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SOGDIAN TRADE

SOGDIAN TRADE. The people of Sogdiana were the main caravan merchants of Central Asia from the 5th to the 8th century.

Origins. Little is known of the origins of Sogdian trade. The first mention of Sogdian merchants is found in the *Shiji* (*Shih Chi*), written around 100 BCE and based on reports by the earliest Chinese envoys to Central Asia: “Although the states from Dayuan west to Anxi speak rather different languages, their customs are generally similar and their languages mutually intelligible. The men all have deepset eyes and profuse beards and whiskers. They are skilful at commerce and will haggle over a fraction of a cent” (Sima Qian, in *Shiji*, chap. 123, p. 3174; tr. Watson, p. 245).

It is Sogdiana that is here referred to as the area between Dayuan (Ferghana [see FARḠĀNA]) and Anxi (the Parthian empire). This description contrasts, however, with those about the neighboring regions, where the presence of long-distance merchants is emphasized. Archaeology indeed bears witness, for the period before our era, only to limited regional trade in Sogdiana (turquoise from Ferghana to Samarkand), contrasting with that of the neighboring regions (Chinese imports to Ferghana). The economy appears to have been very little based on money and, rather, to have been dominated by agricultural exchange. China of the Han period sent numerous embassies with a large number of rolls of silk and other products of the empire, in order to ingratiate itself with the nomadic aristocracies (Yuezhi, Wusun, Kangju) who dominated political life in Central Asia, so as to fight against its Xiongnu enemies. The Sogdians traded with the Chinese envoys on a small scale, while

in Bactria and Gandhara merchants discovered how much they would be able to benefit by developing a market for Chinese silk in India, Iran, and the Hellenized Near East. The latter decided to re-export the silk brought by the embassies and even took the road to China, pretending to be ambassadors so as to buy the silk right at its source (*Han shu* 96 A, p. 3885; tr. Hulsewé and Loewe, p. 109). The Sogdians were to imitate them. In 29 and 11 BCE, ambassadors from Kangju, a nomad state centered on the middle reaches of the Syr Daria but at that time including Sogdiana, presented themselves at the Chinese court pronouncing the word "commerce" (*Han shu*, chap. 96 A, p. 3893; tr. Hulsewé and Loewe, p. 128).

The unification of southern Central Asia and northern India within the Kushan empire during the first and third centuries of our era further reinforced the importance and prosperity of the powerful merchants from Bactria and Taxila and led to the creation of the main economic center of the Middle East. Buddhist sources show that Sogdian merchants, who were not on the main roads situated farther to the south (Ptolemy, tr. Ronca, pp. 31-36, misplaces Samarkand) emigrated as far as India, benefiting from this prosperity (biography of the monk Kang seng hui [Seng-Houei], born in the early 3rd century, tr. Chavannes, 1909, pp. 199-200; Grenet, 1996). The Sogdians were then the pupils and apprentices of the Kushan merchants. Part of the commercial Sogdian vocabulary is of Bactrian origin (Sims-Williams, 1996, pp. 50-51).

The Sogdian commercial network grew sufficiently to ensure that in the early 3rd century, in Gansu, the representatives of Kushan and Sogdian merchants were placed on the same level and together participated in political negotiations (*Sanguo zhi*, chap. 4, p. 895). However, the main proof of Sogdian commercial expansion in the direction of China is provided by a set of letters, the Sogdian *Ancient Letters* (tr. Sims-Williams, 2001; Grenet, Sims-Williams, and de la Vaissière, 2001). Written in 313 in the Gansu corridor, these show the presence of Sogdian merchant communities in the main cities of the region, as well as in inner China. They also show that the merchants were organized within networks. The second letter, written in Gansu, is addressed to Samarkand. The descendants of the Kushan rivals are also mentioned in this text, since the Indian (*ỳntkwt*) and Sogdian communities of Luoyang had been decimated by famine. It is hard to tell what became of the great trade during the following century, but in 439 the Sogdian merchants were the main foreign merchants in Gansu (*Wei shu*, chap. 102, p. 2270; Enoki, 1955, p. 44).

From the same period, in the passes of the High Indus, are found more than 600 inscriptions by Sogdian caravaneers, against only about ten Bactrian inscriptions (Sims-Williams, 1989, 1992)—a fact which gives evidence of the replacement of Bactrian merchants by Sogdians.

Growth. From the 5th to the 7th century, the Sogdians were the principal long-distance caravan merchants in Central Asia. To begin with, their main destination was northern China. From the 5th century on, this area was the goal of a constant flow of Sogdian migrants who settled in the main towns, some of them managing to play a sufficiently important part to be mentioned in the sources or to leave behind epitaphs in Chinese summarizing their careers (examples in Forte, 1995, pp. 42-63; Rong, 2000; de la Vaissière and Trombert, 2004). There were at this period powerful Sogdian communities, led by "caravan chiefs" (*sartapao*, transcribed *sabao* in Chinese, Dien, 1962), whose hierarchy became part of the Chinese Mandarin system from the mid-6th century on (*Suishu*, chap. 27, p. 756 and chap. 28, pp. 790-791; de la Vaissière and Trombert, 2004). We do not know whether the 3rd- and 4th-century communities of inner China (as in Gansu) were continuations of the earlier ones or were newly created. The Sogdians were familiar personalities in the large Chinese cities and are represented by innumerable Tang statuettes with beards and prominent eyes and noses. Tombs of Sogdian merchants have been found, featuring sumptuously decorated funerary beds in stone (Marshak, 2001).

Until the mid-8th century, the Sogdian trade network was the main continental medium for export and import of luxury products in China and so controlled the principal transasiatic trade route. In Alexandria in 550, the Nestorian Cosmas Indicopleustes pointed out that it was by caravan routes, rather than by sea, that Persia received most of its silk (Cosmas Indicopleustes, II, pp. 45-46). The conquest of Central Asia by Chinese armies no doubt changed the economic conditions within which the Sogdian merchants operated. From 640 to 755, importations of western luxury products increased even more (Schafer, 1963); but with a view mainly to finance their expansion and pay their troops, the Tang empire sent more than 10 percent of its fiscal receipts to the West, for the most part in the form of silk and hemp rolls (Trombert, 2000, pp. 108-9)—a manna from which the Sogdians benefited as the main intermediaries of this great trade.

The other great zone of expansion of Sogdian trade was the steppes. We have no sources directly dealing with trade in the steppes during the early Middle

Ages, but the Chinese and the nomadic powers often used Sogdian merchants as gobetweens, and this provides us with some information about their activities. From their bases in Gansu and Turfan, the Sogdians set off as small peddlers traveling among the tribes from the 5th century on and perhaps even much earlier (*Wei shu*, chap. 103, p. 2310; de la Vaissière, 2002, pp. 202-4). The Sogdian language loaned to Turkic certain significant words (Old Turkic *borč* "debt," Sogd. *pwrc;* or Uighur *styr* "coin," Sogd. *styr*). The birth of the Turkish empire and its extension throughout the entire steppes greatly contributed to the economic power of the Sogdian merchants. They provided the Turks with their first chancellery language and administrative infrastructure.

The first known Turkic inscription, at Bugut in Mongolia, is in Sogdian (Klyaštornyj and Livšic, 1972 **), and the first historical text to mention the Turks from the standpoint of the Chinese connects them with the Sogdians (*Zhou shu*, chap. 50, p. 908). Menander Protector's history does likewise on the Byzantine side; in particular, it reports an actual case, within the period 568-75, of how the Sogdians used their diplomatic influence with the Turks to open up new markets. After failing with the Sasanians, the Sogdian merchants persuaded the ḵāqān to get in touch with Byzantium in order to export the thousands of silk rolls which China paid as tribute to the Turks (Menander, tr. Blockley, pp. 111-15). Under Turkish protection, and later under that of the succeeding states, the Sogdians established themselves within the trade of the western steppe. In the 7th century, when a trading entrepôt under Khazar protection was founded in the Crimea, it bore the name Sogdaia. During this period almost half of the Sasanian and Central Asian silver dishes found near the Urals had gone through Sogdian or Khwarezmian hands, and in the 8th century, three-quarters had done so (de la Vaissière, 2000, pp. 368-69). Sogdiana was the center where some of the luxury fabrics imported by Byzantium and the West were traded at that time (Shepherd and Henning, 1959).

In the east, at the border between the steppe and the Chinese world, the Sogdians also played a great part north of the Ordos. Here they bred and sold horses, the principal trade of the region in the 8th century (Pulleybank, 1952, pp. 331 f.), and their hold was such that the northern Ordos was called the "Six Sogdian prefectures," both in Chinese and in Turkish (Klyashtornyĭ, 1964, pp. 78-101). South of the Ordos, there were also Sogdian families controlling the Tang stud farms (the Shi family of Guyuan, whose tombs have been found; Luo Feng, 2001). Lastly, in Manchuria, the Chinese employed Iranian-speaking

merchants, most probably Sogdians, to facilitate trade on their military marches (*Jiu Tang shu*, chap. 185, p. 4814). In Central Asia, the Sogdians controlled their own internal market but also extended their scope over neighboring regions. At Turfan, Chinese documents found in the cemeteries of the city mention several hundreds of Sogdians (de la Vaissière and Trombert, 2004), and a fragment of the customs register regarding the caravans shows that among 35 operations, the Sogdians were involved in 29 (Skaff, 1998, pp. 89-95). This activity is mentioned in sale contracts, records of lawsuits, and census lists. They played a major part in all aspects of life in the oasis, besides its commerce.

At Khotan the Sogdians are mentioned without exact indication of the role they played there. To the west, Khwarezm (Ḵvārazm) entered into the Sogdian monetary zone at a later period, in the 8th century. It was in the south that the Sogdians settled least successfully. Even if they were present at Marv in the 8th century (Ṭabari, II, p. 1022), the Sasanian kings previously must have prevented them from proceeding farther west, so as to protect their domestic market (Menander, tr. Blockley, pp. 111-15).

Conduct of trade. Sogdian trade was not distinguished by any technical innovations which might be precisely attributed to it. In the present archeological data, no Sogdian caravanseries are known. The Sogdians sheltered their caravans in the broad courts of their fortified places. In safe areas, the Sogdians traveled in small convoys (examples in Arakawa, 2001), if not in large caravans. There are no known treaties of Sogdian law, as there are in Sasanian Iran. The formulary of sale contracts was for the most part inherited from Babylonia, transmitted by the Achaemenids, and sometimes modified in terms of the Chinese law (Sims-Williams, 1996). Sogdian trade was not based on the intrinsic value of a currency, unlike Sasanian trade or Samanid trade, which followed that of the Sogdians in Transoxiana. When the Arab armies conquered Sogdiana in the early 8th century, the Chinese silk scroll served to pay the major expenses (Smirnova, 1960, according to Bal'ami; Ṭabari, II, p. 1689, III, pp. 79-80). Besides silk, the Sogdians traded musk, slaves, precious metals, silverware, amber, and other things. The register of the Turfan customs also mentions brass, cucurma (turmeric), sal ammoniac, medicinal plants, candy sugar, and perfumes. We have no idea of the volume of trade. By crosschecking, we can calculate that the price of silk transported by the Sogdians doubled between Dunhuang and Samarkand in the first half of the 8th century (de la Vaissière, 2002, p. 267).

Decline and disappearance. Sogdian trade was greatly diminished by two events in the 8th century. The conquest of Sogdiana by Arab armies was slow and difficult, and it partially ruined the country. Above all, the An Lushan rebellion in China in 755 (Pulleybank, 1955) profoundly changed the imperial economy and put an end to the symbiosis under which Sogdian trade had existed for a century. The Chinese garrisons were evacuated from Central Asia, and there were constant wars among Chinese, Uighurs, and Tibetans in the Tarim basin and in Gansu, thus preventing trade for a long time. In China, the Sogdians were deeply involved in a rebellion led by one of them. Even if part of the Sogdians remained loyal to the Tang, they started to hide their foreign origins (de la Vaissière and Trombert, 2004). We have very little information about the period from the mid-8th century to the late 9th century, due to a lack of Chinese and Arabic sources on Central Asia. Sogdian trade certainly experienced a lasting break. When it recovered at the beginning of the 9th century, this occurred within the framework of the Uighur empire, which until 840 extended all over northern Central Asia and obtained from the weakened Tang enormous deliveries of silk in exchange for horses.

The Sogdians played an important political part in the Uighur empire, and caravans of Sogdians traveling to Upper Mongolia are mentioned in Chinese sources (Mackerras, 1972, p. 89). They played an equally important religious and cultural role (cf. Tremblay, 2001 on the spread of Manicheism). Part of the data about eastern Asia provided by Muslim geographers of the 10th century actually goes back to Sogdian data of the period 750-840 and thus shows the survival of links between east and west. However, after the end of the Uighur empire, Sogdian trade went through a second crisis. Although some Sogdian merchants traveling to China are still mentioned in the first third of the 10th century (Masʿudi, tr. Pellat, I, p. 142), they disappeared afterwards. What mainly issued from Muslim Central Asia was the trade of the Samanids, which resumed the northwestern road leading to the Khazars and the Urals and the northeastern one toward the nearby Turkic tribes. These were roads already familiar to the Sogdians, but within very different economic conditions. (On the part played by silver money in the commerce of the later period, see Noonan, 1984 and 1992.) However, no Samanid coin has been found in China, and Chinese porcelain is almost absent in Samanid Samarkand. Sogdian trade, which was based on barter and on the connections with China, disappeared, and the expatriate Sogdian communities became assimilated (Sims-Williams and Hamilton, 1990).

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