

The Silk Road

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From the Editor's Desktop

Beyond the Sensational: The Reiss-Engelhorn-Museums' "Origins of the Silk Road"

Every blockbuster exhibition wants the public to believe that it is "sensational," since that may ensure large crowds and the revenues to recoup the huge costs involved in borrowing, transporting and mounting the artifacts. The Reiss-Engelhorn-Museums' current "Origins of the Silk Road: Sensational New Finds from Xinjiang, China" is no exception in this regard.¹ But in a world where Silk Road exhibitions pop up on the landscape like flowers after a thunderstorm in the desert, this one goes well beyond the sensational. With few exceptions, the material here, displayed first in Berlin before moving to Mannheim, is being shown for the first time outside of Asia. Readers of this journal will have about a month yet in which to visit Mannheim, before the exhibition closes June 1. It is worth the trip.

Thanks to the Public Broadcasting System, the *National*

Geographic and some recent books (e.g., Mallory and Mair 2000), the sensational part of the story—the largely "west asian" mummies unearthed in Xinjiang—is, in a sense, already well known. In Mannheim, the curators have been rather more cautious about sensational claims concerning western influences in China. Theirs is a nuanced presentation which meshes very nicely with the lead article in this issue of our journal by the distinguished German archaeologist, Hermann Parzinger. Dr. Christoph Lind's curatorial team in Mannheim selected but one of famous mummies (a well-wrapped infant from Zaghunluq, ca. 800 BCE, item no. 101²) and instead invites us to learn about cultures whose ethnic identities remain uncertain. The focus in the first instance is the ordinary artifacts of the everyday lives and deaths of inhabitants in the oases and mountains of Xinjiang. We come away with an appreciation for the complexity of

their cultures and interactions in Central Eurasia starting as far back as the late third millennium BCE, some two millennia before the period when conventional narratives of the silk roads begin. While there is "animal-style" gold work [Fig. 1; exhibit no. 166; Fig. 13, p. 6 below], bronze, silk

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Fig. 1. Gold neck ring or diadem, Jiaohe-Gou Xi, Tomb 1, Western Han Period (206 BCE–24 CE).



Fig. 2. A grave excavated at Zaghunluq.

and some noteworthy examples of Hellenistic artistic influences, the real interest is the material culture of clay, wood, grains and animal products such as bone and wool. As the curators recognize, a limitation of the selection is that most artifacts come from burials [Fig. 2], not from settlement sites, few of which have been located and studied. It is somewhat ironic that the chronological designations for so many of the artifacts are Chinese dynastic dates, even though so little of the indigenous culture displayed here had much of anything to do with China except by the accident of politics which finds the archaeological sites within the borders of today's People's Republic.

The decision was made to organize the exhibition by excavation site, rather than attempt to preserve a strict chronology throughout. Thus we

move on to other sites in the eastern Tarim Basin and Turfan region (notably Subexi and Yanghai). The spectacular "Yingpan Man" [Fig. 11, p. 4



Fig. 3. Archaeological sites in the eastern Tarim Basin and in the Turfan region.



Fig. 4. Sites in the Tien Shan Mountain region and especially the Ili River valley.

begin with the important "Bronze Age" cemeteries (which also happen to be amongst the earliest, dating between 2200 and 1100 BCE) at Qäwrighul and Xiaohe [Fig. 3], not far from Lop Nor. Then we

below; no 162] (the burial of a Sogdian merchant?) is one of many interesting finds from an early first millennium CE site just to the west of Qäwrighul. There is a particularly rich selection of the remarkable 2000 to 2500-year-old textiles excavated at Sampula near Khotan and at Zaghunluq near Chärchän, both on the "Southern Silk Road." The exhibit concludes with Kiziltur (just south of the Tien Shan Mountains near Kuqa) and sites in the Ili River Valley [Fig. 4], where the artifacts range from striking first-millennium BCE bronzes [Fig. 5, facing page; no. 185] to the gold burial mask unearthed with other Turkic period artifacts at Boma [for an image, see p. 26 below].

The site at Xiaohe ("Little River"; nos. 3-36) may serve to illustrate both the promise of the ongoing archaeological work in Xinjiang and the challenges to proper scientific study of the material. Although discovered, it seems, by Ördek, who had led Sven Hedin to Kroraina (Lou-Lan) and who would much later in 1934 guide Hedin's archaeologist Folke Bergman to Xiaohe, this sizeable necropolis of some 2500 square meters was not systematically investigated until its re-discovery in 2000. At that time, a kind of



Fig. 5. Bronze figure. 71 - Tuanchang, Burial Site, 5th-3rd century BCE.

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find and its GIS coordinates became known (Mair 2006). Unfortunately the radioactivity in the area, due to nuclear testing, has made it impossible to obtain ¹⁴C dates.

Although now desert, Xiaohe must have been created in a period when the region was well watered. The boat-shaped coffins include both human remains and "substitute" figures made of organic materials. The burial of "substitute" figures or placing of anthropoid sculptures in or near the graves was not uncommon at other sites as well [Fig. 8; exhibit no. 57]. The wooden poles and "paddles" marking the graves at Xiaohe, as well as certain other objects, suggest a ritual concern over fertility and reproduction. As is the case though with so many other archaeological sites, we can only guess at the meaning of many objects — for example [Fig. 9, next page; no. 6], a small long-nosed wooden mask attached to the chest of a elderly woman whose attire included a striking felt cap and fur boots. Graves at Xiaohe contained delicately woven baskets or sieves, throwing darts bound with feathers, arrows, raw sheep's wool and woolen textiles.

Of particular interest are a 5th-century BCE five-stringed Konghou harp found at Yanghai (no. 69), the oldest such yet



Fig. 8. Mask made of clay and wood, Yanghai, Burial Site II, Tomb 2063, ca. 5th century BCE.

known, and a perfectly preserved compound bow, arrows and arm guard from Subexi (nos. 77, 78). Among the most important exhibits are some of those which make the least striking visual impression. For example, there is a rare 5th century BCE earthenware bellows valve from

Figs. 6, 7. Chinese excavations in Xinjiang.



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Fig. 9. Mask, willow wood, with strings, textile fibers and red paint, Xiaohe, Tomb C, Bronze Age (ca. 2200-1100 BCE).

Yanghai (no. 61), part of the equipment needed for smelting ore. A set of bowls (no. 79) from Subexi, dating from the 5th-3rd centuries BCE, contains food

offerings, including meat cubes and millet; a pouch from Sampula (no. 129), dated to the Han Dynasty era, contains millet biscuits. Among the numerous examples of pottery are a rare early 2nd-millennium BCE vessel decorated with an image of a man and a woman (geometric designs are the more common), a unique 5th century BCE twin cup (no. 73), and a rare, for Sampula, wheel-turned earthenware jug (no.125). Spindles with carved weights may be common enough (nos. 95, 97), but rarely do they preserve traces of yarn. Thread spools (no. 127) (possibly originally attached to a loom?) are unusual.

The most vivid memory of the exhibition for me is the quality and variety of the textiles. Naturally, one's attention is drawn to Yingpan Man [Figs. 10, 11] and the now well known fragment of a large wall hanging with Hellenistic motifs from which trousers were sewn for a burial at Sampula [Fig. 12, facing page; no. 113].³ Undoubtedly the garments in those graves were sewn specifically for the burials, as were some other objects (socks, gloves). However, for the most part we are seeing what appear to have been every-day clothes, some soiled or worn from wear. There are trousers, skirts, kaftans, shirt fronts, and hats. The great majority are crafted from wool, some examples (e.g., the caps, nos. 86, 87)



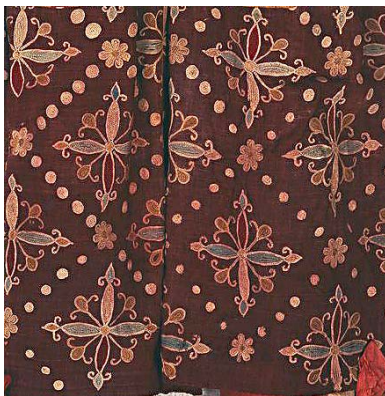
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Fig. 11. Burial outfit of a deceased man, Yingpan, Tomb 15, Eastern Han to Jin Period (25-420 CE); wool and silk.

showing an exquisite ribbed mesh weave technique. Some of the weaves are plain; others brightly



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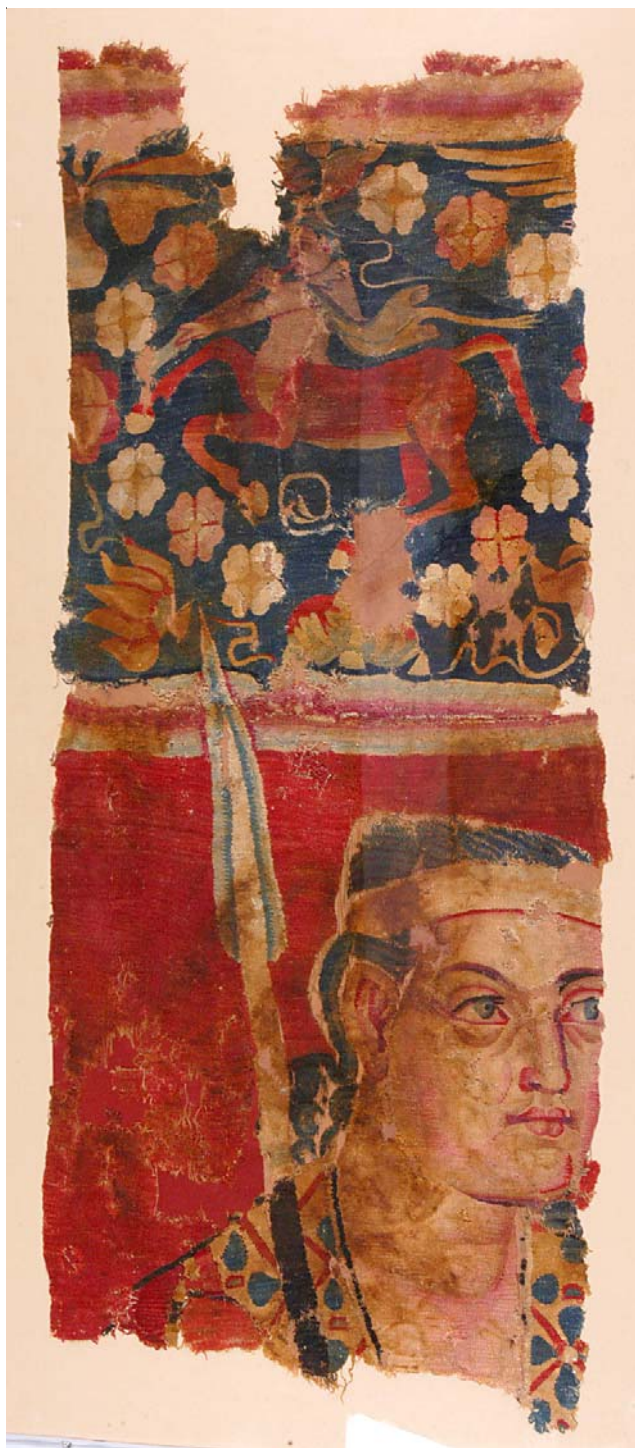


Fig. 12. Trouser fragment, made, apparently, from a large wall hanging, Sampula, Tomb I, Han Period (206 BCE–220CE). The provenance of the textile is uncertain.

colored (e.g., no. 99, a dress with brown skirt but bright red and blue checker pattern top and red piping). Of particular interest are several skirts from Sampula with

began to arrive, I never felt that I was being hurried along by crowds as had been the case in the cramped and poorly laid out space in which the Musée Guimet

woven bands depicting bactrian camels, trees or fantastic creatures (nos. 102, 104, 106, and 117). There is at least one textile fragment (no. 152), probably imported, with an unusual taqueté weaving technique. With one possible exception (no. 96), all the silks date from the Han Dynasty period or later.

The spaciousness of the display area is one of the great virtues of the exhibition. These often quite ordinary clothes of ordinary people are not relegated to obscurity in a corner — many in fact take on a starring role as the central focus of a room or an alcove and thus demand the viewer's close attention. I was fortunate enough to begin viewing the exhibit before its formal opening hour, but even once the public

mounted its Afghan treasures exhibition last year in Paris.

Apart from the Silk Road exhibition in Mannheim, I would strongly recommend that those interested in archaeology visit the excellent Palatinate Museum in historic Heidelberg, only 15 minutes away on the train. There one can enjoy a rich collection of pre-historic and Roman period material. If your calendar excludes Mannheim before June, then at very least obtain the catalogue of the Silk Road exhibit (*Ursprünge* 2007), in which you can view the objects and read a number of interesting essays, including one on daily life in the early Xinjiang communities written by Dr. Ulf Jäger, a contributor to this journal. And in the meantime, enjoy on the pages below a substantial amount of new information about other discoveries which are expanding our knowledge about cultures of the silk roads, their pre-history, and their legacy down to the present.

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Ursprünge 2007

Ursprünge der Seidenstraße: Sensationelle Neufunde aus Xinjiang, China, Alfried Wieczorek and Christoph Lind, eds. Stuttgart: Konrad Theiss Verlag, 2007. ISBN 978-3-8062-2160-2.

Notes

1. The curatorial team for the exhibition was headed by Dr. Christoph Lind; apart from the Reiss-Engelhorn-Museen in Mannheim, the presenters included the Martin-Gropius-Bau Berlin and the Eurasia Department of the German Archaeological Institute. Funding was provided by several institutional and corporate sponsors. The exhibition objects are from the Cultural Heritage Bureau of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, China.
2. With the exception of the two maps provided by the exhibit

organizers, my images here are limited to the few publicity photos made available by the Cultural Heritage Bureau of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, China. The item numbers are those in the caption list kindly sent me by Dr. Christoph Lind; I assume they correspond to the published catalogue numbers, which I have not yet had the opportunity to check.

3. The Sampula textile was also part of the Metropolitan Museum's exhibition "China: Dawn of a Golden Age, 200-750 AD"; see http://www.metmuseum.org/special/china/s3_obj_1.R.asp.

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Fig. 13. Gold foil belt buckle ornament depicting a griffin attacking a tiger, Jiaohe-Gou Bei, Tomb 1-mb, Han period (206 BCE- 220 CE).