

# The Silk Road

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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

Rather than attempt to comment here on every article in this issue of our journal, let me share with you some thoughts inspired by reading two important new books which are closely related to certain of our contributions. In the first volume, *Royal Nauruz in Samarkand*, the eminent scholar Prof. Frantz Grenet begins his essay with the statement: 'A positive side to the so-called 'Ambassador's painting' at Samarkand is that we shall never fully understand it...This means that research on this painting will never stop and this is excellent news, as this research had many repercussions on the knowledge of Sogdian history and art' (p. 43). Indeed, as most of our articles in *The Silk Road* this time remind us, we live in a world of new discoveries, if one marked by sad reminders of what has been lost or is under the threat of destruction or theft. Were we to second-guess history, we might ask, for example, what if the bulldozer in 1965 had not torn off the top of the hall with the 'Ambassador's painting?' Would it eventually have been properly excavated with enough more intact to answer some of the now unanswerable questions which are inviting such ingenious solutions as the one proposed below by Matteo Compareti, who organized the conference in which Grenet and the other experts participated?

The conference reports in *Royal Nauruz* are fascinating reading in part precisely because the authors do not always (and probably never will) agree on some of the most important issues. Was the hall with the mural part of a palace or

part of an elite but non-royal residence? What is depicted? Is the whole iconography connected with celebration of Nauruz? Is it abstract and symbolic or rather related to a very specific political situation? Is the Chinese scene on the north wall a specific depiction of court culture in China or simply emblematic of a Chinese princess's having been sent off as a bride to Central Asia? It is certainly interesting that at least one contributor (Markus Mode) explicitly disagrees with the premise about Nauruz which is embodied in the volume's title. While the consensus dating for the paintings now has been narrowed to the 7<sup>th</sup> century, scholars cannot agree whether we might be looking at the late 640s or, say, the early 660s. Each choice has some plausible arguments in its favor. Or, take the Sogdian inscriptions on the murals, published in a new reading in this volume by Vladimir Livshits. When were they written? Do they record merely formulae and interpretation of the imagery by those who could not have witnessed the scene it depicts?

One can readily obtain a visual impression of the scholarly disagreements by comparing the various reconstructions of the murals on the west wall of the hall, the wall that arguably held the central imagery, since it faced the entrance to the room. Since only the lower part of the wall survived the ravages of time and the bulldozer, within certain limits imposed by the rest of the imagery, the scholar is free to imagine what was in the upper register. A number of key issues are at play here. One basic and

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perhaps somewhat surprising one is that most of the interpretations which have been advanced are based on an imperfect publication of the surviving evidence. As Irina Arzhantseva and Olga Inevatkina note in their paper, the earliest drawings of the paintings contained many errors and omitted significant detail. The more precise drawings undertaken during restoration work in 1978 have remained largely unknown and still need to be properly and fully published. The two scholars document the value of those 1978 drawings with a number of examples (and, one might add, the volume as a whole is valuable for its extensive illustration).

As presumably any of the specialists should admit, the challenges of 'reconstruction,' which perforce involves interpretation, and other kinds of analysis based on that which has been reconstructed embody some real dangers. For example, François Ory's explanation for his reconstruction drawings (see Figs. 1-3, p. 91) should give everyone pause. A lot of his detail derives from his reading of the other justly famous set of Sogdian paintings, those at Panjikent. Yet, as Étienne de la Vaissière pointedly notes (p. 153; he is commenting on Boris Marshak's interpretation of the murals, not on Ory's reconstruction), 'The painting of Samarkand is not that of Panjikent.' Might one not respond to de la Vaissière, who seems to prefer for the west wall imagery a variant where the upper register is based on a relief on a Sogdian funeral couch from China (see his fig. 3, p. 158), that 'The painting of Samarkand is not Sogdian carved reliefs from China'? Is the key and now lost image in the upper register the Goddess Nana, the Sogdian ruler Varkhuman, or the Turk *khaghan* or some alternative configuration of the last two? Choose one and a whole skein of alternative reasoning unravels.

Part of the challenge here is to balance the inventiveness of modern scholars in finding analogies and sources for the imagery with the realities of the preserved evidence and what to moderns are the opaque world views and knowledge of the creators of the paintings. I think no one nowadays would err on the side of underestimating the complexities of Sogdian culture, which embraced Iranian, Central Asian, Indian and other elements. Indeed, what meticulous scholarship is determining is how widespread certain motifs seem to have been, even if they have survived to this day in scattered locations only in isolated and fragmentary examples. Might there not be a danger though of imposing a rationality and system on the Samarkand paintings which they do not merit? And might there not be a danger of exaggerating the complexities? The late Boris Marshak's contribution to this volume (which has been dedicated to his memory) is noteworthy for his opening admission that he had been wrong in some of his earlier analysis and for his insistence that too many of the other interpretive schemes are at odds with the archaeological evidence from Sogdiana, evidence which most would agree he knew better than any other person. While of course he may not be right, Marshak shows what I would call a salutary skepticism, for example, in regard to reading too much out of the Sogdian inscriptions on the paintings. It is worth remembering one basic rule of argument, which is that the chain of evidence is only as strong as each of its links. I think part of what Marshak is getting at is that tendency to want to construct an edifice of 'proof' mainly out of unproven assumptions, at least some of which end up becoming 'accepted fact.'

It is hard to know how we may respond to this volume when we re-examine it in five or ten years, but I think there is a reasonable

bet that the articles in it which will hold up best with time are those which are the narrowest in their focus on specific details: Etsuko Kageyama's careful comparison of details of coiffure and garments of the Chinese women with recently discovered depictions in early Tang tombs; Valentina Raspopova's examination of weaponry with her interesting observations on the fact that to a degree the artists did not always match weapons to the ethnicity of the individuals in the paintings; the previously mentioned article by Arzhantseva and Inevatkina; and Alix Barbet's technical study of the painting technique. That said, Grenet surely is right about the stimulation provided by the uncertainty concerning what we know. That stimulation is abundantly evident in Matteo Compareti's article which we publish below: if his conclusion would be accepted, it could indeed help to explain some of the puzzling details of the 'Ambassador's painting.'

While a volume such as *Royal Nauruz* is a landmark publication pulling together both what is known and what is hypothesized and posing questions for future research, the volume indirectly suggests another kind of desideratum for the success of that research. Extensive as the literature now is on the Samarkand paintings (and, of course, many of the other important bodies of material unearthed along the Silk Road), much of it is not readily accessible. Markus Mode and the Franco-Uzbek Archaeological Mission headed by Frantz Grenet are to be commended for their publication of materials on the Internet. Imagine the benefit were they to coordinate efforts and begin systematically to post to one or the other website digital copies of the scholarly literature that is often published in books or journals unavailable in most libraries. Surely it is in the interest of everyone that permissions be

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obtained for copyrighted and uncopyrighted material to be reproduced in electronic form. That would truly be, to use Grenet's words, 'excellent news.'

If the Samarkand murals have in certain ways been 'well known' and preserved starting with their discovery over a quarter century ago, the excavations at Bamiyan and surveys in southern Tibet reported on in this issue may be news to many and highlight the ongoing threats to the preservation of cultural artifacts. The threats come from various directions — illegal excavation, deliberate destruction for religious or other reasons, indifference, the pressures of 'modern development.' In too many places — be they in the Middle East, Latin America, or Southeast Asia — there is no adequate security even at sites which have long been recognized as having substantial historical value. It is hard to know where the balance lies between discovery and charting of new sites (as is being done in the project reported on by Karl Ryavec in Tibet) and protection. As the Sichuan archaeologist Huo Wei noted in a presentation I heard on this Tibetan material a year ago, when the archaeologists returned to at least one of the sites a year after the first discovery, the looters had already been at work.

When we think back over the history of archaeology on the Silk Road, there is, of course, the well-flogged issue of whether the 'foreign devils' should be castigated for carting off to Europe so many objects, defacing Buddhist cave sites, etc. There also are the unintended consequences of excavations such as Aurel Stein's, where once the word got around locally about the possible value of the artifacts, local entrepreneurs went to work on what had been covered up and left behind. By the time C. P. Skrine, the British Consul in Kashgar in 1922-24 arrived in Khotan, he could purchase sizeable chunks of Buddhist murals from a shop that

was stocked with them. Skrine reported how one of these 'excavators,' looking for objects to sell, entered a previously unknown small temple in the desert only to have the walls and their murals disintegrate around him.<sup>1</sup> It is impossible to come up with a balance sheet here regarding whether the world would have more or less of the evidence of historic remains had not many of them been removed by outsiders whose motives may have been altruistic and scholarly or imperialistic. We cannot know, for example, whether the remains at Kizyl or Miran would have been better preserved for posterity had the German expeditions in the first instance, and Stein in the second never been there. Even though now, unlike then, proper legal frameworks are in place to protect cultural patrimony and prevent it from being illegally removed, enforcement is lax.

Such controversies plague the issue of the antiquities of Afghanistan, where since 1922, with a hiatus in the Civil War and Taliban years, the Delegation Archéologique Française en Afghanistan (DAFA) has so fruitfully worked. Perhaps more would have been left for future generations to discover had material excavated prior to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century not ended up in the Kabul Museum for the shelling of the Afghan Civil War and the iconoclastic Taliban to destroy. But who was to know? The world knows the grievous tale about the wanton destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan. The world should know and support better the resumption of serious archaeological investigations in Afghanistan. Would that there also be some way to check the inroads made by ongoing illegal excavations, whose pits pockmark the landscapes of many of the better known sites. Field work by DAFA at Bamiyan, now headed by Zmaryalai Tarzi, is already advancing substantially what we know about that former royal

residence and Buddhist monastic center, beyond what we knew while the Buddhas still stood. Read Professor Tarzi's report below: although phrased very cautiously, it encourages us to think that even more significant results may soon emerge.

This brings me to the second book about which I promised to write here: *Afghanistan: the Rediscovered Treasures*, the catalogue for a remarkable exhibition at the Musée Guimet in Paris until April 30 (which then will travel to the United States). The treasures begin chronologically with the Fullol hoard, which dates from about four millennia ago. The largest portion of the objects come from the much later sites: Ai Khanum on the Amu Darya, Tillia Tepe, and Begram. Many years of the French-directed excavations under DAFA were devoted to Ai Khanum and Begram. A Soviet-Afghan team headed by Victor Sarianidi and Zmaryalai Tarzi, excavated the spectacular hoard of gold from Tillia Tepe in the late 1970s just prior to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. A well-illustrated catalogue of the Tillia Tepe finds appeared in Russian in 1983. Until the objects from these various excavations resurfaced in 2003, they had been assumed lost during the Civil War and period of Taliban rule. In fact they had been locked away safely in vaults of the Central Bank. The exhibition provides a rare opportunity to see these treasures and to support the reconstruction of the Kabul Museum, which will benefit from the proceeds of the tour.

Apart from its superb illustration in color of 228 objects and numerous historic photographs and drawings from the excavations, the catalogue contains a number of valuable essays, starting with that by Omar Khan Massoudy, the Director of the National Museum in Kabul, laying out the recent and tragic history of his institution and its collections. Several of the leading French specialists — Pierre

Cambon, Jean-François Jarrige (who is also Director of the Musée Guimet), Paul Bernard and Véronique Schiltz — bring readers up to date on the significance of the four major excavations and the objects they uncovered. The finds at Fullol, discussed by Jarrige, are important as evidence concerning the 'Bactro-Margiana' cultural complex of ca. 2200-1800 BCE, which connects to the better-known centers of culture in Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley. Bernard reviews the importance of Ai Khanum as an outpost of Hellenic culture. Visitors to the exhibition will have the opportunity to see the well-known inscription commemorating the visit there by Clearchos, a disciple of Aristotle, and quoting the Delphic code of civic conduct. Véronique Schiltz's essay on the Tilia Tepe finds, discusses the yet unresolved issues of their chronology and places the objects in the context of other early nomad art. A appendix by Thomas Calligaro on the technical analysis of the jewels set into the Tilia Tepe gold demonstrates the broad geographical sweep encompassed by the trade networks, from northeast Africa to Tibet and Ceylon to the Baltic. And Chambon waxes lyrical about the eclecticism and artistic imagination of the steppe nomads ('un monde nomade éclectique et ouvert, qui joue de la curiosité pour des mondes différents et cultive la beauté,' p. 296). Not that we need to be reminded, but this is precisely what we expect in the 'crossroads' of civilizations which later would produce an analogous syncretism of cultures depicted in the paintings of Afrasiab.

In the most substantial of the essays, Chambon reviews carefully the arguments about the chronology of the Begram finds. Here we seem to have a conundrum equivalent to that regarding the paintings at Afrasiab, where there is much scholarly disagreement and apparently little likelihood in the

near future of a definitive solution. Among his many interesting observations are ones on the degree to which some of the results of the French excavations were inadequately or incompletely published. He concludes that there is a cultural unity in the finds at Begram, Tilia Tepe and Sirkap (one of the most important settlements at Taxila in northern Pakistan), with a strong indication that the Begram 'treasure' is thereby pre-Kushan in date, either 'Indo-Greek' or Parthian. While there are some early indications of Buddhism, this is not yet the era of the refined development of Gandharan Buddhist art under the Kushans. The Begram ivories, with their stylistic diversity and enthusiastic evocations of the pleasures of life are well known. There are bronzes of striking refinement. The glass is nothing short of miraculous — enameled beakers with their scenes of the hunt, fish-shaped flagons, two cobalt blue blown glass vases...

I would like to think that in my lifetime I might visit a restored Kabul Museum and see these treasures there, under conditions which might ensure that they be preserved safely to educate new generations of Afghans about the wonders of their heritage. As it is, the objects are arguably better known in the West than in their original home. The 'News from Ancient Afghanistan,' to quote the title of Nicholas Sims-Williams' article below, in fact can be surprisingly good. That there can even be such an exhibition now in Paris is, I suppose, some reason for hope in the face of the grim realities which, alas, are regular features in the news from *modern* Afghanistan.

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## Note

1. See Skrine's field diary, British Library, Oriental and India Office Collections, MSS EurF 154/39, p. 47, April 4, 1924, under the heading 'New stupa found by Abbas Khan at Khadalik.'

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## A Hundred Years of Dunhuang, 1907-2007

An international conference co-sponsored by The British Academy, The British Museum and The British Library, will be held at all three venues, Thursday 17 to Saturday 19 May 2007.

In May 1907, the Daoist caretaker of the Dunhuang Buddhist caves in northwest China revealed to Aurel Stein FBA a hidden library in Cave 17. The library had been sealed a thousand years earlier and was packed with documents, manuscripts and paintings. This discovery revolutionised 'oriental studies' throughout the world in the early 20th century. In this centenary year we seek (1) to reflect on the discovery and (2) to review its impact on 'oriental studies,' including the writing and re-writing of history and (3) to discuss directions for the future. The rich finds from Dunhuang have implications beyond 'oriental studies' and need to be understood as part of world culture. Details of the program may be found at <<http://www.britac.ac.uk/events/2007/dunhuang/prog.html>>, where there is a link to a pre-registration form.