

state,” he has access to centers of power that would not otherwise take cognizance of the needs of remote communities. Lastly, and perhaps most important, secular western authors very much underestimate the role of faith in mobilising communities: the rapid transition from Soviet farms to private farming in the Pamirs (and accompanying significant crop yields and improvements in self-sufficiency), for example, was greatly aided by the conviction that this was the will of the imam.

I have seen with my own eyes the increased dignity and self-confidence of the communities served by the Aga Khan network in the Northern Areas of Pakistan, in the Pamirs of Tajikistan, and in Gujarat. We are here at the heart of the philosophy of development. At its simplest level, from my own dialogues with villagers in the Pamirs there emerged clear and unprompted priorities for communities: adequate food (“there is a danger of famine, help us increase our crop production”), electricity (“otherwise we live like animals, following the sun” and “our children die on the steep slopes collecting firewood”), water supply (“we women have to walk long distances to fetch water”). At one level, it can indeed be argued that modernization leads to a loss of specific cultural identity: supply of electricity turns on the TV sets and people sing and dance less; market forces create societal tensions; the walk to the river was an opportunity for discussions among women that may now be lost. At another level, the definition of Aga Khan program objectives is today firmly based

on the express wishes of the people in the target areas.

It is true that, in the Tajik Pamirs, the Aga Khan Foundation started with a much more egalitarian society with less social stratification and a higher level of local education, both resulting from Soviet policies. This facilitated an open and participatory dialogue. Kreutzmann’s argument is that in Hunza it has taken much longer to weaken entrenched hierarchical and authoritarian structures that date from pre-colonial times and were reinforced during the colonial period. He argues that, in the past, the Aga Khan institutions and their *khoja* leadership may have, perhaps unintentionally, reinforced these structures:

In terms of participation, the process of implementing new rules and regulations conflicted with inherited power structures and traditional influence by elite groups. (p. 460)

More recently, these institutions have “offered well-educated and trained people opportunities to influence their chances of prosperity and well-being; besides politics, this was the most effective avenue for social mobility and transformation” (p. 460). Many choose to return and put their acquired skills at the disposal of their community—this is the most powerful agent of change.

The title chosen by Kreutzmann is a play on words that declares his intentions: for him, indeed, Hunza matters.

- Robert Middleton

***The Sogdians: Influencers on the Silk Roads.* A digital exhibition hosted by the Freer and Sackler Galleries, part of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C.**
<http://sogdians.si.edu>

This digital exhibition launched in April 2019, but it is still interesting to invite readers to explore the incredible depth and width on offer here, which may not be apparent at first sight to everyone.¹ This is the first exhibition on the Sogdians in

¹ This project has been curated by Thomas Wide (Smithsonian Institution), Judith A. Lerner (Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, NYU), and Kimon Keramidas (XE: Experimental Humanities & Social Engagement, NYU). The exhibition

any format (as we shall see below, the project started as a real exhibition). I am not sure whether this digital exhibition has received sufficient publicity, although it was announced on several scholarly blogs and platforms. It is extremely important and very enjoyable to view, and the result of years of very carefully weighed work by the best scholars in this field.

team has comprised Sana Mirza (Freer|Sackler), Julie Bellemare (Bard Graduate Center), and Matthew Dischner (independent scholar). The initial idea for this project came from Julian Raby, Director Emeritus of the Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery. See also <https://asia.si.edu/the-sogdians-influencers-on-the-silk-roads/>

THE SOGDIANS

Influencers on the Silk Roads

Explore the life, art, and influence of the
greatest traders of the Silk Roads



Although I have been returning to it, like to a much-loved handbook since its launch, it is only now when writing this review and systematically looking through the various options, that I have realized the extreme depth of this undertaking. We are now, after a year of lockdown and closed museums, used to digital exhibitions, but this one is not like other examples known to me. The site offers an amazing wealth of visual material in the highest possible quality and with good visual options (such as being able to point to zoom in and find out more²), with 3-D scans provided by the science lab of the Hermitage.³ This allows you to turn the object and zoom in and see details of, for example, the technology as if it were under a magnifying glass. Sweeping landscapes are linked to maps, and in fact I have never seen so many maps (apparently 85)—every time a geographical name appears, an optional map is beside it. Also, 25 objects are highlighted and described in detail, and videos give

² See, for example, Figs. 25–31. Click on the hotspots to view details of the Blue Hall mural and read about the various episodes in the story of Rustam. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, SA-15901-15904. Below the Rustam cycle, approximately thirty panels contained scenes from Hindu animal fables of the *Panchatantra*, Buddhist *Jataka* tales, and Aesop's fables. These last had their roots not only in ancient Greece, but also in the West and farther east, in Asia.

³ https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/wps/portal/hermitage/news/news-item/news/2019/news_102_19/?lng=

even more insight to some of the objects. For example, Keith Wilson shows us two beautiful metal bowls from the Freer-Sackler collection: one Sogdian and one Chinese. Enlarged images, vintage footage from the sites, and a modern drone flight above an archaeological site are also included, as are sound recordings of music. Still, despite all these qualities I would be tempted to call this a ground-breaking new type of digital book, one where you do not have to read from the first page to the last (although you can), but rather can take any number of routes and options.

The format seems to perfectly match the content: not centralised, more similar to a network, like the Sogdians themselves preferred. We learn that the Sogdians never had an empire, but instead established trading colonies, with their language becoming the *lingua franca* of the trade routes that we now refer to as the Silk Roads. They were tolerant of all religions known then in the area and transmitted them along the trade routes acting as translators. Their script became a model for the Uygur script and later this in turn became a model for Mongol and Manchu—looking at it this way, elements of the Sogdian cultural model survived into modern times. In a video, Sören Stark explains how the interplay of nomads and sedentary civilizations were more consequential than empires.



FIGS. 25–31 Click on the hotspots to view details of the Blue Hall mural and read about the various episodes in the story of Rustam. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, SA-15901-15904. View object page →
Photograph © The State Hermitage Museum.

The Sogdians were “between Empires.”

Judith Lerner, lead curator of the project, introduces the Sogdians as “influencers” of their time in a video and talks about her favourite object in another. “Perhaps the most striking feature of these discoveries is the sheer *variety* of beliefs that existed in Sogdiana: Mazdaism (Zoroastrianism), Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Shaivism, Judaism, and Manichaeism. This suggests that the Sogdians brought the same sense of tolerance, openness, and creativity to their practices of religion as they did to their arts.”⁴

The website emphasizes in a balanced way this modern aspect of the Sogdians. “Every religion except Buddhism” was practiced by them in their homeland, says Frantz Grenet in a video. But when they were far from home, the transmission of Buddhism was also one of their main roles, as it is explained in several important videos by Nicholas Sims-Williams, who has shaped our knowledge of Sogdians and their language in a decisive way since his PhD dissertation on Sogdian Christian texts. In a sub-chapter on the Sogdian language written by him we can see all important text types and scripts listed. Experts of the Sogdians explain the most

important aspects in the videos.

In the last couple of years, I have come back to this site repeatedly to read about the Sogdian funerary beds that became so famous in the last twenty years since their discoveries in Chinese archaeological sites, and especially to zoom in and look at the detail in the excellent images, such as Wirkak (also known by his Chinese name as Shi Jun 史君, who died in 579)⁵ crossing the Chinvat Bridge, where a beautiful maiden awaits him and his caravan to lead him safely across due to his good deeds (if he had been bad he would see an old hag, the bridge would narrow and he would fall off, and in the dangerous waves monsters await him). This scene had only been known from textual sources before the discovery of Wirkak’s tomb near Xi’an in 2003. I also re-visited the digital exhibition to learn more about the typical clothing of the Sogdians, the koftans—as I was preparing the donor paintings of Kizil Cave 8 for conservation and reconstruction in the Humboldt Forum, where they are now being prepared for an opening scheduled for autumn of this year.⁶

⁵ <https://sogdians.si.edu/shi-juns-sarcophagus/>

⁶ For the Humboldt Forum, see Lilla Russell-Smith, “Berlin’s ‘Turfan Collection’ Moves to the Center,” *The Silk Road* 13 (2015): 153–57 + Pls. V–VI. The Tocharian donors wear very

⁴ <https://sogdians.si.edu/believers-proselytizers-translators/>

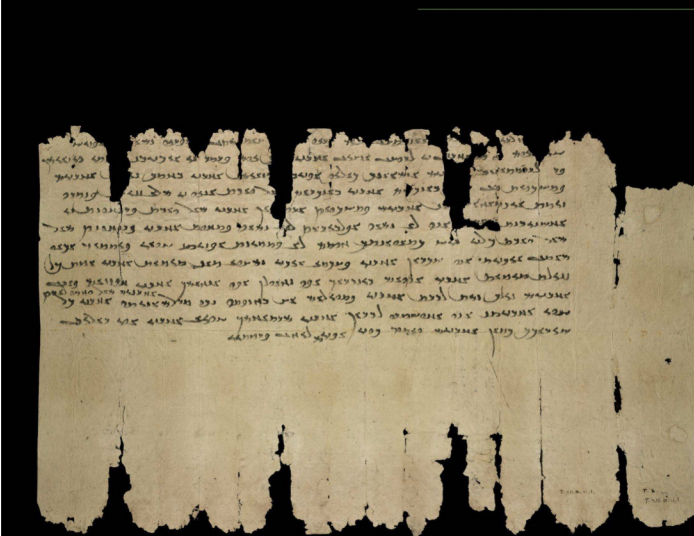


FIG. 5 Sogdian Ancient Letter 1, 4th century CE. Discovered in 1907 at watchtower (T.XII.A), west of Dunhuang 敦煌, Gansu Province, China. Ink on paper; H. 42 × W. 24.3 cm. View object page →
© The British Library Board, Or. 8212/92.

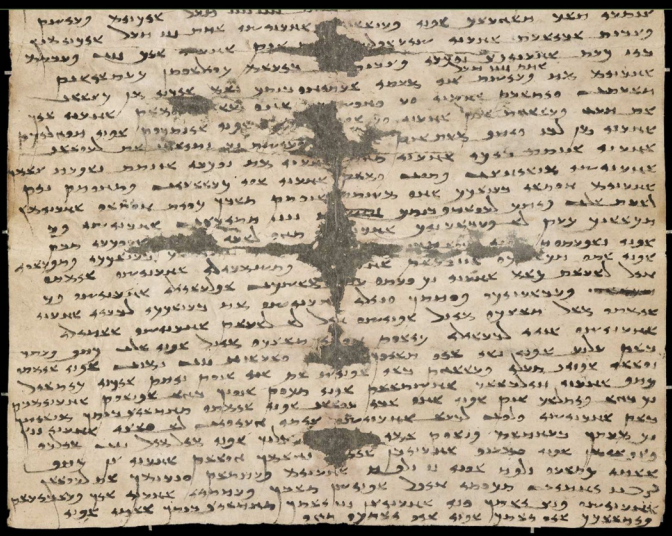


FIG. 6 Sogdian Ancient Letter 2, 312 or 313 CE. Discovered in 1907 at watchtower (T.XII.A), west of Dunhuang 敦煌, Gansu Province, China. Ink on paper; H. 42 × W. 24.3 cm. View object page →
© The British Library Board, Or. 8212/95.

Chinese representations of Sogdians caricatured them (especially showing them as grooms, musicians, and other people of lower status) as having large noses and round eyes, and being heavy-set and generally comical or “barbaric” in appearance. In contrast, the Sogdians depicted themselves as elegant people, with fine features, dressed in silk kaftans.⁷ In one of the shorter essays, Betty Hensellek writes about the banquets and the clothes of these elegant figures depicted in wall paintings, which are today in the Hermitage.

Snippets illustrating the depth include the observation that more coins with Christian symbols have been found around Bukhara than anywhere else in Central Asia, which suggests to Aleksandr Naymark that the issuing authority was Christian. And yet the text remains very readable. Due to so many detailed sources, unexpected surprises await the reader, such as a map of the Otani expeditions.⁸ This digital exhibition invites you to dive in, enjoy details, and come back another time, which is what I have been doing in the past two years from time to time.

But it is only now, preparing this review, that I noticed that not only is every statement backed up by sources in the references, but also that these are all

similar kaftans influenced by Sogdian art.

⁷ Fig. 42, Fig. 43.

⁸ <https://sogdians.si.edu/the-rediscovery-of-the-sogdians/>

put together into a Zotero reading list of over 300 items, which are open source and available to everyone.⁹ This is like a starter study kit about the Sogdians, put together by the absolute authorities in the field!

This project started as an idea by Julian Raby, then director of the Freer-Sackler Gallery, to organise a real exhibition about the Sogdians ten years ago. Judith Lerner tells the story in a video, including holding a conference during a hurricane in 2012. As a result, not everyone in Washington D.C. could take part.¹⁰ A second conference followed in January 2014 in Hangzhou. But in February 2014 the Crimea was annexed by Russia, and, despite the close involvement of Pavel Lurje (head of Central Asia Department at the Hermitage and an excavator in Panjikent and other sites), it became very unlikely that loans of real objects would be possible.¹¹

⁹ https://www.zotero.org/groups/2132759/freersackler_sogdian_project/library

¹⁰ Judith Lerner explains in an excellent lecture available on the Friends of the Silk Road Museum YouTube Channel how this project came about and the most important points (June 22, 2019): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=osoAUijc-Qss&list=PLGVIY9SCbAsNrTqUOAKlx6Ae2ey26fzol&index=7>. Another earlier lecture (October 19, 2018) was hosted by the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6zKxdNQqr4>.

¹¹ <https://sogdians.si.edu/sidebars/the-castle-on-mount-mugh-and-its-documents-exemplified-by-letter-v-18/>

Once it became clear that the project would go digital rather than being a real exhibition, careful planning went into finding the right tone, including a seminar with students at Bard College in 2016, during which—after an introduction on the Sogdians by experts—students would write about aspects that appealed to them most, for example music.¹² This was useful as a basis for the project, which then started in 2017. According to Judith Lerner, the following topics were explored:

1. Who were the Sogdians and why do they matter?
2. Sogdians at home (introducing their material culture)
3. Religion among Sogdians
4. Sogdians abroad (in China)
5. From Nara to Nancy (Japan to France—their heritage)
6. Last days of the Sogdians—Arab conquest
7. Discovery/rediscovery, archaeological finds

They form the basis for the final five chapters that can be found on the home page.

In another section, 25 objects are introduced—perfect to get a first taste, or to learn more. These object pages are also linked into the essays. In a geo-narrative essay, we can follow the Sogdian trade route starting from Afrasiab/Samarkand all the way to Xi'an/Chang'an. Eleven “side-bar essays” give further information on topics such as banqueting, the nine Chinese surnames, the Sogdian language, and even music from the Yaghnub Valley in eastern Tajikistan, as the language used there today can be linked to Sogdian. Aurel Stein and Boris Marshak are also introduced in this section.

The site apparently hosts 362 images, far more than would ever have been possible as real objects in a real exhibition. Five are interactive or 3-D. Internet allows for the inclusion of sound, movement, and people speaking—I suppose we can do all of these in an actual exhibition with media tables or apps, but the freedom of choosing any com-

binations is only possible at home.

Writing the review, I discovered that it is also nice to use this website more like a book, reading every sentence, following every lead. It is easy to use on a mobile phone, which suggests that the design was especially made for this format. What appears to be a lot of information on my computer screen seems easier to navigate on the mobile screen, with attractive colors and a lot of options for getting extra information. The site combines seamlessly the scholarly aspect, acting as a digital handbook, and the popular aspect for those just scrolling through images or looking at certain aspects. So whichever way you explore, a lot of beauty and a wealth of information will tempt you to come back again and again in ways that is usually not possible after a real blockbuster exhibition.

Needless to say, that I am nowhere near the end, since there is so much material here. This project has set a new standard in digital formats, and my only worry is that this wealth of information may disappear if for some reason the Freer-Sackler Gallery would decide not to host the site anymore (the fate of so many databases and websites). But if it remains, it will give us much material to consider and follow up for many years to come, and perhaps—unlike in the case of a printed catalogue—in a future project even updates could be added in years to come. I hope other museums will also host similar detailed websites or digital exhibitions in the future, as this certainly has been a great inspiration for me. It shows institutions how, during the current pandemic, new ways can be found for hosting information. I recommend this website to everyone, whether they have never heard of the Sogdians (as implied in the introduction to the site) or whether they are looking for specialist information.

- Lilla Russell-Smith

¹² The website still exists: <https://kimon.hosting.nyu.edu/sogdians/>