

THE TOMB OF THE WAYWARD QUEEN

*an investigation into the nature of
knowledge, archives, and the desire to know*

PROJECT ARCHIVES

atelier tuhsu, 2025-2026

PROLOGUE:

THE BEGINNINGS OF DOUBT

For the first seven months of 2025, I released—through the Patreon platform—documents connected to a Franco–Soviet archaeological mission sent into the Zeravshan foothills in 1937.

There were authorizations, telegrams, personnel records, translated memoranda, transmission slips, photographic traces, contested maps, an oral account, and the increasingly nervous evidence of a bureaucracy attempting to determine what kind of material had entered its possession.

The documents did not tell a complete story, nor were they ever intended to.

They arrived damaged, displaced, mistranslated, separated from their enclosures, and assigned to institutional categories that weren't quite right. Dates certainly weren't. Personnel moved in and out of the record. A missing annex became more consequential than the report that referred to it. A figure in a chamber (maybe) moved uneasily between object, effigy, body, and person. The archive repeatedly approached certainty and then drew back.

Taken individually, each document appeared to perform an ordinary function. Money was authorized. Supplies were delayed. Personnel were listed. Papers were routed. A later scholar attempted classification. An administrator noted that something had not been enclosed.

But after twelve documents, another pattern became visible as well.

The archive was not only recording the mission. It was recording the institutional difficulty produced by the mission.

At first, the papers concerned what was being planned. Later, they concerned what was found. Later still, they concerned what may be said about what was found, where the reports should be sent, which terms may be used, and who might be permitted to make those decisions.

I.

When I began *The Tomb of the Wayward Queen*, I was interested in the authority of the archaeological document, as well as archival pressure in the face of near omnipresent ambiguity and opaqueness.

A typed memorandum, an official stamp, an accession number, a carefully worded translation--these things do not merely carry information. They also produce confidence. They tell us that an observation has passed through procedure and emerged as something else, something more important: knowledge.

The archive reassures because it gives disorder a sequence and a tidy(ish) container.

- ⇒ Something happened.
- ⇒ Someone witnessed it.
- ⇒ A report was written.
- ⇒ A file was opened.
- ⇒ A classification was assigned.
- ⇒ The document was retained.

The apparent solidity and clarity of that chain allows us to forget how much interpretation has already occurred.

- ⇒ Before a thing enters an archive, it must be named.
- ⇒ Before it can be filed, someone must decide what kind of thing it is.
- ⇒ Before it can be sent, someone must decide who has the authority to receive it.
- ⇒ Before it can become evidence, it must be made legible within an existing system.

Bureaucratic language can tolerate uncertainty temporarily, but not indefinitely. A box will eventually have to be marked; a department will have to accept custody; a report will need a title, and of course, an inventory needs a noun.

The figure of the Wayward Queen, hinted at only obliquely, resisted the available nouns.

And so, the archive did what archives often do when confronted with something that cannot be comfortably absorbed:

It divided the problem.

One office retained the report while another appears to have held the annex. A later record imposed a typology, and then a translation shifted emphasis. Names disappeared from one list and reappeared in another context. Responsibility moved sideways.

No single document contains the whole difficulty.

This may have been deliberate.

But, equally, it may also have been the ordinary outcome of several people, working within several systems, each trying to make the material manageable. Just doing their jobs.

The difference between concealment and administration is not always as clear as we would like.

II.

The first twelve documents were released separately because I wanted the archive to accumulate before it was explained.

Had I begun with a complete account of the mission—its discovery, its disappearance, the chambers, the figure, the missing objects—every later document would have served only as illustration.

It would have confirmed a story already known.

Instead, each document was permitted to exert its own pressure.

- The funding authorization established official interest but no sense of danger.
- The logistical telegram placed the mission within the ordinary frustrations of distance, supply, and institutional dependence.
- The roster appeared to stabilize the personnel until later documents made that stability doubtful.
- The Soviet typological memorandum attempted to impose order retrospectively, but revealed the strain required to do so.
- The transmission slip preserved the absence of an enclosure and, in doing so, made the absence part of the surviving record.

- The maps did not lead cleanly back to the site, in any acceptable way.
- The oral testimony did not resolve the documentary contradictions. It complicated them by introducing memory, translation, fear, and the possibility that the official archive had excluded the witnesses most capable of describing what happened.
- The later filing and routing materials brought the institutional response closer to the foreground.

By then, the documents were no longer concerned solely with an archaeological discovery. Instead, they were concerned with the presence and circulation (and perhaps, maintenance?) of uncertainty.

One of the central questions of the project became: what happens when an institution cannot decide what it knows, but cannot admit that it does not know?

The answer, at least within this archive, is not silence. It is more paperwork.

The file grows around the failure of classification. Each new document promises to clarify the earlier ones. Instead, it adds another historical voice, another motive, another vocabulary, another layer of custody, and another possibility of distortion.

The archive becomes larger and less conclusive.

This isn't just a useful aesthetic decision or device. It's a condition familiar to anyone who has worked with historical evidence.

More material does not always bring us closer to the event. Sometimes it brings us closer to the systems through which the event was made available to us.

III.

There is a pleasure in making documents of this kind.

There is the development of institutional voice: deciding what a French administrator in 1937 might omit, what a Soviet scholar in 1951 might insist upon, what a later archivist might reduce to a routing code.

There is the physical work of the document: typography, paper, stamps, wear, reproduction, annotation, and damage.

There is also the slightly strange intimate frisson of creating an object whose authority depends upon suppressing the presence of its maker.

A successful archival fiction should not feel loudly invented. Rather, if all goes well, it should feel encountered.

But this pleasure contains a danger, namely that the archive can become endlessly generative.

There is always another memorandum that might exist, another photograph that might be missing, another institutional correction, another translation, another note in the margin of a report that has not survived.

At a certain point, further evidence does not deepen the work. It merely expands the file.

After twelve releases, I decided that I had reached that threshold.

The archive established its world. It showed the mission's official origins, the instability of its personnel and chronology, the separation of evidence from report, the competing attempts at classification, and the institutional unease surrounding whatever else may be hidden just out of sight.

Another administrative document might have been persuasive, sure. But to what end?

IV.

The answer may involve less paper.

The Tomb of the Wayward Queen had always belonged to a larger artistic practice concerned with objects, matter, ritual, classification, memory, and the instability of the evidence through which the past is constructed.

The documents were one manifestation of that practice, but they were not, and cannot be, its final destination.

The tomb contains things.

Ceramic things--ritual and domestic. Objects that move between use and symbol, between the ordinary and the votive, between the remains of a life and the structures imposed upon it afterward.

The archive had so far surrounded those objects without fully releasing them.

This was necessary. The documents established the pressure under which the objects would later be seen. They created the disciplinary, political, and historical frameworks that would attempt to explain them.

But a project about material evidence cannot remain forever in the paper structures that contain it. It has to eventually encounter the object.

The project's ambiguities are not puzzles awaiting solutions, rather they belong to its very structure.

But future work may approach those ambiguities through different means: ceramics, fragments, photographs, spatial arrangements, sound, essays, residues, and the relationships produced when these things are placed beside the surviving documents.

The archive will remain, but it will cease to be the only voice.

V.

Let me also just say that there is also an ethical question within any project built around withholding, and this has been important in my thinking about all of this.

A serial mystery produces an expectation of eventual revelation. Attention appears to form a contract: follow long enough and the concealed truth will be disclosed.

The more documents accumulate, the more strongly the reader may feel that uncertainty should eventually be exchanged for knowledge.

I do not think that exchange can be honestly completed here (or, perhaps, anywhere !?).

The surviving materials do not support a single, authoritative account of the mission. They do not allow the contradictory maps to resolve into one reliable plan. They do not make it possible to determine whether the missing evidence was lost, suppressed, divided, destroyed, or never produced in the form later documents imply.

To resolve these questions merely because resolution is narratively satisfying would repeat the archive's own violence. It would force the evidence to become coherent on demand.

The refusal to do that is not a refusal of meaning.

It is a refusal of premature meaning. There are things we may infer, patterns we may identify, institutional behaviors we may recognize.

But there is also a point at which interpretation must acknowledge the pressure of its own desire. We want.

We want the archive to yield;

we want the absent annex to contain the answer;

we want the photograph to survive somewhere;

we want one witness to be reliable.

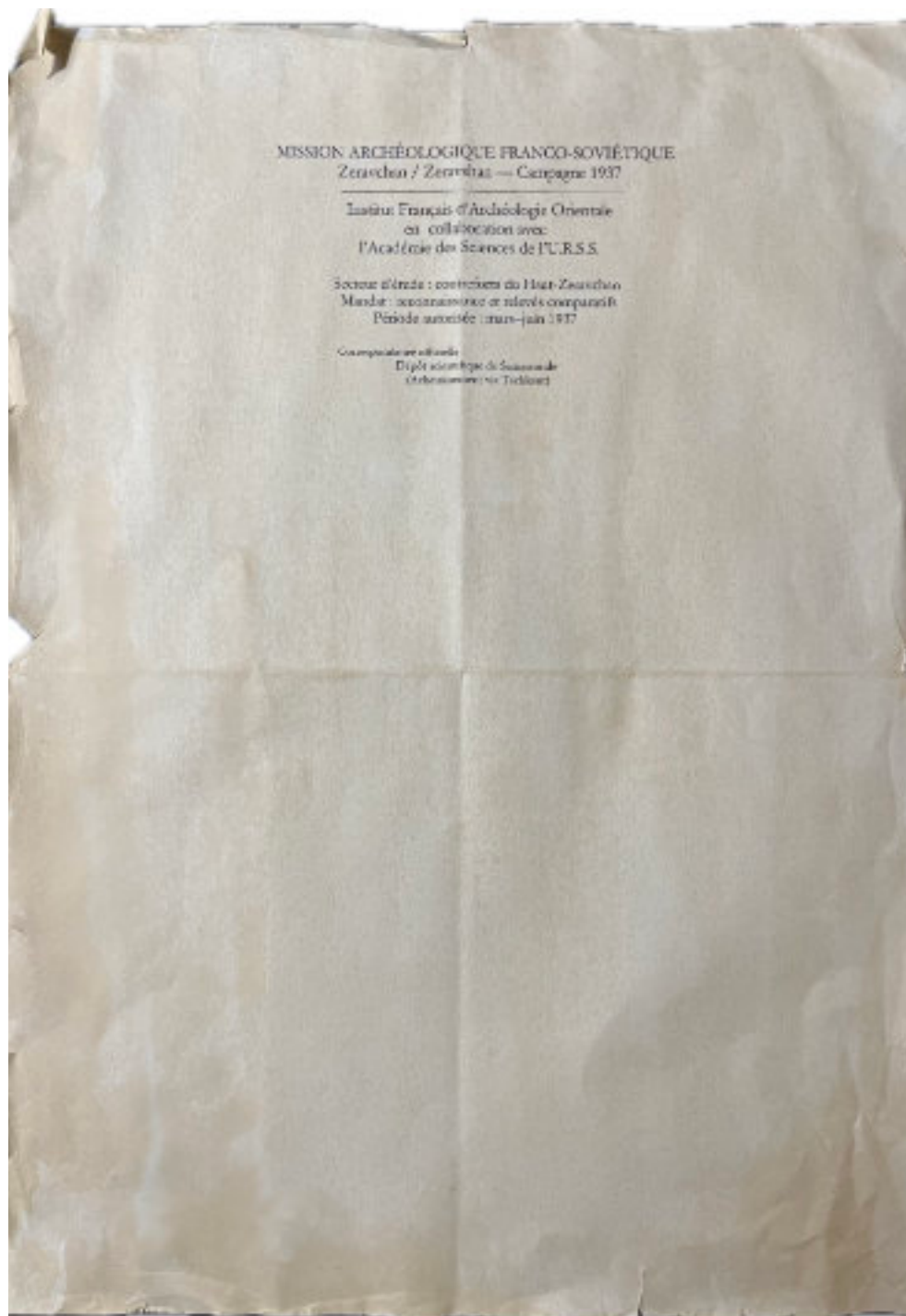
The project will continue to work within those wants, but it will not necessarily satisfy them.

What follows, here, then, is an archive of the archive. I record of what was done, what was released, and how it might have been interpreted.

It does not include every post that followers of the project received, nor does it mark every possible path. What it does do is attempt to stabilize a project that was never intended to be stabilized.

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MISSION LETTERHEAD (1937)

Document type: Letterhead

Origin: Mission archéologique franco-soviétique

Date: 1937

Language: French

This page is the earliest material to survive in a form stable enough to release.

It bears the letterhead of the Mission archéologique franco-soviétique, Zeravshan campaign, 1937. It establishes institutional partnership, geographic scope, and an authorized period of work. No accompanying correspondence survives.

At this stage, nothing here signals difficulty, risk, or anomaly. The document performs authority cleanly and without excess. It names, dates, and delimits.

Read this page as a framing device rather than a message.

Attend to what is defined, and to what is left for other documents to carry.

For now, it should be treated as a reference, not an anchor.

The document appears intact. There are no stamps, signatures, or annotations.

Scans are presented as recovered.

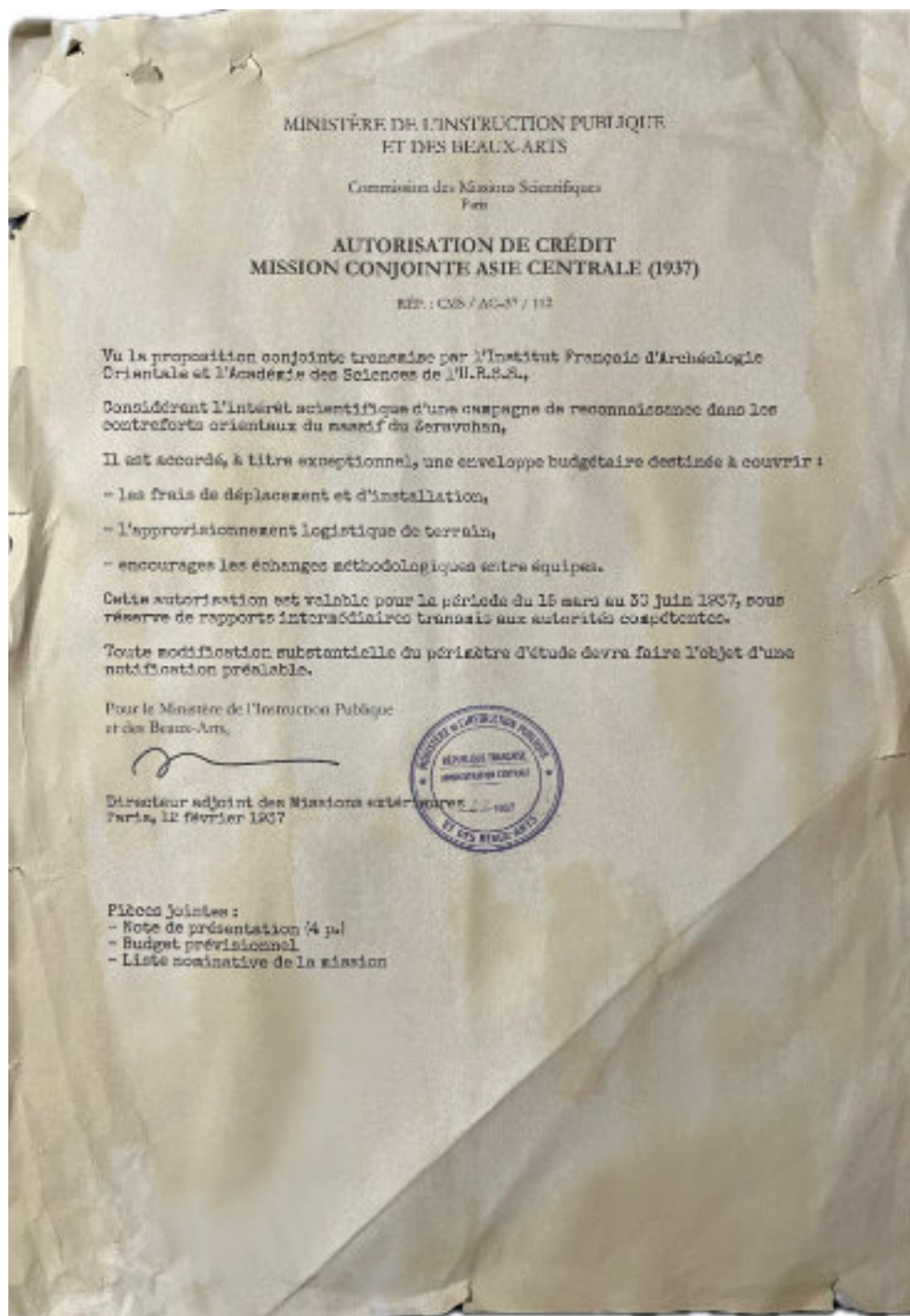
A procedural note.

This document is doing a large amount of stabilizing work early in the archive. Its calmness, clarity, and bureaucratic confidence establish a reading posture that later materials will rely on—and strain against.

It is important not to retroactively load this document with significance it does not yet claim. The pressure it exerts emerges only in relation to other records.

For now, its function is positional rather than evidentiary.

If you find yourself wanting it to mean more, note that impulse. It will recur.



CREDIT AUTHORIZATION (1937)

Document type: Authorization de crédit

Origin: Commission des Missions Scientifiques

Date: 1937

Language: French

This document formalizes the financial authorization for the 1937 mission.

Issued in February 1937, it specifies the mandate, duration, and institutional conditions under which funds were released. The language is procedural and measured, emphasizing reconnaissance, comparative survey, and logistical coordination.

Nothing in this authorization suggests uncertainty. The mission is presented as limited, contained, and routine. The tone presumes that administrative clarity is sufficient preparation.

Read this document in relation to the letterhead released previously.

Notice how authority shifts from identification to obligation. Later materials will test the adequacy of these assumptions.

Internal observation

The document is structurally dense: mandate, conditions, duration, and reporting obligations are all specified with precision.

At the same time, it refers to several annexed materials — presentation note, provisional budget, and a nominative list of the mission — that are not present here.

What survives is the authorisation itself, detached from the documentation meant to justify and operationalise it.

N° 4272  POSTES ET TÉLÉCOMMUNICATIONS

TÉLÉGRAMME

BUREAU D'ORIGINE	DATE	HEURE DE DÉPART
TACHKENT -- TÉLÉGRAPHE CENTRAL	27 MARS 1937	09h15

INDICATIONS DE TRANSMISSION

DEPOT DE SAMARCANDE
ENREGISTRE
LE 30 MARS 1937

NOMS ET ADDRESSES	DESTINAIRE MISSION ARCHAÉOLOGIQUE FRANCO-SOVIÉTIQUE, SECTEUR ZERAYCHAN POINT DE CAMP CONNU EXPÉDITEUR COMITÉ SCIENTIFIQUE - TACHKENT SERVICE LOGISTIQUE RÉGIONAL
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TEXTE

APPROVISIONNEMENT RETARD -STOP- FARINE
PÉTROLE NON LIVRES -STOP- ATTENT
AUTORISATION COMPLÉMENTAIRE -STOP-
CONSEILLONS MAINTIEN POSITION ACTUELLE
JUSQUA NOVEL ORDRE -STOP-

NOMBRE DE MOTS: 20 | TRANSMIS PAR: QN | OBSERVATIONS: Retard signalé

TELEGRAM (1937)

Document type: Telegram

Origin: Regional logistics service (Mission archéologique franco-soviétique [presumed])

Date: 1937

Language: French

This telegram concerns logistical delays during the early phase of the mission.

Routed through established administrative channels, it reports difficulties in provisioning and transport. On its face, it is a routine communication: brief, practical, and narrowly focused on supply.

This is the first document in the archive to register friction, though not yet meaning. No interpretation is offered, and none is required at this stage.

Read the telegram for what it records, not for what it might foreshadow.

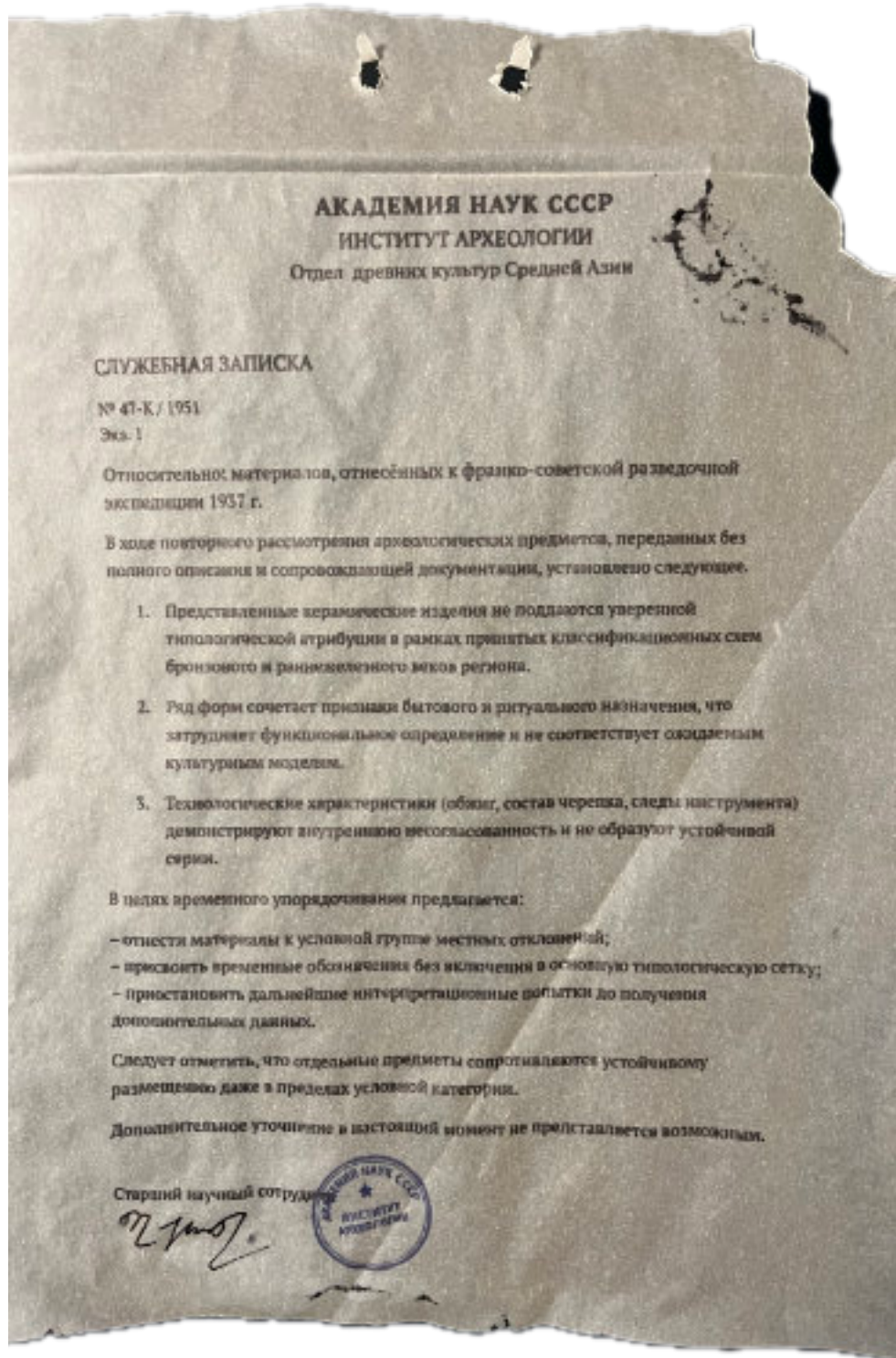
Pay attention to compression, urgency, and what the format excludes.

For now, it remains a logistical note.

The telegram is terse and formulaic, yet it carries two dates: the sending date (27 March 1937) and a later registration stamp at Samarcand (30 March 1937).

The gap is small but consequential, occurring within a mission whose authorized period is already narrow.

No subsequent telegram resolving the delay survives here.



TYPOLOGY MEMO (1951)

Document type: Internal memo

Origin: Department of Ancient Cultures of Central Asia,
Institute of Archaeology, Academy of Sciences of the USSR

Date: 1951

Language: Russian

This memorandum records a Soviet re-examination of archaeological materials attributed to the 1937 Franco–Soviet reconnaissance expedition.

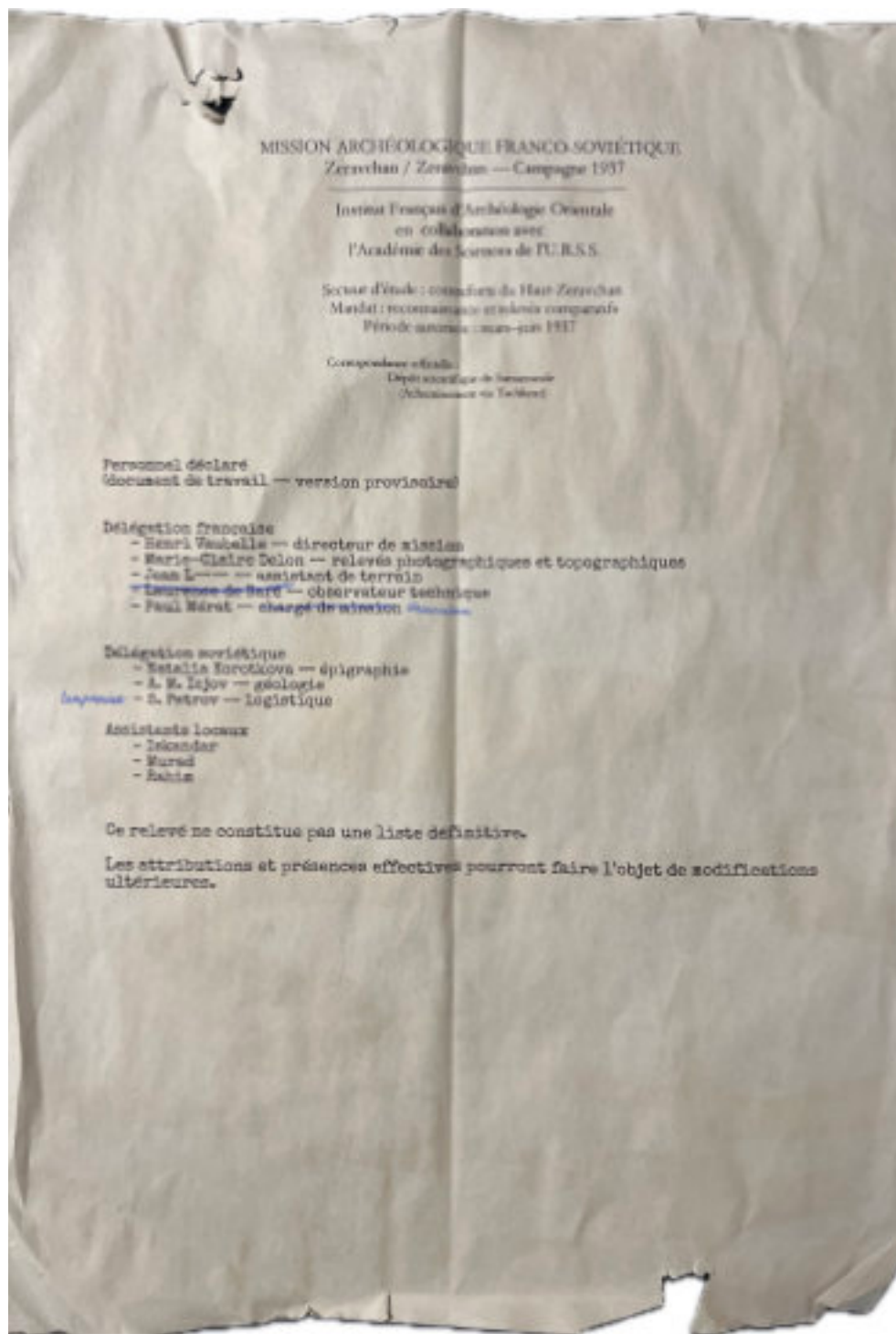
It concludes that several ceramic objects cannot be confidently assigned to established regional typologies and recommends provisional classification pending further data.

Internal observation

The language of the memo is orderly but defensive. Rather than forcing attribution, it creates a holding category designed to absorb anomaly without revising the broader classificatory framework.

Notably, even this provisional grouping is described as unstable: certain objects resist consistent placement even within the conditional category.

The memo closes by declaring further clarification impossible at the present time.



MISSION ROSTER (1937)

Document type: Personnel roster

Origin: Mission archéologique franco-soviétique

Date: 1937

Language: French

This document lists personnel declared for the Franco-Soviet archaeological mission to the Zeravshan region.

It distinguishes between the French delegation, the Soviet delegation, and local assistants.

The page explicitly notes that the list is provisional and subject to later modification.

Additional note

This page is less a list than a snapshot taken mid-adjustment.

What interests me here is not who appears, but how tentatively they appear: crossed-out names, altered titles, provisional language, and the final warning that presence itself may later be contested.

Read alongside the earlier authorisation and the provisioning delay, this roster suggests a mission whose human configuration was still unsettled at the moment it was supposed to begin.

TRANSMISSION SLIP WITH OMITTED ANNEX (1937)

Document type: administrative, transmission slip

Origin: Mission archéologique franco-soviétique (although entirely unclear)

Date: 1937

Language: French

A small administrative file closes the season.

At first glance, just a routing slip, a carbon copy, a note about circulation. Nothing announces anything of importance. And yet it records something new in the archive: a set of photographs from a descent passage appears to have been handled separately from the ordinary file.

The photographs themselves are no longer present. What remains is this trace of a decision about them.

Up to now, the surviving documents have mostly suggested the familiar ravages of time: delays, gaps, partial records, institutional wear and tear. Here, for the first time, the archive hints that at least one absence may not be accidental.

This matters because it changes the nature of the gap. What survives is not the missing material itself, but a small paper trail around it: the suggestion that certain passage photographs were copied, routed, and held apart from the ordinary file. The annex is gone. The photographs are gone. This administrative trace is all that remains, at least for now.

Held against the first five documents, this is the first one that makes the archive feel less passively damaged and more actively managed.

NOTE DE CIRCULATION

Mission archéologique franco-soviétique - secteur du Zeravshan

Matériaux photographiques / fin de mission
Classement provisoire

À l'attention de :

M. H. Vauvelle

Copie : secrétariat de mission

Copie différée : Institut, section d'Asie centrale

Il est transmis sous pli séparé un ensemble restreint de matériaux photographiques relatifs au couloir de descente et aux marques observées au-dessous du premier niveau maçonné.

Ces éléments ne doivent pas être intégrés au tirage général ni portés au dossier descriptif courant avant examen comparatif complémentaire.

Prière de noter :

1. que les vues concernées ont été prises dans des conditions de lumière insuffisante ;
2. que plusieurs des incisions relevées n'apparaissent pas avec une netteté suffisante pour publication ;
3. que Mme N. Korotkova a demandé que toute assimilation prématurée à un système de signes soit évitée ;
4. que la circulation de ces vues doit, pour le moment, demeurer limitée.

Les plaques correspondantes ne seront pas mises en duplication avant révision du relevé comparatif demandé par Mme N. Korotkova.

Annexe mentionnée : feuillet descriptif + inventaire partiel des plaques

Annexe non jointe au présent bordereau

Samarcande, le 30 avril 1937

REÇU
SAMARCANDE
30 AVR 1937

A few things come into view at once. First, the photographs existed as a distinct group, not as incidental plates buried in a broader visual record. Second, the surviving paperwork implies comparison, duplication, and delayed or limited circulation. Third, because the subject is a marked descent passage, the restriction touches not a peripheral detail but a location presumably close to the site's interpretive essence or pressure.

This does not yet amount to some sort of theory of concealment. But it does make innocence harder to assume.

The important thing, at this stage, is not to overread. We do not know whether the images were withheld because they were unclear, disturbing, politically awkward, methodologically inconvenient, or in conflict with another account. We know only that the administrative record preserves the shape of an intervention while the thing intervened upon has vanished.

That asymmetry is new.

27. IV. 37
 Vent plus fort des 9h.
 Poussière ramonée ds le couloir,
 1. Reprise des vues et du relevé
 au-dessous du 1^{er} niveau
 masonné.
 Ouverture visible : env 0,64 m.
 2. Paroi g. friable
 Dépôt sombre dans plusieurs
 creux.
 Marques visible seulement par
 instant, selon angle de la
 lampe.
 3. Le passage ne descend pas chof,
 infléchit lég. à g., puis se ré-
 sève.
 Incisions relevées ce matin ne
 correspondent pas tout à fait
 au tracé repris hier.
 4. À revoir avant tracé.
 1 desc. 3,1
 → 0,64 m

FIELD NOTEBOOK FRAGMENT (1937)

Document type: field document, fragment from notebook

Origin: Unattributed (perhaps/probably Delon), Mission archéologique franco-soviétique

Date: 1937

Language: French

A slight document for this first drop of the new season: a torn field-notebook page dated 27 April 1937.

On its surface, it is practical and unadorned. Wind, dust, light conditions, a few measurements, a note on the passage wall.

But one sentence matters more than the others: the marks seen that morning do not correspond exactly to the tracing made the day before. That is a small discrepancy, written in a working hand, without commentary or alarm. Precisely for that reason, for me, it carries weight.

After the previous document, this fragment reads differently than it otherwise might have. We now know that certain photographs of the passage were held back before duplication. Here, for the first time in field rather than administrative language, we see the instability itself begin to register on site.

English translation for the fragment:

Stronger wind from 9 o'clock.

Dust carried back into the passage.

Resumed photographs and tracing below the first masonry level.

Visible opening: approx. 0.64 m.

Left wall friable.

Dark deposit in several recesses.

Marks visible only intermittently,
depending on the angle
of the lamp.

The passage does not descend straight;
it bends slightly left,
then narrows.

The incisions recorded this morning
do not correspond entirely
to the tracing resumed yesterday.
To be reviewed before printing.

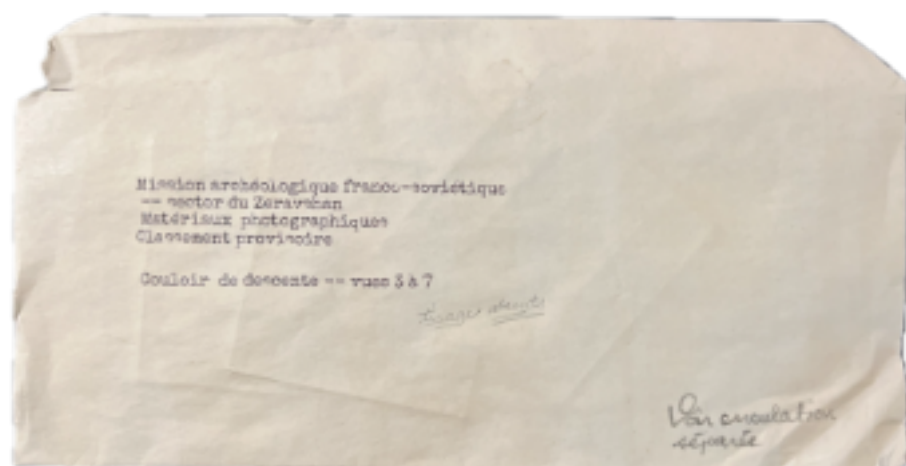
Three things are worth holding together here.

First, the page confirms that the passage was being worked in a practical, repetitive way: viewed, measured, traced, then reviewed again under different conditions. This was not a single glance or an anecdotal impression. The mission was returning to the same evidence and finding that it would not settle.

Second, the note places instability at the level of perception itself. The marks are only visible “by moments,” depending on the lamp angle. That matters. It means discrepancy may have arisen not only from interpretation, but from the conditions under which the passage could be seen at all. The archive’s later contradictions may begin here, in the friction between trace and visibility.

Third, the final line anticipates the significance of the withheld photographs. If the marks did not correspond exactly to the earlier tracing, then visual documentation would become unusually important. And if visual documentation later disappears from ordinary circulation, that disappearance is no

longer neutral. The notebook does not prove suppression. But it sharpens the field in which suppression becomes imaginable.



PHOTOGRAPHIC ENVELOPE (1937?)

Document type: Photographic envelope

Origin: Mission archéologique franco-soviétique

Date: unknown

Language: French

English language translations:

sleeve proper:

Franco-Soviet Archaeological Mission — Zeravshan Sector

Photographic Materials

Provisional filing

Descent passage — views 3 to 7

pencil markings:

prints missing

see separate circulation

At first glance, this is a very minor survival: a photographic envelope (based on impressions, presumably for slides), labeled for a set of views, now empty. It does not give us the images. It does not even tell us with complete confidence what those images showed. But it matters because it turns a previously inferred absence into a physical fact within the archive.

Until now, the missing photographs have hovered beyond reach. Document 6 suggested that certain images from the descent passage were handled separately, restricted before they could enter ordinary circulation, and detached from the main descriptive file. That was already enough to change the feel of the archive. This sleeve goes further. It gives us the place where at least some of those images were supposed to be.

That is important. Archives do not only preserve contents; they preserve expectations. A labeled envelope like this promises

that something was once assembled, counted, and held in some sort of order. When the contents are gone but the container remains, what survives is not the evidence itself but the administrative outline of evidence. We are left with a record of handling, sequence, and intended custody, but not with the material that would justify any of it.

This is one of the first moments in the project where absence stops feeling accidental. Not because the sleeve proves deliberate removal on its own, because of course it doesn't. But because it shows the archive continuing to suggest the shape of something unknown. That is a different kind of clue. It tells us that the record has not merely thinned with time. It has been left unevenly intact.

For now, that's enough. We do not know whether the missing images showed the descent passage, the marked walls, the chamber threshold, or something that confused the filing from the outset. But we can say this: the archive 'knows' that photographs existed, and 'remembers' it materially. That, in a project like this, is not nothing. It is the beginning--perhaps--of a pattern.

Additional thoughts

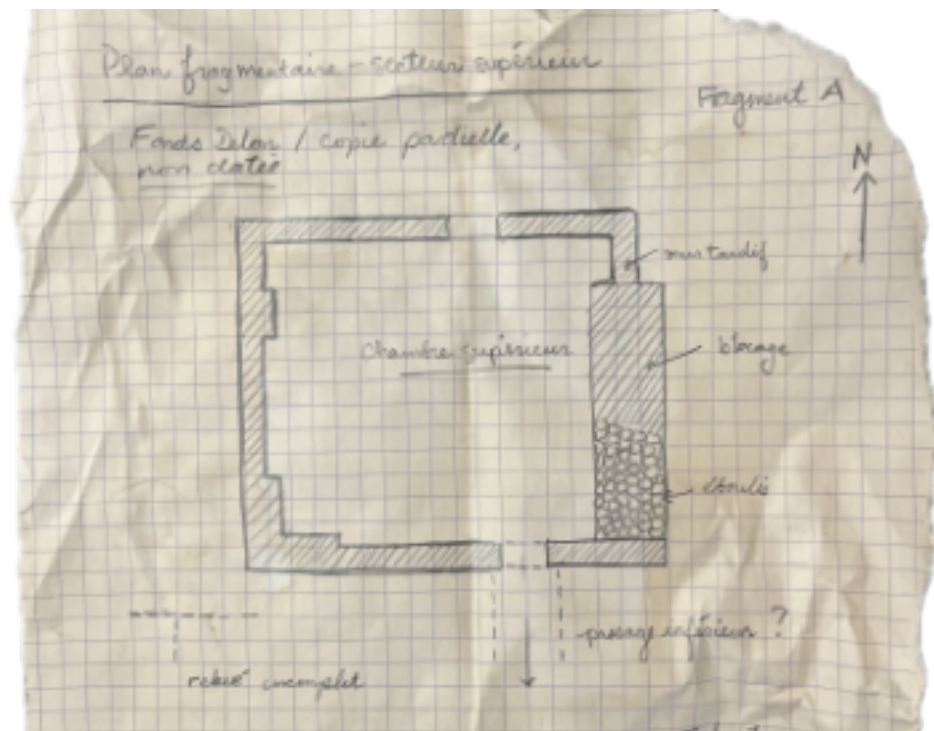
An empty container is never neutral in an archive. It performs a very particular kind of work. It tells us that something once occupied a place within a structure of custody, and it continues to assert that place even after the thing itself has vanished. In that sense, the envelope is not only evidence of loss. It is a machine for producing an afterimage of order.

That makes this document especially valuable for reconstruction. Had the photographs disappeared without leaving any trace of storage or handling, we might assume only the ordinary attrition of time: war, neglect, bad filing, damp, institutional indifference. But the envelope complicates that

easier explanation. It says: here was a unit, here was a grouping, here was a sequence of images treated as related material. The archive did not forget them entirely. It forgot them selectively.

Selective forgetting is one of the archive's most revealing gestures. It leaves behind enough scaffolding to confirm that something existed, but not enough substance to let that thing be read securely. This is why the envelope feels more charged than an ordinary missing item. Like the missing impressions visible on it, its emptiness is shaped. It bears the contour of procedure.

Seen from that angle, this envelope sits very close to document 6. The circulation note introduced the possibility that certain views were diverted from ordinary descriptive handling. This document suggests what that diversion may have looked like on the ground: the maintenance of outward filing practice alongside the disappearance of contents. In other words, the archive goes on behaving as an archive even after its materials have begun to thin in suspicious ways.



fragment a



fragment b

PLAN FRAGMENTS: UPPER CHAMBER / DESCENT SECTOR (1937)

Document type: Map fragments

Origin: Mission archéologique franco-soviétique (attribution unclear; perhaps Delon and Vaubelle??)

Date: 1937 (fragment b, perhaps a later reconstruction?)

Language: French

The two fragments reproduced here appear, at first glance, to belong to the same problem.

Both concern the upper chamber; both indicate some kind of lower feature: both preserve the language of field uncertainty: incomplete survey, uncertain orientation, possible access, possible passage.

But they do not agree.

Fragment A is the more controlled. It presents the chamber as something close to a rectilinear architectural space: walls, blockage, rubble, and an indicated lower passage. It looks like an effort to make the chamber behave as a plan, as something real and present.

Fragment B is different. The chamber becomes irregular, almost bodily in outline. The labels shift. The lower feature is no longer marked as passage inférieur ? but accès inférieur ? The orientation is explicitly marked as unverified. A later note adds that it does not correspond to survey D-3.

This is the first real spatial contradiction in the archive.

The problem is not simply that one fragment is clearer than the other. The problem is that both seem to preserve serious attempts to describe the same space — and yet they do not show the same room.

An empty photograph sleeve tells us something is missing.

These maps do something more difficult: they show us something that survived, but survived in a manner which renders the reality they represent one of contestation.

The important thing about these fragments is that neither one looks obviously incompetent.

Fragment A has the authority of measurement. It uses graph paper, rectilinear walls, hatching, rubble notation, a north arrow, a partial scale. It belongs to the visual language of survey: the chamber is made legible by being reduced to lines.

Fragment B has a different authority. It looks less finished, but not less serious. It reads like a copied sketch or later reconstruction, possibly from memory or from a damaged original. Its irregular outline may indicate uncertainty, but it may also preserve something Fragment A has suppressed: perhaps, the chamber's resistance to clean geometry.

That is a/the(?) central tension.

Fragment A may be more orderly because it is more accurate. Or it may be more orderly because it has already corrected the room into a usable, even expected, shape.

Fragment B may be less reliable because its orientation is uncertain. Or it may be more honest about the conditions under which the chamber was actually seen.

The archive does not—of course—tell us which possibility to prefer.

Instead, it places two acts of looking beside one another and asks us to notice something else: the damage that can be produced by making space legible. The lower feature shifts. The chamber shape shifts. The descriptive vocabulary shifts.

What appeared to be a mapping problem is already becoming a problem of interpretation.

The room has not become impossible. But it is certainly not behaving.

These fragments should not be read as alternate versions of a solved problem, of a solved plan.

Rather, I think they should be read as evidence of plan-making under pressure.

The first fragment gives us a chamber that can still be disciplined: squared, bounded, oriented, marked. Its lower feature is labelled *passage inférieur ?*—lower passage. That phrase suggests continuation. It imagines the feature as something one might move through, even if the question mark keeps that movement uncertain.

The second fragment changes the terms. Here we have *accès inférieur ?*—lower access. That is not quite the same thing. An access is a point of entry, perhaps even a permission. It does not guarantee passage. It may indicate a threshold rather than a corridor.

The distinction matters because the maps also disagree visually. Fragment A places the lower feature in relation to a more stable wall system. Fragment B places it in a more unstable chamber, a space whose very outline appears negotiated rather than measured.

Then the later annotation interrupts:

does not correspond to survey D-3

That note is certainly not a resolution. It is another fracture.

It tells us that the disagreement was noticed. Someone compared the fragments. Someone tried to cross-check them against another survey. But the act of comparison did not repair the record. It merely created another reference point, another missing authority: D-3.

So the fragments form a triangle of instability:

There is Fragment A. There is Fragment B. And there is the absent survey against which one of them apparently fails.

That absent third document now exerts pressure on both surviving fragments.

The archive is thickening: multiplying the conditions under which a map could be doubted.

АКАДЕМИЯ НАУК СССР
Институт истории материальной культуры
Сектор Средней Азии

ПРИМЕЧАНИЕ К ПЕРЕВОДУ

ПРОВЕРЕН

Дело: Зеравшанская экспедиция, 1937 г.
Материал: плановые фрагменты, сектор II
Дата: 17/IX/1951

На фрагменте А французская подпись читается как:

«passage inférieur?»

На фрагменте В:

«accès inférieur?»

В предварительном русском переводе оба места
переданы одинаково:

«нижнее устье?»

Такая передача представляется неточной.

«Passage» следует отличать от «accès».

Первое допускает перевод «проход» или «ход».

Второе ближе к «доступ» или «вход».

В обоих случаях вопросительный знак должен быть
сохранен.

Слово «устье» не является нейтральным
архитектурным обозначением. Однако на обороте
одного листа имеется пометка «устье вниз»,
по-видимому, сделанная другой рукой.

До выяснения источника пометки термин не заменять
окончательно.

Н. Короткова ✓

TRANSLATION NOTE (1951)

Document type: Soviet translation note concerning labels on plan fragments

Origin: Institute for the History of Material Culture, Central Asian Sector

Collation Date: 17/09/1951

Attributed signature: N. Korotkova

Language: Russian, French terms

Source status: partial copy / internal review note

Associated materials: plan fragments in previous release

English translation:

ACADEMY OF SCIENCES OF THE USSR

Institute for the History of Material Culture

Central Asian Sector

NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

File: Zeraвшan Expedition, 1937

Material: plan fragments, Sector II

Date: 17/IX/1951

On Fragment A, the French label reads:

“passage inférieur ?”

On Fragment B:

“accès inférieur ?”

In the preliminary Russian translation, both instances have been rendered identically:

“lower mouth ?”

This rendering appears inaccurate.

“Passage” should be distinguished from “accès.”

The first permits translation as “passage” or “corridor.”

The second is closer to “access” or “entrance.”

In both cases, the question mark must be preserved.

The word “mouth” is not a neutral architectural designation.

However, on the reverse of one sheet there is a note reading “mouth downward,” apparently written in another hand.

Until the source of the note has been clarified, the term should not be definitively replaced.

N. Korotkova

**

This document follows directly from the two plan fragments previously released.

Those fragments already disagreed in obvious ways: the shape of the chamber shifts, the lower feature appears in different positions, and the orientation of at least one drawing is openly marked as uncertain. But there is another disagreement, and perhaps easier to miss.

They do not name the lower feature in the same way.

On one fragment, the label reads:

passage inférieur ?

On the other:

accès inférieur ?

In English, these can be rendered as : A lower passage? and A lower access?

Neither term is secure, note the question marks on the original plans. Both belong to the cautious language of people trying to describe something not entirely understood.

The Soviet note reproduced here catches that uncertainty at the level of translation. In the preliminary Russian rendering,

the two French labels appear to have been reduced to a single phrase:

нижнее устье ?

Literally: lower mouth.

That may seem like a small change. It is the kind of change that can happen in any archive: a translator chooses one word, a classifier repeats it, a later reader accepts the repetition as evidence of consistency.

But the consistency is artificial, or at least constructed.

This document matters for our project because it shows the archive changing shape in the act of being handled.

A passage becomes an access; an access becomes a mouth.

A question mark remains, but something behind it has begun to shift.

Additional note

The problem is not simply that one word has been mistranslated.

The problem is that two different French labels — *passage inférieur ?* and *accès inférieur ?* — have been made to agree too quickly.

Fragment A gives us a possible lower passage. Fragment B gives us a possible lower access. Neither label is secure. Both carry a question mark. The Soviet rendering collapses them into a single phrase: нижнее устье ?

Literally, this can be read as “lower mouth.”

That is not impossible. Russian устье can refer to the mouth of a river, the outlet of a channel, or the opening of a cave or hollow. It is defensible. But it is not cleanly architectural. It brings with it another set of associations: channel, aperture,

emergence, entry, or discharge, or discharge. Something perhaps more organic, or alive.

Korotkova's objection is therefore precise. She does not say the word is false. She says the reduction is premature.

That matters.

A passage is not quite an access. An access is not quite an entrance. A mouth is not quite an opening. And none of these terms can be made innocent once the maps themselves have already failed to agree.

The note does not solve the problem left by the previous release. If anything, it makes it worse.

This note should be read beside the contradiction between the two plans, not after it.

The map fragments showed a spatial problem: the chamber seemed to shift. The fragments did not agree on the position of the lower feature, the shape of the room, or the reliability of orientation. This document shows that the same instability (and potential problem) has entered language.

The lower feature is not stable as a location. It is not stable as a term.

Passage.

Access.

Entrance.

Aperture.

Mouth.

Each word proposes a different relationship between the upper chamber and what lies below. A passage implies traversal. An access implies permission or entry. An entrance implies intention. An aperture implies material opening. A mouth implies something more difficult to contain: an opening that receives, emits, or belongs to a body or channel.

The danger is not that one of these words reveals the truth.

The danger is that each one participates in building a different tomb.

Korotkova's hesitation is therefore methodologically important. She does not simply replace the Russian term with a better one. She preserves the disputed word while marking the translation as unstable. That is a very particular kind of scholarly refusal. She is not solving the problem. She is preventing the solution from becoming too clean.

The most troubling element is the note she cites but does not reproduce: устье вниз — "mouth downward" — apparently written on the reverse of one of the sheets, in another hand.

That unseen reverse side becomes a third pressure point.

There are the maps we can see. There is the translation note we can read. And then, well then, there is another annotation, somewhere invisible to us, that may have shaped the translation before anyone fully understood its force or importance

ORAL ARCHIVE FRAGMENT (1974)



Document type: Zeravshan District Oral Archive Fragment, Recorded testimony attributed to "M. K."

Origin: Collected during a regional oral-history survey; exact village unconfirmed.

Original medium: field cassette, later copied.

Date: 1974

Language: Uzbek, with Russian interview prompts.

This recorded fragment comes from a later oral-history, apparently made in the Zeravshan district in the mid-1970s. Unlike the previous materials, it does not come from the 1937 mission file, nor from the Soviet typological apparatus that later tried to contain it.

A witness, identified only as "M. K." in the surviving recording, recalls what his father claimed to have seen, or, more precisely, what his father claimed to have been brought near. The distinction between the two matters. The speaker resists the interviewer's terminology almost immediately. "Tomb" is rejected as an imposed word. "Statue" is corrected. "Passage" fails. "Queen" is accepted, but only as the easier formulation.

This is the first major fragment in the archive that does not behave like institutional evidence.

It doesn't map or classify. Rather, it offers a sort of remembering.

And memory, here, does not clarify the record. It complicates it.

Several details appear to brush against earlier materials: the first chamber as a false or misleading space; the descent passage; the marks that are “not writing” but not simply natural; the seated figure; the uncertain removal of an object; the blocked space beyond the chamber proper. But none of these in this recording are delivered as confirmation. They arrive altered by time and memory, and family lore.

The result is not corroboration, exactly.

It is pressure.

The archive has now opened a second memory stream: not the official record of those who entered, but the inherited speech of those who stood near the entrance, carried rope, held lamps, and like all such people, remember what others later preferred to name, and perhaps claim.

The recording has been preserved here in translated transcript form. The audio version retains the interview structure and the mixed Uzbek/Russian exchange of the surviving copy.

As always, contradictions have not been corrected.

Archive ref.: ZER/ORAL/74-11-B (Soviet designation)

Original medium: magnetic tape, copied from field cassette

Language: Uzbek, with intermittent Russian prompts

Translation notes: Several terms are unstable. The speaker appears to use a local place-name or descriptive phrase that may be rendered as “hollow,” “mouth,” “lower place,” or “old opening.” The word translated here as “queen” may also mean “mistress,” “lady,” or “the one who sits.”

You can listen to the reconstructed interview here: [recording](#).

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWER: Please say again what your father saw.

WITNESS:

My father did not say he saw it.

He said he was brought near it.

INTERVIEWER: Near the tomb?

WITNESS:

Not a tomb. That is your word.

[pause]

There was a place in the hill.

The stone had opened after winter.

Goats found it first. Or boys. I was told both.

INTERVIEWER: And the foreigners entered?

WITNESS:

The men with papers entered.

The woman with the black box also entered.

INTERVIEWER: A camera?

WITNESS:

Yes. The black box. She covered her head with cloth.

She was not afraid of the dark.

My father was young then. He carried rope, water, lamps. He said the first room was nothing. Stones, dust, wrong walls.

INTERVIEWER: Wrong walls?

WITNESS:

Walls that did not know each other.

[pause]

One part old. One part newer. One part put there to lie.

INTERVIEWER: To conceal something?

WITNESS:

To make people stop.

Below it was a throat in the stone. Narrow. Not straight. It turned.

He said a man could go down facing forward, but he would come out turned around in his thoughts.

INTERVIEWER: Was there writing?

WITNESS:

They argued about that.

The Russian woman said: "Not writing." Then she said: "Not not-writing."

[short laugh]

That is how learned people speak when a thing is watching them.

There were marks on the wall. Some cut. Some made by smoke. Some made by hands.

My father said the wall was soft in places, like old bread after rain.

INTERVIEWER: Did he describe the second chamber?

WITNESS:

He would not describe it at night.

INTERVIEWER: But he described it to you?

WITNESS:

Once. When he was old. When he had fever.

[long pause]

He said the air changed before the room. Not cold. Not warm. Changed.

Like entering a house after someone has died, but before anyone has said it.

There was a seated one.

INTERVIEWER: A statue?

WITNESS:

You call it statue. He called it the one who remained.

INTERVIEWER: Female?

WITNESS:

Yes. No.

Everyone said queen because that is easier.

INTERVIEWER: Easier than what?

WITNESS:

Than saying she was not finished being dead.

Her face was gone. Not broken. Taken away.

INTERVIEWER: By whom?

WITNESS:

By time. By men. By herself.

There are many thieves.

[pause]

My father said no one should look long where the face had been.

INTERVIEWER: Why?

WITNESS:

Because the place looks back.

There were bowls. Not bowls. Things like bowls.

Clay, black, red, grey. Some had marks like counting, but not counting.

One of the foreigners held one too long.

INTERVIEWER: Which foreigner?

WITNESS:

The thin man. The one who coughed. Or the woman.

My father changed this when he told it.

INTERVIEWER: Changed it?

WITNESS:

Sometimes the man took it. Sometimes the woman hid it.

Sometimes no one took it, but afterward it was gone.

Behind the seated one there was another place.

INTERVIEWER: A passage?

WITNESS:

No. A refusal.

INTERVIEWER: I don't understand.

WITNESS:

A stone that was also a door.

A door that did not agree.

On the oral fragment and the problem of inherited witness

This is the first document in the sequence where the archive stops pretending that evidence belongs only to institutions.

Until now, the materials have largely moved through recognizable systems of authority: ministry stationery, expedition logistics, typological notes, maps, translation memos, photographic handling. Even when those systems failed, they failed in official forms. Their breakdown remained bureaucratic.

This fragment is different.

The speaker is not a member of the expedition. He is not an archaeologist, photographer, epigrapher, or administrator. He speaks as the son of someone who was brought near the site and later carried the experience forward in fragments. That distance is crucial. This is not eyewitness testimony in the clean legal sense. It is inherited witness: memory carried through another's voice.

That makes it less stable.

It may also make it harder to dismiss.

The speaker repeatedly refuses the interviewer's categories. The place is "not a tomb." The seated figure is not a statue. The space behind her is not a passage but "a refusal." The most important terms do not translate cleanly because the archive is trying to pull local speech into institutional shape after the fact.

That pressure is the real document.

Several points matter for the reconstruction:

First, the so-called outer chamber is remembered as deliberately misleading. Not merely damaged, not merely poorly understood, but arranged to make people stop.

Second, the marks in the descent passage are remembered through the argument around them. The witness does not tell us what they are. He tells us that the learned people could not keep them inside one category.

Third, the seated figure is recalled through negation: not statue, not simply woman, not safely dead. "Queen" appears as a convenience, not a solution.

Fourth, the missing object remains unstable. The father's story changes: sometimes the coughing man takes it, sometimes the woman hides it, sometimes no one takes it and it is simply gone. This is not a clean accusation. It is a pattern of disappearance attaching itself to the people nearest the chamber.

Finally, the blocked space behind the figure is given a formulation that will matter later: "the queen's true house." The witness immediately asks that this not be written down. Not because it is false, but because writing would make it seem found.

That line may be the most important in the fragment.

To write of something can diminish it, make it smaller. And more importantly, perhaps the subject of the interview understood that recording something runs the risk of confusing proximity and knowledge for possession.

For our purposes, this oral account does not solve the chamber. It does something more useful and more dangerous: it shows that the institutional archive was never the only archive. There were other custodians of the event.

The formal record has begun to lose its monopoly.

АКАДЕМИЯ НАУК СССР
Институт истории материальной культуры
Сектор Средней Азии

Дело: Зеравшанская экспедиция, 1937 г.

Материал: плановые фрагменты и переводческие замечания

Арх. №: ЗЕР/37-II/доп.

Дата: 22/IX/1951



СЛУЖЕБНАЯ ПОМЕТА
о направлении материалов

В связи с просмотром дополнительных материалов по делу Зеравшанской экспедиции предписывается следующий порядок хранения и направления:

1. Плановые фрагменты А и Б оставить в составе дела, но не включать в общий альбом планов до дополнительной сверки обозначений.
2. Переводческое замечание от 17/IX/1951 приложить к обоим фрагментам. Отдельного обращения замечания не допускать.
3. В рабочих выписках сохранять вопросительные знаки после обозначений «нижний проход» и «нижний доступ». Замена указанных терминов единым обозначением не рекомендуется.
4. Лист с пометами Н. К. Коротковой изъять из рабочей папки и хранить при деле в запечатанном вложении до особого распоряжения.
5. Копирование фрагментов, содержащих отрывочные обозначения к нижнему участку, производить только по разрешению заведующего сектором.
6. До согласования терминологии сводку не составлять.

Передано:

- в рабочую папку сектора
- в переводческий стол
- в архивный шкаф № 3

*Не расширять круг
ознакомления*

Исполнитель: мл. науч. сотр. А. М. Селиванов

Подпись: *АС*

NOTE CONCERNING UNRECONCILED MATERIALS (1951)

Document type: Internal memo

Origin: Academy of Sciences of the USSR (Institute for the History of Material Culture)

Date: 1951

Language: Russian

English translation from the Russian:

ACADEMY OF SCIENCES OF THE USSR
Institute for the History of Material Culture
Central Asia Section

File: Zeravshan Expedition, 1937

Material: plan fragments and translation notes

Archival no.: ZER/37-II/add.

Date: 22/IX/1951

INTERNAL NOTE

concerning the routing of materials

In connection with the review of supplementary materials relating to the Zeravshan Expedition file, the following procedure for storage and routing is prescribed:

1. Plan fragments A and B are to remain within the file, but are not to be included in the general album of plans pending further verification of designations.
2. The translation note of 17/IX/1951 is to be attached to both fragments. Independent circulation of the note is not to be permitted.

3. In working extracts, the question marks following the designations “lower passage” and “lower access” are to be preserved. Replacement of the indicated terms by a single designation is not recommended.
4. The sheet bearing the annotations of N. K. Korotkova is to be removed from the working folder and kept with the file in a sealed enclosure pending further instruction.
5. Copies of fragments containing arrow designations toward the lower section are to be made only with the authorization of the section head.
6. No summary is to be prepared until the terminology has been reconciled.

Forwarded to:

- section working folder
- translation desk
- archival cabinet no. 3

Prepared by: junior research associate A. M. Selivanov

Signature:

[handwritten marginal note]

Do not widen the circle of review.

**

This note is small. That is partly what makes it powerful.

It doesn't describe the tomb, nor mention the Queen. It doesn't offer a discovery, a theory, or even a clear administrative decision. Instead, it records the movement of papers: where certain fragments should be sent, which materials should remain attached, which annotations should not circulate independently, and which terms should not yet be treated as stable and official.

In other words, it shows bureaucracy doing what bureaucracy does when evidence becomes troublesome: not suppressing, exactly; but not clarifying, either. What we see here is routing, holding, separating, and most worrisome, delaying.

The materials referenced here appear to concern the same unresolved cluster we have been hovering about: the conflicting map fragments, the translation problem around passage inférieur and accès inférieur, and at least one annotation attributed to N. Korotkova. What matters with all of this, and certainly now with this document, is that someone understood they had become problems.

The most telling instruction comes near the end:

Do not prepare a summary until the terminology has been reconciled.

It sounds careful, even responsible.

But by this point in the archive, “terminology” is no longer a neutral matter. The words are failing because the thing they are meant to describe has begun to exceed available categories available for 'proper' categorization. Passage // or // access. Chamber // or // recess. Object // or // figure. Survey // or // warning.

The archive hasn't yet broken. But, I think it is clear, that it has begun to file away within itself its own anxiety.

Additional thoughts

What interests me here is not simply that the archive is confused.

Confusion can be honest. A map can fail because the chamber was difficult to measure. A translation can waver because one language refuses to sit cleanly inside another. A witness can contradict another because memory is unstable, because fear alters the way we see things and sequence things, because fifty

years is a long time to carry a story without it becoming something different.

This note feels at odds with this sort of positive reading.

It is not confusion. It is management. And those are two very different things.

By 1951, the Zeravshan materials have already passed out of the field and into institutional afterlife. They are no longer being excavated; they are being handled, translated, compared, stored, restricted, and administratively neutralized. The language of this note is almost aggressively ordinary: attach this, do not circulate that, preserve the question marks, remove the annotation sheet, do not copy without permission, do not summarize yet.

Nothing in it sounds like panic.

Which is why it sort of does.

The most revealing gesture may be the instruction to remove Korotkova's annotated sheet from the working folder and keep it sealed with the file. Not destroyed. Or denied. Not even formally classified. Simply separated from ordinary use. That is a very particular kind of archival violence: the document remains, but its capacity to act on the rest of the file is reduced.

This matters because Korotkova has been one of the few figures in the record willing to resist premature assimilation. She does not seem to want the marks, plans, or terms forced into a stable system before the evidence can bear it. In earlier materials, that resistance still appeared scholarly. Here, we see the institution beginning to treat it as a problem of circulation.

The repeated concern with terminology is equally important. "Lower passage" and "lower access" may sound like minor translation variants, but the note insists that they not be collapsed into a single term. At one level, this is philological caution. At another, it suggests perhaps that the lower area itself has become administratively dangerous. A passage

implies movement through. An access implies entry into. Neither is neutral.

And then there is the final instruction, and it may be the sentence around which the entire document and its implications turn.

A summary would create coherence. It would tell the institution what the file "means." It would convert fragments into framework. But the terminology cannot be reconciled because the underlying object of description remains unstable. The archive wants a category before it narrative. The materials refuse to provide one.

So the file is routed instead.

That is the bureaucratic brilliance of the note. It does not suppress the problem by naming it forbidden. It suppresses the problem by keeping it in motion: from working folder to translation desk, from translation desk to cabinet, from annotation sheet to sealed enclosure, from evidence to procedure.

The archive is delaying.

SOURCES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Working across the bureaucratic, scientific, and administrative registers in three languages over three decades required an enormous attention to everything from phraseology to typography. Getting the look and feel right was as important as building and presenting a coherent arc.

I am enormously grateful to the archivists and librarians of Persée at the École Normale Supérieure de Lyon; of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France; of the State Archive of the Russian Federation; and of the Hoover Institution Library & Archives (Russia and Eurasia collection).

Without the patience and good cheer of Gio Berishvili, Adilya and Rinat Albetkova, and Doniyor Otamurodov, the Uzbek and Russian oral history would have been impossible.

Many thanks too, to the early readers, and of course, to the subscribers.

PROJECT CHRONOLOGY

October – December 2025: Development and early reader testing.

January 2026: Public launch with the release of the Mission Letterhead followed by Credit Authorisation.

February 2026: Telegram and Typology Memo released.

March 2026: Mission Roster and Transmission Slip with Omitted Annex released.

April 2026: Field Notebook Fragment and Photographic Envelope released.

May 2026: Plan Fragments and Translation Note released.

June 2026: Oral Archives Fragment released.

July 2026: Note Concerning Unreconciled Materials released.

July 18, 2026: Final release: The Beginnings of Doubt (included—with modifications—at the beginning of this document).

Peter Shoemaker / atelier tushu
Normandy, France

<http://www.ateliertushu.fr>



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