Review Article

NEW WORK ON THE SOGDIANS, THE MOST IMPORTANT TRADERS ON THE SILK ROAD, A.D. 500-1000

BY

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The publication of these two fine books marks a breakthrough in the study of the Sogdians, the most important group of traders on the Silk Road. First mentioned in Persian inscriptions of the sixth century B.C., the region of Sogdiana (which spans modern-day Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) contained important city states like Samarkand, Bukhara, and Panjikent. Then, starting in A.D. 300 or so, the Sogdians began to expand east, first to Châch (modern-day Tashkent) and Semirech’e (eastern Uzbekistan), and then beyond into China. Of clear importance to anyone who seeks to understand Central Asian or Chinese history, they offer a thought-provoking counter-example to world historians studying the empires of the past. Although never politically united, and never in possession of their own military force (but sometimes wealthy enough to hire mercenaries), they were able to form a commercial empire spanning most of Eurasia. The Sogdians dominated Central Asian trade from 500 to 1000. How did they do it?
The analyst seeking to understand the history of the Sogdians immediately encounters a formidable barrier: the paucity of Sogdian-language materials. The Sogdians spoke and wrote Sogdian, an Iranian language like Middle Persian, of which perhaps twenty scholars in the world today can claim a genuine understanding. Since the early twentieth century scholars have known about the eight letters (five intact, three fragmentary) that Aurel Stein’s workmen unearthed in a watchtower near Loulan as well as a group of over one thousand Manichean, Christian, and Buddhist texts in Sogdian found at Turfan. The discovery of a corpus of some one hundred shorter texts at Mount Mugh (outside Panjikent, Tajikistan) followed in 1933. Since then other isolated materials have turned up: various coins, an important contract dated 639 found at Turfan (see the Appendix below for Yoshida Yutaka’s translation), some Sogdian graffiti on the Karakorum highway, occasional inscriptions giving the weight of silver bowls or the length of silk textiles.

In short, Sogdian-language materials are surprisingly few, and not all pertain to commerce. Fortunately, the various peoples who encountered the Sogdians, particularly the Chinese, wrote about them. In addition, a team of Soviet archeologists led by Boris Marshak has excavated Panjikent for over fifty years, providing an extraordinarily well-documented example of settlement archeology in a field dominated by tomb excavations. Chinese archeologists have also unearthed several different tombs of deceased Sogdian expatriates during the past decade.¹

Of course, such a variegated sourcebase poses considerable difficulties. Few can read all the primary sources in Sogdian, classical Chinese, and Arabic along with the voluminous secondary literature (including site reports) in Russian, modern Chinese, German, French, English, and Japanese. Yet the authors of these two studies have extraordinary linguistic reach. De la Vaissière draws on materials in Greek, Arabic, Russian, and Sogdian, and he handles the secondary literature in European languages with ease. In addition, he can handle Chinese materials, with the occasional assistance of his colleague, Éric Trombert, who checked all the translations from Chinese. The book is a revised version of his doctoral thesis, submitted to the École Pratique des Hautes Études, Section des sciences historiques et philologiques, where he is now Maître de conférences. Rong Xinjiang, a professor of Chinese history at Pe-

¹ For a list of these discoveries, see Rong p. 114, notes 1-6.