

# The Silk Road

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## In This Issue

- The Archaeology of Sogdiana
- Returning to Varakhsha
- Sogdians in China: A Short History and Some New Discoveries
- Pre-Islamic Civilization of the Sogdians (seventh c. BCE to eighth c. CE): A Bibliographic Essay
- Bamiyan: Professor Tarzi's Survey and Excavation Archaeological Mission, 2003
- "Knowing the Road That Leads You Home": Family, Genealogy, and Migration in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan
- Among the Kazakhs of Xinjiang

## Next Issue

- On the Antiquity of the Yurt by Professor David Stronach
- Dr. John Sommer on Klavdiya Antipina, Ethnographer of the Kyrgyz
- Professor Al Dien on Palmyra
- Stride, Padwa and Kansa on the GIS Atlas of Ancient Bactria

And more...

## About

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

Please feel free to contact us with any questions or contributions.

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## FROM THE EDITOR

It is my pleasure to introduce the second issue of the Silkroad Foundation's Newsletter which contains a range of articles that should interest general reader and specialist alike. I respond to these essays on both a personal and a professional level. On the one hand, the Silk Road embodies a kind of romantic and romanticizing vision of a past which may come alive when I visit the locations where history unfolded. On the other hand the historian in me keeps whispering that I should beware of reading too much into the past from its remains that have survived to the present.

It has been my privilege to have seen the Sogdian murals at Afrasiab on the outskirts of Samarkand, to have visited, however briefly, the famous Sogdian town of Panjikent, to have seen Sogdian petroglyphs in the Hunza Valley in northern Pakistan, and to have driven out to the Dunhuang "limes" in the area not far from where Aurel Stein discovered the famous "ancient Sogdian letters." In fact, almost anywhere we might step along the various paths of the ancient Silk Roads, we can imagine we are following in the footsteps of the Sogdians, who played such an important role in the Inner Asian trade for a major part of the first millennium CE. Similarly, visiting the Kazakhs or (in my case) the Kyrgyz in their Central Asian mountain pastures brings to life the remarkable, centuries-old, descriptive accounts we are fortunate to have regarding the traditional culture of the pastoral nomads who contributed so significantly to the movement of peoples and goods across historic Eurasia.

As a historian interested in periods for which the archaeological record provides essential source material, I am especially intrigued by the material

remains of Sogdian culture. To the casual visitor, the dusty mounds of Afrasiab or Panjikent or even the darkened and damaged originals of their murals barely speak, but they come alive through the expertise of scholars such as those whose essays on the Sogdians occupy the largest part of this issue of our Newsletter. I have had the personal pleasure of hearing Boris Marshak lecture for our Silk Road Seattle events back in 2002 and witnessing how his gentle erudition charmed all who met him. For half a century he has been one of the giants of Sogdian studies. More recently, in conjunction with the stunning exhibit of Silk Road art at the Dayton (Ohio) Art Institute (in which many of the objects spoke to the importance of the Sogdians) I shared the stage with Aleksandr Naymark and heard first-hand his discussion of the remarkable Varakhsha palace which he has now written up for these pages. His essay offers an excellent example of historical detection, where the written sources and material remains can be brought together into a narrative that questions accepted wisdom in attempting to make sense of events which occurred some 1200-1300 years ago. Étienne de la Vaissière's elegant summary about what we are learning on the lively frontier of the study of the Sogdians in China should encourage everyone to read his book, the first major synthesis of all that is known about the Sogdian merchants and one which deserves to be translated for those who cannot read the French. Everywhere one turns in the literature on Sogdiana, one encounters the name of Frantz Grenet, who is Director of the Franco-Uzbek Archaeological Mission that has been continuing the excavations at Afrasiab and at other sites nearby. We can be much encouraged by the way in which international participation in Cen-

tral Asian excavations has expanded in the post-Soviet era, not the least of the benefits being that the results are becoming more widely known than they were in the days where so much of the important scholarship appeared mainly in Russian.

Yet Sogdiana rarely makes the front page news, whereas the tragedy of Bamiyan is, alas, all too fresh in the minds of everyone. The destruction of so much of value in Afghanistan's cultural heritage and the threats from looting to that which remains in the ground should not obscure the fact we are also living in a time when important new discoveries continue there. One thinks, for example, of the earliest physical copies of Buddhist writings, which somehow were spirited out of Afghanistan before the Taliban could destroy them and are now being made available for scholars to decipher. Just as we await eagerly the appearance of each volume in the Early Buddhist Manuscripts Project, we wait with bated breath to learn the results of the continuing excavations by Zemauryalai Tarzi, in search of the reclining Buddha at Bamiyan. If the international community wishes to contribute to projects honoring and preserving the cultural heritage of this true crossroads of civilizations, then supporting the protection of archaeological sites and

the continuation of major excavations and the study of their results should be a higher priority than the reconstruction of the standing Buddhas of Bamiyan, however important symbolically that might be. It is no small miracle that in current conditions in Afghanistan any kind of serious archaeology can be undertaken.

Saulesh Yessenova's article introduces us to another important aspect of the preservation and understanding of the past. It is at once alarming and heartening to learn how Kazakh family genealogies are in danger of being ignored by the younger generation and at the same time are being actively preserved by their elders. This, in a culture where memory of family and kin has always been at the heart of identity. Just as in many places we are racing against time to rescue material culture from the architects of modern development, so also is it important to record and preserve traditions that inevitably change due to the realities of "modernization."

Bob Jones's experience among the Kazakhs of Xinjiang serves as another reminder of how rapidly tradition is being encroached upon by the economic demands and temptations of development. Even where one can go high enough into the mountains to es-

cape diesel fumes, fast food and busloads of tourists, it would be a mistake, of course, to imagine that the life of the herding families is unchanged from the way it was, say, back in the time when William of Rubruck or Marco Polo travelled through Inner Asia.

We need to remember that the chronologically most recent layer in any kind of excavation, be it in the ground or in human memory, may not be a reliable guide to the layers of earlier centuries. As we learn more about the Silk Road, on whatever level we study it, we find ourselves both overwhelmed by how much is known (and is there to be learned) and dismayed by how much may never be known. To me the romance of the Silk Road is its challenge to venture into what for most of us is *terra incognita*. Just as we think we are beginning to identify secure landmarks along the way, we realize that even the best experts may disagree about what they mean. Our challenge is to overcome the limitations imposed by our experiences in the present in order to be able to recover a past whose shards are buried in the sands of memory.

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