

*The spread of trade and religions:
Tocharians and Sogdians*

THE TRADERS who carried luxuries and necessities in camel trains between the oases on the Silk Roads were very varied in physique, language, costume and culture. At different times during the thousands of years when the Silk Roads were the most significant trade routes, different peoples dominated the trade and the earliest Silk Road inhabitants were amongst the last to be discovered.

Almost a hundred years ago, Sir Aurel Stein discovered well-preserved mummies at desert sites on the edge of the shimmering salt Lop lake at Loulan. 'Several of the bodies were wonderfully well-conserved, together with their burial deposits. The peaked felt caps decorated with big feathers and other trophies of the chase, the arrowshafts by their side, the coarse but strong woollen garments, the neatly-woven small baskets holding the food for the dead, etc., all indicated a race of semi-nomadic herdsmen and hunters, just as the Han Annals describe the Lou-lan people when the Chinese found them on their first opening of the route through the desert.

'It was a strange sensation to look down on figures which, but for the parched skin, seemed like those of men asleep . . . The characteristics of the men's heads showed close affinity to that Homo Alpinus type which, as the anthropometrical materials collected by me have proved, still remains the prevailing element in the racial constitution of the present population of the Tarim Basin.'¹

Stein associated these people with other finds he made in the area and, as his mention of the Han histories suggests, assumed that they were about 2,000 years old, contemporary with the beginnings of Chinese exploration of Central Asia. Similar mummified bodies have since been found at the Cherchen site, also on the edge of the Tarim basin but south of Loulan. Subsequent expeditions to Loulan led by Sven Hedin in the late 1920s followed Stein's description of the graveyard. The nature of the site, with its shifting, wind-blown sands, meant that stratigraphic analysis was impossible and in the early years of the twentieth century there were no other scientific means of dating the finds, except by association. However, associated finds such as coins and documents were similarly unstratified and unstratifiable, subject to the same shifting sand and wind.

More recent analysis suggests that the Cherchen burials were made



Top left, mummy of a red-haired and possibly Caucasian fifty-five-year-old male known as 'Cherchen Man', c.1000 BC. In a tomb nearby, below, was this mummy of a three-month-old infant, buried with blue glass stones across his eyes. His tie-cord suggests he is probably from the same household as Cherchen Man, and he is buried with a cow-horn cup and a sheep's-udder nursing bottle. The thirty-year-old male figure, right, buried at Yingpan, Urumqi, sometime between AD 265 and 420, was discovered more recently



about 1000 BC, whilst the Loulan graveyard bodies seem to have been buried as early as 2000 BC. Though the site is now barren, salty, sandy and windswept, the rings of dried tree-trunks surrounding the graveyard, the bundles of ephedra twigs in the graves, and the arrows and baskets all point to a different environment thousands of years ago, enabling a semi-settled life. When the Chinese of the Han dynasty first set out into Central Asia, Loulan was still an important caravan stop with water and food in abundance. A disastrous flood in about AD 330 destroyed the town, and the Lop lake gradually dried up into salt flats, although, out of custom, many travellers still passed through the remains of Loulan on the northern route that offered no shelter or sustenance. From this time onwards the southern route was safer, though longer.

The mummies found at Loulan and Cherchen were strikingly European-looking. They had high-bridged noses, substantial beards, deep, round eye-sockets and often fairish or reddish hair. They were tall, if fully grown, and wore clothing of furs, woven woollen cloth, often in an interesting plaid pattern, leather and felt. The colours of their textiles remain remarkably fresh: a twisted skein of bright red and blue wool held the woven shawl of a baby in place; 'Cherchen

*Flaming Mountains,
Bezeklik*

The Silk Road

Man', a fifty-five-year-old buried about 1000 BC, wore a woven robe of deep red with white deerskin leggings but inside his leggings he had amazing felt socks of blue, red and yellow horizontal stripes. Some of their cloths were formed from rows of narrow plaited braids in blue, red and orange or yellow, some plain, some with large or small lozenge-shaped patterns. Their felt hats ranged from a bright blue felt bonnet with a red border (for the baby) to felt hoods adorned with large, jaunty feathers and tall felt witches' hats.²

The origins of these apparently European people are somewhat mysterious but it is thought that they may have migrated in about 2000 BC from somewhere east of the Caspian Sea, over the Tian Shan mountains down to Loulan. Though they left no evidence of a written script and we cannot know what language they spoke, documents found in the area (dated to about the third century AD) were identified in 1908 as Tocharian, a language which, one expert stated, 'had many affinities with Latin'.³ These early inhabitants are, therefore, tentatively identified as Tocharians, speaking an Indo-European language, and are thought perhaps to have been the ancestors of the Yuezhi who lived in the same area during the Han dynasty and who moved, in part, westwards, to found the Kushan empire on the northwestern edge of India.⁴

Today, the area where the mummies were found is out of bounds, for it is near where the Chinese test atomic bombs in the open air.

Sven Hedin made a terrifying crossing of the desert of Lop in 1896 and Aurel Stein returned twice, in 1906 and 1913, both choosing to travel in winter with water transported in the form of blocks of ice, rather than risk near death from dehydration as Hedin had, in 1895, near Yarkand at the other end of the Taklamakan desert (west of the Lop desert). Stein's account of his crossing of the Lop desert is a fascinating juxtaposition of sand and camels with freezing weather and ice. Hedin returned to the Loulan area in 1934 and, as he had done previously, made much use of boats and canoes to reach the lake by means of the rivers that fed it. Just sixty years later, in pursuit of the increasingly rare wild camel, John Hare found arrowheads, coins and beads on the sandy surface which had still been under water when Hedin last passed. Hedin had described conditions that the Tocharians might have recognised: 'Tamarisks and reeds looked up out of the water. It was a delicious place! I sat with my sleeves rolled up and dabbled my hand in the water . . .' As his boat moved forward, he saw 'a wild hog, swimming from the mainland, to the reeds'.⁵ There were ospreys, grebes, herons and a multitude of fish, all vanished as dams constructed by today's Chinese garrisons have blocked the water that once fed the Konche Darya and Kuruk Darya rivers that emptied out into Lop Nor.⁶

Road marking at Black Gobi, photographed by Hedin in 1934. Such grisly remains served as warnings or signposts to travellers on the Silk Road



Long after the Tocharians had apparently vanished, leaving only desiccated bodies behind, the town of Loulan enjoyed a position in the fourth century AD as a major staging post on the 'middle' Silk Road, a position attested by some of the 'Sogdian letters' (see page 67).

From the second century BC until the end of the Tang dynasty (tenth century AD), Sogdian merchants dominated much of the trade of the Silk Roads. Their homeland, the fortified city of Marakanda, now Samarkand, lay due northwest of the Silk Road. Even before they became known to the Chinese through Zhang Qian's explorations of the Western Regions, the Sogdians were known to the Greeks of the fourth century BC. Though they had been thought of as fierce warriors by the Greeks, the Achaemenid fortress at Marakanda, and the walled city, were taken by Alexander the Great on his eastwards progress in 329 BC. The capture of the city did not end local resistance, for one of Alexander's columns was ambushed just to the west and he embarked on an expanded campaign to subdue Sogdiana. Fortress after fortress was taken and the local population were massacred, enslaved



*Loulan photographed
by the Swedish explorer
Sven Hedin in 1901.
The remains of a reed
house are visible on the
right*

or subjected to forced transportation. By the time the revolt was put down in 327 BC, the area was left with 'a large garrison of mercenaries and a network of new city foundations, in which a Hellenic military elite was supported by a native agrarian workforce – the invariable model for the dozens of Alexandrias he founded in the eastern empire'.⁷

The military power of the Sogdians never recovered and it was as travelling tradesmen that they subsequently became known all over Central Asia – the Khotanese called all merchants *suli* (Sogdian) whether they were or not. Their language, related to Aramaic, became the common language of trade along the Silk Roads and they were partly responsible for the movement of religions like Manicheism, Zoroastrianism and Buddhism eastwards along the Silk Road. Chinese stories of the Sogdians describe them as born to their trade: 'At birth honey was put in their mouths and gum on their hands . . . they learned the trade from the age of five . . . on reaching the age of twelve they were sent to do business in a neighbouring state.'⁸ The Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang described them as farmers and traders, carpet-makers, glass-makers and woodcarvers. He rather approved of the fact that little boys in Samarkand were taught to read and write at the age of five, even if it was in the service of their commercial skills.

The spread of trade and religions

Our knowledge of Sogdian trading activities was enhanced by the 'Ancient Letters' found by Stein near a beacon at the end of the Great Wall. They appear to have come from a post-bag which was abandoned, for reasons unknown, at some time around AD 307-11. The letters were written by Sogdian merchants resident in Chinese Central Asia (two in Dunhuang) and the only one with an address was for Samarkand, whilst the others may have been destined for Loulan and other places on the route west to Samarkand. Though the letters are fragmentary and difficult to decipher, they refer to commodities such as gold, musk, pepper, camphor, flax cloth and wheat. There were calculations of weight, based on Chinese copper coins. They also suggest that there was a Zoroastrian temple in Dunhuang.

It appears from these, and other scattered Sogdian sources, that in the fourth century AD they may have managed a sort of triangle of trade, possibly a monopoly trade, between India and Sogdiana and India and China. By the seventh century, many Sogdian merchants had settled in China and assumed Chinese names (usually taking the 'An' surname also used by Parthians). By the middle of the eighth century, the Sogdians of Dunhuang were respected members of society, many having taken up agriculture, and they were sometimes given Chinese titles. The Sogdians of Turfan at the same period were still trading in silk and horses, but much more on a local basis than the grand triangular trade of the third century.

The Sogdians were responsible for the transportation to China of the grapevine and alfalfa (or lucerne grass) to feed the heavenly horses from Ferghana. They also carried the special mare's teat grapes from the oasis of Khocho (packed in ice in lead containers) and sold luxury goods from the west to the Chinese: Sassanian silverware from Persia which had a huge influence on Chinese silverwork, glass vessels and beads from Syria and Babylon, amber from the Baltic, Mediterranean coral, brass for Buddhist images, and purple woollen cloth from Rome. They themselves bought silk, copied the Chinese copper coinage and used Chinese paper. The establishment of paper manufacture in their native city, Samarkand, in the eighth century, led to the gradual transmission of paper-making to Europe. Legend has it that it was the capture of Chinese paper-makers during a battle on the Talas river in AD 751, when an allied army of Uighurs and Tibetans defeated a Chinese force under Gao Xianzhi, that led to the establishment of paper-making in Samarkand (where local hemp and flax and the abundant water from the *karez* provided raw materials in abundance).⁹ The westwards transmission of this vital technology was probably more gradual, and part of various Sogdian borrowings. Chinese art, for example, especially that of wall-painting, had a strong effect on Sogdian art.¹⁰



A tribute horse and camel, painted on paper, found amongst the fragments at Dunhuang, late ninth century

In the ruins of a Sogdian city at Panjikent, Tajikistan, the remains of fine wall-paintings have been found which vary the picture of the travelling merchants. The frescoes show jousting and banquet scenes, and the Sogdians depict themselves as having 'long thin faces, prominent noses, deep-set eyes and luxuriant beards'.¹¹ Similar faces can be found in Manichean manuscripts, found at Khocho in the 1920s by the German explorer and archaeologist von Le Coq. The illustrations, probably produced by Sogdian artists, depict priests with neat, pointed beards, long dark hair and rather corpulent figures.¹² They wore Phrygian felt hats with knee-length silk tunics, belted at the waist, over narrow trousers and high leather boots, very like the dress of the Kirghiz today.¹³

Panjikent was, like other Sogdian cities, built on a hill and surrounded by a wall. It stood above the Zerafshan river, in sight of the snow-capped Pamirs. The surrounding wall, enclosing only about thirty acres, meant that the city was very crowded. Houses were built upwards, with upper storeys meeting over the streets, leaving them narrow, dark and airless. The markets and caravanserais were outside the walls.

The Sogdian capital, Marakanda, later Samarkand, which lies between the Syr Darya and Oxus rivers, is a city that has been destroyed and rebuilt countless times throughout its history. After Alexander the Great captured it in 329 BC, Turks and Huns descended on it and each time it would be patched up. Xuanzang, who passed through in the seventh century AD, described it as 'six miles or so in circumference, completely enclosed by rugged land, and very populous'. He noted the markets with many goods, brought from the west and destined to travel further east: 'The precious merchandise of many foreign countries is stored here. The soil is rich and productive and yields abundant harvests. The forest trees afford a thick vegetation and flowers and fruit are plentiful. *Shen* horses are bred there. The inhabitants' skill in the arts and trades exceeds that of other countries. The climate is agreeable and temperate and the people brave and energetic.'¹⁴

Sogdian merchants and travellers were mainly responsible for the spread of Zoroastrianism along the Silk Roads, eastwards to China, although the initial contacts may have been earlier, for linguistic evi-



dence has been cited to suggest that there were Iranian soothsayers in China as early as the eighth century BC.¹⁵ There is evidence of Zoroastrian temples in Lanzhou and in the secondary capital of Luoyang during the Tang, where magic shows were held in front of huge crowds.¹⁶

The dates of the prophet Zarathustra or Zoroaster are uncertain. Some place him in the thirteenth century BC, others in the sixth century BC, and his origins similarly are set as far apart as Azerbaijan and Mongolia. Rather as the Buddha reflected his own religious background in adapting various aspects of Hinduism, so Zoroaster's religion represented both an incorporation of existing Iranian belief in the sun as the visible manifestation of Ahura Mazda, and a rejection of other prevailing beliefs such as the sacrifice of bulls and ritual drinking sessions. Zoroaster elevated Ahura Mazda as the sole god to worship, thus placing him amongst the earliest monotheists, but his opposition of an evil deity means that Zoroastrianism is generally

Fragment of a wall-painting from Panjikent, Tajikistan, showing bearded demons with bows and arrows, first half of the eighth century



Sogdian silver plate, seventh century. The figures engaged in a duel bear some resemblance to those of the Panjikent murals

characterised as 'dualistic'. The association of Ahura Mazda with the sun and 'its earthly analogue, fire', included a general belief in the purifying potential of both, and paradise was seen as a place of light.¹⁷

Zoroastrianism was adopted by a number of Sogdians who carried it along the Silk Roads, into China where it was tolerated for a while during the Tang, and into India where it still survives.

Another major religion transmitted along the Silk Roads into China by Sogdian merchants and travellers was Manicheism, as the Sogdian letters demonstrate.

Manicheism began in Mesopotamia with the prophet Mani, born in AD 216 in a family descended from the royal house of Parthia. After two revelations when he was twelve and twenty-four, Mani set out to preach his message in Buddhist Kushan, in northwest India. His beliefs were a blend of Iranian and Semitic traditions, with additions from Buddhism and Christianity, and they were to survive in medieval Europe in the Cathar movement in Provence and amongst the Bogomils of the Balkans.¹⁸

Mani's ideas are generally characterised as gnostic, offering a dualist view of the universe where good is balanced against evil and where esoteric interpretations lead to salvation through knowledge.¹⁹ Spirit was equated with light, matter with darkness, and good was seen as

Fragments from a Manichean manuscript found by Albert von Le Coq in Khocho. The first, right, shows priests at their writing desks. It has a panel of Sogdian writing. Below, the fragment shows the feast of Bema, an annual feast held to commemorate the martyrdom of Mani in March 276. It was mentioned by St Augustine, who was himself at one time a Manichean





The spread of trade and religions

particles of light struggling to escape from the dark matter in which it was trapped. Mani set forth a pantheon which incorporated previous prophets including Zoroaster, Buddha and Jesus, declaring himself a successor to these prophets, and spoke of an elite or 'elect' group which would lead the faith, wearing white, adhering strictly to a vegetarian diet and potentially ensuring the end of the faith through strict abstinence from reproduction. In a leaf from a Manichean book found in a temple of the eighth to ninth century in Khocho, a white-robed priest is shown surrounded by the Hindu deities Shiva, Brahma and the elephant-headed Ganesh. On the opposite part of the fragment is a depiction of the feast of Bema, commemorating Mani's martyrdom (he was crucified in 276 on the order of the Persian king Hormizd I). White-robed Manicheans with black beards and a variety of tall or turban-shaped white hats, sit on a carpet beside a gold tripod piled with a vegetarian spread of watermelons, grapes and honeydew melons.²⁰

Mani believed that people (matter) contained a finite number of light particles and reproduction would divide their light particles increasingly sparsely amongst their descendants. Similarly, the preparation of food would divide the good light particles residing within all living things including vegetables. Thus, the elect ate vegetarian food prepared by others whilst reciting, ' "Neither have I cast it into the oven, another hath brought me this and I have eaten it without guilt." ' ²¹

From the Sogdian capital, Samarkand, a Manichean centre, the faith spread along the Silk Road. The scriptures, written in Syriac, Middle Persian and Parthian, were translated into Sogdian, Turkish and Chinese, and several texts, mostly dating to the eighth or ninth century, were discovered in the great Buddhist temple library at Dunhuang and at several sites in the Turfan area.²²

The religion was adopted by the Uighur ruler Bugug Khan (759–80) and it remained the state religion of the Uighurs for some hundreds of years until the rise of the Mongols. There were also Manichean temples in China and, whilst the religion gradually lost adherents to Buddhism and Islam, one temple, at Caoan, near Quanzhou (Fujian province), still survives. Its courtyard contains an inscription with the words 'Mani the Buddha of Light' and its halls contain images which, to the expert, are clearly of Mani rather than the Buddha. But the faithful who worship there, 'pious old women', seem to be under the impression that the figures are Buddhist.²³

A similar confusion over Manicheism apparently occurred in the late thirteenth century when Marco Polo, his father and his uncle visited Fuzhou in southeast China. They met a group of believers there, who were terrified of persecution for their faith. They were something of a mystery to the Polos: they did not worship fire so they were not

The Silk Road

Zoroastrians; they did not worship 'idols' so they were not Buddhists; and, according to a local 'Saracen' interpreter, they were not Moslems. The Polos studied their religious texts (one wonders what the language and script were), identified their holy book as a Psalter, and informed them that they were Christians after all, and that the Polos would intercede on their behalf with the Great Mongol Khan. Most modern scholars, aware of Mani's borrowings from Christianity, have identified the group as Manicheans, particularly since Fuzhou is in the same province as Quanzhou and Caoan, though well over 150 kilometres to the northeast; Marco Polo, as usual, getting things nearly right. The account of the meeting with the Manicheans occurs only in one manuscript of Marco Polo's *Divisament dou Monde*, found in Toledo in the 1930s and dated to the mid-fifteenth century; a manuscript which contains over two hundred passages not seen in other earlier versions, which leaves me (though few others) with some doubts. The story itself may reveal that there were, indeed, practising Manicheans in Fuzhou in the thirteenth (or fourteenth or fifteenth) century and, perhaps, that a description was incorporated by the copyist of the 'Polo' manuscript in the mid-fifteenth century.

Whether the Polos were right or not, the Manichean faith, in one confused form or other, persisted in China long after the Sogdian traders had been forgotten.



The Silk Road

TWO THOUSAND YEARS
IN THE HEART OF ASIA

FRANCES WOOD

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

BERKELEY LOS ANGELES

University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

First published by the Folio Society Ltd 2002

© Frances Wood 2002

Endpaper maps drawn by Reginald Piggott

Published by arrangement with The British Library

Cataloguing-in-publication data is on file with the Library of Congress

ISBN 0-520-24340-4

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset at The Folio Society in Sabon with Ondine for display

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Bath Press Colourbooks, Glasgow