

# The Silk Road

Volume 2 Number 2

"The Bridge between Eastern and Western Cultures"

December 2004

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## About

*The Silk Road* is a semi-annual publication of the Silkroad Foundation. *The Silk Road* can also be viewed on-line at <<http://www.silkroadfoundation.org>>.

Please feel free to contact us with any questions or contributions. Guidelines for contributors may be found in Vol. 2, No. 1 (June 2004) on the website.

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## From the Editor

1907 was a year of remarkable coincidence. In March, after a winter of stunning discoveries in the desert, Aurel Stein arrived at the Mogao Caves near Dunhuang. After learning there of the "Library Cave," he returned to his excavations along the Dunhuang "limes," in the process uncovering the famous "Ancient Sogdian Letters." Back in Dunhuang, he would then pack off to London a major part of the treasures from what we now know as Cave 17. As readers of this newsletter know, the study of the Silk Road would never be the same. Less familiar, I suspect, is another event in 1907, which would also result (but not immediately) in a portentous discovery. In July of that year, when the boxes of Dunhuang manuscripts were already on their way to Europe, the pre-eminent paleontologist of his day, Charles Doolittle Walcott, first visited the region of the Burgess Shale quarry in western Canada. His discovery of the spectacular fossils there would occur only two years later, and their careful study to arrive at full understanding of their implications would be the work of a later generation. Paleontology has never been the same.

Recently I was inspired to re-read the late Steven Jay Gould's *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History*, in which he makes an eloquent, if controversial, case for the significance of the unprecedented explosion of animal life at the beginning of the Cambrian era, some 500 million years ago. The evidence for this is in the fossils of the Burgess Shale.

Apart from what his book tells us about our ancestors (very) far removed, it is stimulating for what it reveals about the uncertain paths of scientific discovery. It is a tale about the questioning of old paradigms, about the impact of institutional and conceptual limitations on scholarship, about imagination and new techniques, and about contingency. At the risk of stretching the analogies, I find interesting parallels between the story of studying the Burgess fossils and what we learn about the changing world of scholarship in contributions to this issue of *The Silk Road*.

Aleksandr Leskov's article on the "Maikop Treasure" re-thinks the old paradigms about this collection of early nomad artifacts. Like the Burgess fossils, the Maikop Treasure was dispersed in separate locations where it had never been fully studied. It has taken Leskov's careful analysis to "reunite" it and establish (insofar as the record allows) its history. This work is something akin to dissecting the layers of the compressed soft-bodied animals of the Cambrian era in order to establish their three-dimensional form. While his accomplishment is the fruition of a lifetime's study of steppe archaeology and employs what we might characterize as traditional methods, it also the story of institutional constraints and the accident of fate whereby Leskov felt compelled to abandon his prestigious academic career in Ukraine and emigrate to the United States. Leskov's case serves as a salutary reminder of

how politics and scholarship rarely mix to the benefit of the latter.

As we learn from James Vedder's article, steppe archaeology has challenged us to re-examine the long-known evidence of epic and art regarding the Amazons. His material is part of a larger body of evidence and reinterpretation which is positing a factual basis for what commonly had been seen in traditional Classical scholarship as figments of the active Greek imagination.

A substantial focus of this number of *The Silk Road* concerns the application of the newest technology as a means of organizing and comparing not only the full range of archaeological evidence for Inner Asia but also a massive amount of new material on ecology, climate, and much more. Just as we can now visualize the three dimensional form of the Burgess animals, so also, thanks to Geographic Information Systems (GIS) applications, we can begin to construct multi-dimensional images of archaeological sites and changes in patterns of human and natural history.

The collection of short pieces by Mariner Padwa, Sebastian Stride et al. reminds us how good scholarship depends on not just imagination but on dogged, hard work in assembling and organizing data. It may come as something of a shock to realize that multiple encounters with the same archaeological site have sometimes led to its being recorded in different locations. Developing precise geographic coordinates for localizing cultural information is thus essential, and is far from an easy task, where the evidence of earlier mapping must be correlated with the precise data obtained from satellite imagery. I admire the relative accuracy of the mapping by Stein and Hedin in conditions that would test the stamina of

most of us, but I am also mindful of the fact that some of Hedin's maps were keyed to the pace of the camel he was riding while taking compass bearings and sketching. We have now entered a different world of precision, but the only way to take advantage of what the technology has to offer is to convert the accumulated historic records. One can hope that the coordinated activity of these several projects focussing on relatively small portions of Eurasia will inspire the extension of this kind of work so that eventually data for all regions will be connected seamlessly.

It is clear that already these projects are revealing new information on routes of trade, defensive lines and patterns of communication. If there has been a tendency in popularizations to oversimplify the Silk Road, we are reminded here of the complexities of the Silk Roads. We can hope that the new documentation of archaeological sites will help in the effort to study and preserve them in the face of modern development and looting. And lastly, a great virtue of these projects is their intent to make the material fully available to everyone via public-access Internet sites. Scholarship will never fulfill its mission if it remains inaccessible to all but a privileged few.

Finally, I am delighted to note our contribution from Michael Wright, who contacted me after we publicized the previous issue of this newsletter. Attention to music along the Silk Roads often focusses on the eastward movement of instruments such as the lute (famous examples being in the Shosoin imperial

repository in Japan), or evidence of Western influences as documented in T'ang-era *mingqi* or mural painting. As Wright demonstrates, the "Jew's Harp" has a fascinating history of transmission across Eurasia, most likely in the opposite direction. As in so much else these days, archaeological evidence forms an important part of the documentation.

Whether you are already involved in archaeological work or, like me, are looking forward to your first experience on an excavation, the Silkroad Foundation is offering an excellent opportunity to participate in one this summer. Information may be found at the end of this issue. Most histories of the Silk Road begin with the story of the interactions between the nomadic Xiongnu and Han China more than 2000 years ago. This summer program will focus on Xiongnu sites in Mongolia.

Silk Road studies have come a long way as we approach the centennial of the great discoveries of 1907. Were we to return in yet another century, we might well be surprised to learn how little we know now.

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Belt plaque with a tiger attacking a wild donkey. Eastern Zhou Dynasty, Warring States Period, 480-222 BCE, Ordos Region. Gilded bronze. Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst, Berlin, Inv. Nr.1965-24a. Photo: Daniel C. Waugh, 2004.