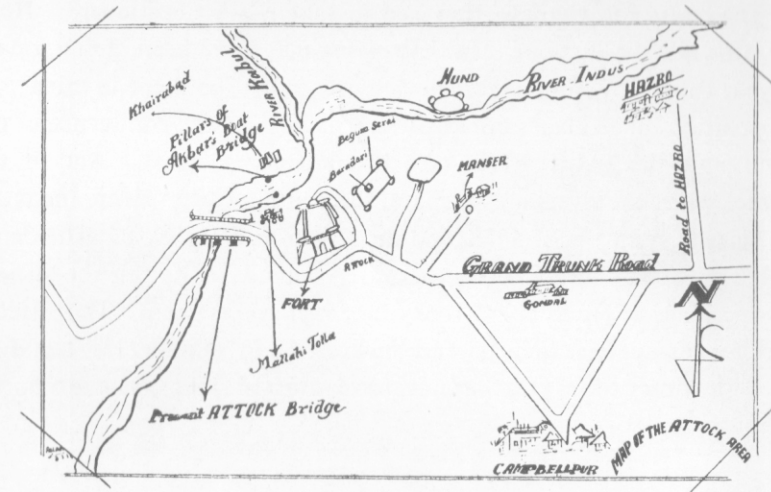
I cannot decipher the rest. I may have even committed many other mistakes in my readings above. An expert will some day improve upon my decipherments.<sup>6</sup> Now, looking at these dates collectively, we come to the following conclusions :—

- (a) The travellers have been coming and going from both sides of Attock. In other words, people have come from outside into this subcontinent. Some have also left this country to go across its frontiers.
- (b) The dates mostly fall within the winter months, when crossing was easy, and we have already pointed out this above in passing. This may now be judged from the following comparative dates :
  - (i) Jamādī-us-Thānī, 1081 A.D. falls in October 1670 A.D.
  - (ii) Ziqa'd, 1010 A.H. falls in April, 1601 A. D.
  - (iii) Muḥarram-ul-Ḥarām 1028, A.H. falls in December, 1618 A. D.
  - (iv) Rabi'-ul-Awwal 1081 A.H. falls in August, 1670 A.D.
  - (v) 1081 A.H. starts in February, 1677 A.D.

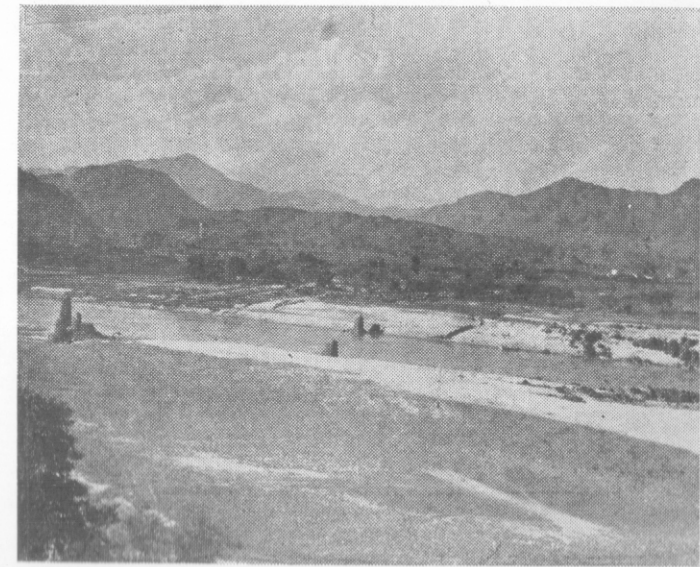
There may have been some variations in the months in transit but then the travellers had probably to wait for a few days for the river to abate to enable them to cross over. It is our firm conviction that no crossing was possible during the summer months when the width of the river was enormous due to floods. This was of course no obstacle for invading troops. Nothing could stop them. But for the convoys

6. The decipherment of the Colonel has numerous errors, and as stated by him as well, he could not read these in full. The present text is the result of editorial staff efforts. In this connection the guidance of Prof. Vazir-ul-Hasan Abedi is gratefully acknowledged.

carrying crafts and victuals, they had to take it a bit cautiously. However, this may be just our idea. Crossing may have been going on all the year round, by some clever device. It must be kept in mind that the position of Akbar's Boat Bridge is beyond the confluence of the Kābul and the Indus River (see accompanying map). And in the summer when the rivers are in spate, the width of the river Indus at this place is simply enormous, and the stream is very fast. The depth too is very great and the bed is rocky. As compared to this the ancient crossing place at Hund is not rocky, nor is it very deep. The stream here spreads out very greatly, and the crossing in summer is less difficult. In winter times great armies have crossed this place on horse-back.<sup>7</sup>



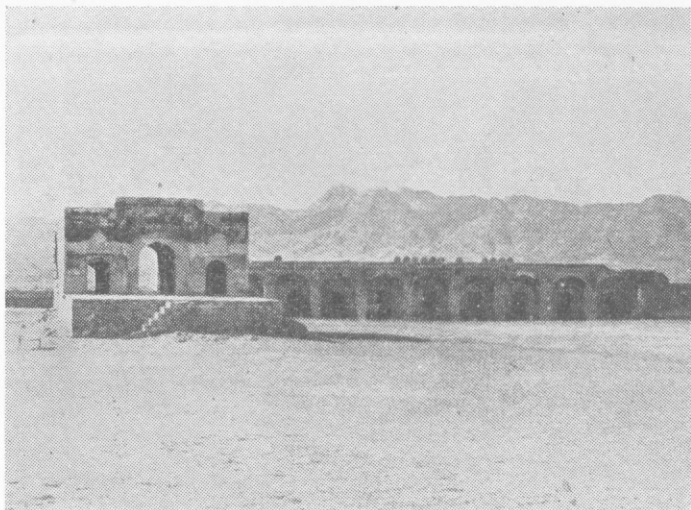
Map of the Attock's area, showing important sites. Haṭiān is to the right of "N".



Picture No. 1. This is taken from the Begum Sarāi. It shows the river Indus, with two pillars of Akbar's boat bridge. The village Khairābād can be seen that a distance across the river.

7. Historical Dissertations By Lieut Cononel K. A. RASHID, Published by Pakistan Historical Society, Karachi, 1962. Chapter on Combined Operations at Hund, Mahmūd of Ghazna.

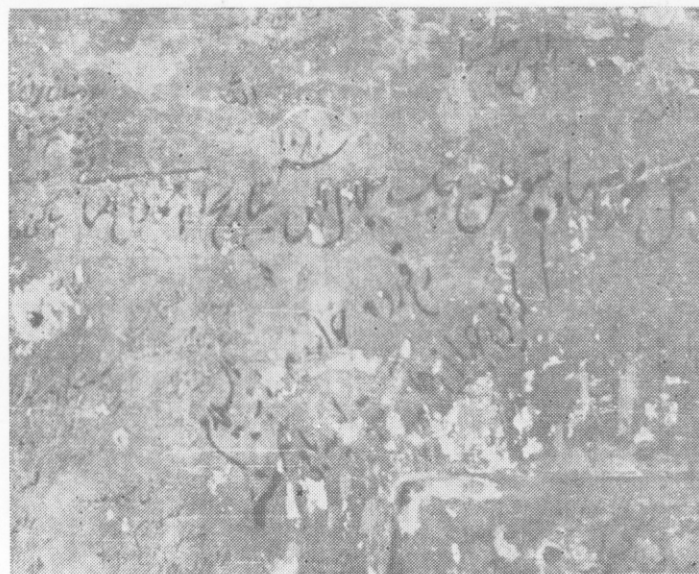




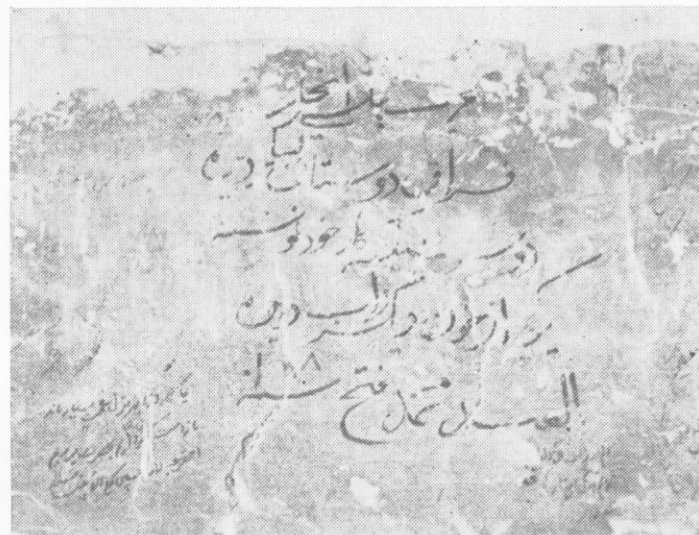
Picture No. 2. The Begum Sarāi, showing the Bārādārī like structure in the compound. This has a shadow to the North. The picture shows its eastern platform with six mounting steps.



Picture No. 3. The Bārādārī, showing its eastern side. This platform has no leading steps. The southern wall shows remnants of a flight of stairs.



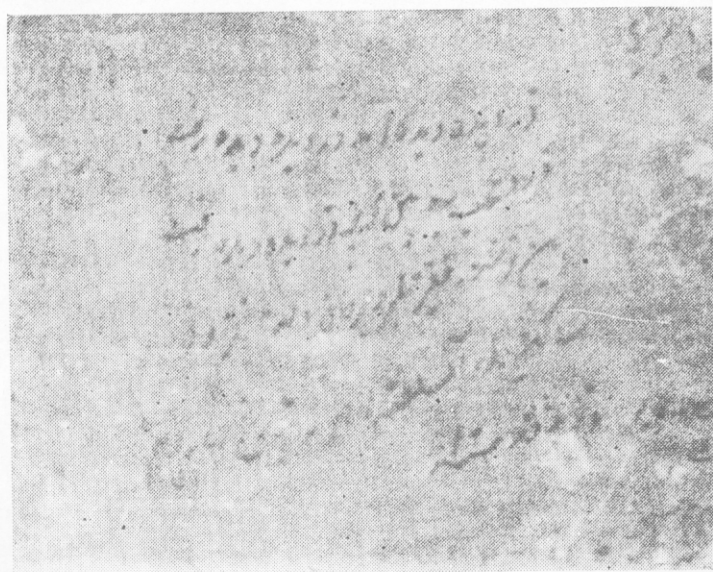
Picture No. 4, shows the date 1088 A.H.



Picture No 5, shows the date 1088 A.H.



Picture No. 6, shows the date 1038 A.H.



Picture No. 7, shows the date 1010 A.H.