

The Legacy of Sogdian Inscriptions. On a Newly Published Sogdian Chrestomathy

Review on Alim Feyzulaev (ed.): Каталог памятников согдийской письменности в Центральной Азии – Catalogue of Sogdian Writings in Central Asia. IICAS, Samarkand, 2022.

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In the past few decades, we have witnessed a significant rise in newly discovered sources of Eastern Iranian languages. It is especially the Bactrian and the Sogdian languages where we can see a rapid development of our knowledge concerning newly discovered sources and secondary literature.

Sogdiana was first mentioned in the Achaemenid period as one of the Central Asian provinces of the mighty Old Persian Empire in the late 6th century BC. Sogdian language, an Eastern Iranian language, was once mainly spoken in present-day Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and partly in Turkmenistan; the present areas of the Zarafshan River and Kashkadarya province but also the Bukhara oasis and the area of Tashkent were traditionally the Sogdian heartlands. However, we have evidence for the presence of Sogdian traders in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, China, Mongolia, Pakistan and Ladakh in India. These Sogdian settlements were created by Sogdian merchants hailing from the Sogdian homeland between the 2nd and 10th centuries CE. The elites of the Sogdians were excellent traders along the Silk Road operating between China, India and perhaps the Black Sea, but in the Bukhara oasis and Samarkand, Sogdians became excellent agriculturalists as well. The golden age of the Sogdian ‘Commercial Empire’ was the period between the 4th and the 8th century. Politically Sogdiana appears to have a highly fragmented map where several principalities coexisted, though due to the extreme scarcity of information on preislamic Sogdiana, we do not know too many details on political events. Our Chinese sources speak of the rule of nine families in Sogdiana in

the 6-7th centuries, referring to nine major cities and provinces of Samarkand, Bukhara, Kiš, Baikand, Maymurğ, Ištīhān, Kabūdānjakath, Ustrūšana and Kūšānšahr.

Sogdian merchants were followers of several religious movements along the Silk Roads, as we have Zoroastrian, Buddhist, Manichaean and Christian Sogdian texts. Similarly, Sogdians adopted several alphabets based on their religious background. Three Sogdian alphabets (Aramaic, Syriac and Manichaean) were all of Middle Eastern origin, descendants of Semitic consonantal writing systems, while the Indian Brahmi script was also used by some Sogdian groups, and there are a few glosses of Sogdian in Arabic script. The earliest existing Sogdian text was a translation of an Avestan hymn possibly dating back to the late Achaemenid period (4th century BC?) while the latest surviving Sogdian inscriptions were composed in the 11th century CE. Sogdian did not die out completely, the modern Yağnōbī language still spoken in Tajikistan can be considered as a Neo-Sogdian language. Sogdian was mainly supplanted by Persian (Tajik) a western Iranian language and by different Turkic languages in Central Asia in the Islamic period. According to de La Vaissière the last Sogdian speaking generation was born in Bukhara in the first three decades of the 10th century.

Sogdian studies began to develop at the end of the 19th century with the discovery of the first major Sogdian texts in Western China. Hungarian-British scholar Sir Marc Aurel Stein was one of the early pioneers of Sogdian manuscripts, he and other Western, Russian and Japanese scholars saved plenty of Sogdian texts in the early 20th century in Dunhuang and Turfan, soon Sogdian manuscripts found their way to European, Russian, Japanese and Chinese archives. The decipherment of the first Sogdian texts took place in the same period and the early 20th century witnessed the birth of Sogdian studies both in Russia and in Europe. In 1932 the discovery of the Mount Muğ archive gave further impetus to Sogdian studies in the Soviet Union, Vladimir Livshits became the founding father of Sogdian studies mastering Sogdian palaeography with his numerous publications. Livshits and his students made painstaking efforts to publish Sogdian sources while in the West Nicholas Sims-Williams, Frantz Grenet and Étienne de La Vaissière are nowadays the leading experts of Sogdian studies.

Sogdian studies represent a very important part of Iranian studies which unfortunately have not been cultivated in Hungary since the death of the late János Harmatta who also made significant contributions to the study of Eastern Iranian languages and scripts. Among others, Harmatta dedicated important papers to the study of the so-called *Ancient Sogdian Letters* written in the 4th century CE. The *Ancient Sogdian Letters* – among others – contain valuable information on the Hunnic attacks against China and the daily life of the Sogdian traders in Chinese territories along the Silk Road. The *Ancient Sogdian Letters* were translated by Harmatta to Hungarian thus making them accessible to historians, amateurs and those untrained in Sogdian philology, a subject rarely being part of curriculums of departments of Iranian Studies.

A similar approach, the promotion of Sogdian written sources for a possibly wider audience, students of history, religious studies and Iranian studies, can be seen in the case of the recently published bilingual Russian-English work entitled *Каталог памятников согдийской письменности в Центральной Азии – Catalogue of Sogdian Writings in Central*

Asia. This work was published in Samarkand by IICAS (Международный институт центральноазиатских исследований – International Institute for Central Asian Studies) a UNESCO founded scientific institution to promote Silk Road studies.

The present volume was edited by Alim Feyzulaev (International Institute for Central Asian Studies) and was compiled by several distinguished Uzbek and Russian scholars, being experts of Sogdian studies: Bobir Goyibov (Samarkand State University), Pavel Lurje (The State Hermitage Museum) Alisher Begmatov (Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Turfanforschung Department) Valentina Raspopova (Institute of History of Material Culture of the Russian Academy of Sciences) Gaybulla Boboyorov (National Center of Archeology, Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan). Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies, Beruni Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan also participated in this scientific project the results of which were finally published in 2022 in Samarkand, Uzbekistan.

The main aim of this volume is briefly summarized at the beginning of this book: ‘The publication is addressed to specialists, university students and a wide range of readers interested in the cultural heritage of the Silk Roads.’ (p.2.) Also, the publication of the present volume appears to be a multinational step on behalf of IICAS to register the written heritage of Central Asia at UNESCO’s “Memory of the World” Programme.

Although the name ‘catalogue’ would theoretically suggest a complete oeuvre comprising all the published and unpublished Sogdian texts, the present volume can be rather called a chrestomathy, i.e. a selection of important but not all the Sogdian texts. In the closing remarks of the present volume, this fact was indeed mentioned and underlined that the present volume is a collection of selected Sogdian sources, written on different materials to promote Sogdian writings and Sogdian studies.

This bilingual Russian-English volume contains a selection of ninety Sogdian texts discovered in the five Central Asian republics (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan) and Mongolia. Its inner structure separates the published material according to the six countries. The book has a short but very informative introduction on the history of Sogdian studies and Sogdian philology where authors summarize the most important findings in the field of Sogdian epigraphy. Interestingly there is also a brief conclusion at the end of the book, where, as a sign of a solid excuse authors of the book apologize for not being able to include other materials into the book. As it is mentioned in the conclusion, ‘it is not an exhaustive catalog (sic!) and does not claim to be.’ The present author has never met exhaustive catalogues so far, and this is perhaps a less fortunate wording, on the other hand, there is no need for any excuse, since the main aim of this book is to give us a summary of the most important Sogdian texts in a simplified and easily accessible form.

Each text is introduced in a very transparent and clear way where one can find the following features (both in Russian and English): 1. Object, Location of the text (provenience) 2. Present location. 3. Physical description of the monument 4. Transliteration 5. Translation 6. Notes 7. Bibliography 8. Images.

It is important to stress that none of the published texts are primary publications and as it was stated in the foreword of the book: ‘This edition includes the most reliably read Sogdian texts’ (p.15.) based on the former editions of Livshits, Bogolyubov and Smirnova or by the authors of the volume. On the other hand, there are minor adjustments in the sources; in several cases, the authors included slight changes in their translations offering new readings. But the most important novelty is the inclusion of numerous new photos in the published documents. One must note however, that not all the images are of great help for a better analysis or to further develop our knowledge in Sogdian palaeography, and sometimes the reader can encounter images of poor quality where texts are not completely visible due to the diminished size of the published photos

As far as the content of this volume is concerned, the present book contains selections from some of the most important Sogdian archives or major Sogdian inscriptions. For instance, nearly half of the seventy-five Sogdian documents found at Mount Muğ in the Sogdian heartlands are included. Another fifteen inscriptions from Panjikent were also translated (another 65 inscriptions were not included). The present volume offers a good chance for the study of the development of Sogdian literacy both in terms of chronology and in geography spanning from the earliest known Sogdian inscription from Kultobe (Kazakhstan, possibly from the 1st century BC or CE) until the last significant Sogdian inscription discovered of Semirechye region from the early 11th century CE. Sogdian inscriptions related to the first Turkic khaganate of the 6th century from present-day Mongolia were also included, similarly, a short Sogdian text from Marw, present-day Turkmenistan from the early Islamic period represents the arrival of Sogdian merchants to former Sasanian borderlands around the collapse of the Sasanian empire in the 7th century.

On the other hand, Sogdian texts discovered in China are not included at all; many Manichaean, Christian, Buddhist and Zoroastrian texts were omitted from the volume. Besides them, the Ancient Sogdian Letters from the early 4th century CE and Sogdian correspondences found in the Turfan oasis are sorely missed from the present book. Early and brief Sogdian inscriptions of Sogdian merchants from the 2-3rd centuries CE from the Upper Indus area from present-day Pakistan published by Sims-Williams were also not included. It appears that the main emphasis of this selection was put on longer and more elaborate Sogdian letters and inscriptions discovered in the five republics of Central Asia and modern-day Mongolia therefore many shorter inscriptions from the Semirechye area or Sogdian legends on coins were not included. In addition, Sogdian fragments written in Arabic script (such as the Sogdian glosses of al-Bīrūnī or the *History of Bukhara* of Naršahī) are not found in the present chrestomathy. However, our authors promised further editions of different Sogdian texts in the closing remarks of the book perhaps hinting to future editions of legends of Sogdian coins and the corpus of the Upper Indus area inscriptions. (p.245.).

Former Sogdian heartlands are well represented in this collection, for; the Sogdian inscriptions from present-day Tajikistan and Uzbekistan cover most of the book. In this case, the three main sites are Mount Muğ (Kuh-i Muğ, literally ‘magus mount’) and Panjikent both

in Tajikistan and Afrasiab in the outskirts of Samarkand in Uzbekistan. As for the Mount Muğ documents, these represent the single surviving Sogdian archive from the heart of historic Sogdiana. As it is known it is a heterogeneous collection of correspondences of King Dēwāštič, the last Sogdian ruler of Panjikent who was killed by the conquering Arabs in 722. Dēwāštič and his followers spent the last months of their life in the fortress of Mount Muğ and the surviving archive is rather an interesting amalgam of letters and documents from the period of the last Sogdian rulers.

Many of these documents were sent to or by King Dēwāštič, but many other letters were composed by local Sogdian governors (*khuws*) and other high-ranking officials (such as *framāndār* Ut/Awat) in the Zerafshan valley and it is not exactly known how these documents landed in this archive, though perhaps some of these governors could have fled to Mount Muğ in the last months of independent Sogdiana in 721-722. The fortress of Mount Muğ itself is located at the confluence of the rivers of Zerafshan and Qum, some 120 km east of Samarkand and 60 km west of Panjikent. The Mount Muğ documents are mainly in Sogdian, but a few Arabic, Old Turkic and Chinese letters and documents also survived, a local shepherd discovered the collection in 1932 and Soviet scholars made further discoveries in 1933. Our present volume republishes many important letters of the Mount Muğ collection making it accessible for students of history and Oriental studies.

In this recently published collection, we find among others several fascinating historical and economic documents. The Sogdian letter of Arab military leader ‘Abd al-Rahman addressed to Dēwāštič and written in an eloquent Sogdian (TJ-MUG-1.I) is of primary importance for a better understanding of the rather tense political situations as well as the dealings of local Sogdian magnates with newcomer Arabs on the eve of the collapse of preislamic Sogdiana. Similarly, the so-called ‘spy report’ on the area of Khujand (TJ-MUG-A-9) is of high historical value, several letters of local *khuws* and *framāndār* Ut/Awat reveal the administrative methods of early 8th century Sogdiana. A letter of Dēwāštič (TJ-MUG-B-18) reprimanding one of his governors uses a rather harsh tone revealing the rather expressive way of Sogdian epistolary style (detected also in some of the *Ancient Sogdian Letters*). Besides their content, these are very good sources for the Sogdian epistolary style which seems to be a very sophisticated and developed system proven by other pieces of evidence from Dunhuang, Turfan and Marw. Apart from historical letters, several exciting economic documents on different transactions are included in our collection such as documents on the purchase of leathers, wine, grain, and cattle; documents on the distribution of money, and garments were also included. Our chrestomathy includes a marriage contract (TJ-MUG-NOV.3) as well as a so-called ‘obligation of bride-groom’ ((TJ-MUG-NOV.4.) in Sogdian throwing a rare light on Sogdian legal practices and the style of Sogdian marriage contracts. Similarly, funeral rites are listed in one the Mount Muğ documents preserved from the early 8th century in our book. (TJ-MUG-B-8)

Materials used for these letters are also very diverse, some letters are written on leather, others on paper, but again others are penned on wood sticks. Lurje found similar wood sticks with Sogdian inscriptions in Hisorak in 2011, which were also included in the present volume.

Less important are the very short inscriptions of Panjikent, once a significant Sogdian city in Tajikistan, the seat of Dēwāštič. Here we can see very brief student exercises on ostraca, with little or modest historical value. My impression is that more texts could have been published from the Mount Muğ archive at the expense of these rather unimportant fragments of Panjikent. Similarly, the Sogdian findings of Afrasiab (old Samarkand) are of modest importance, it is perhaps the notes preserved on the surfaces of the world-famous Afrasiab frescoes are worth mentioning which reveal the diplomatic contacts of King Varkhunan of Samarkand in mid-7th century. Other findings from Kafirkala (near Samarkand, Uzbekistan) are of modest importance in comparison with those of Mount Muğ.

Nevertheless, the mapping of Sogdian inscriptions reveals that Sogdian chancelleries all were destroyed following the Arabic conquest of Central Asia. Except for the surviving archive of Mount Muğ, no other Sogdian archive in any Sogdian political centre managed to survive. On the other hand, Sogdian colonies or settlements created by their mother-cities (Samarkand, Bukhara, Čāč) outside historic Sogdiana in present-day Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, China and Mongolia performed better and preserved much more written material in Sogdian than the Sogdian heartlands.

The Sogdian texts from present-day Kyrgyzstan are mainly brief, but here one can find the latest dated ones from Terek-sai and Kulan-sai gorges, from the 10th-11th centuries apparently with a growing number of Turkic lexica, titles, toponyms and names. On the other hand, the few Sogdian inscriptions from Kul-tobe (Kazakhstan) represent the earliest Sogdian inscriptions ever found. These texts are the written pieces of evidence of early Sogdian colonisation activities by the cities of Čāč (Tashkent), Samarkand and Naqšab (near modern-day Qarshi, Uzbekistan). The inscriptions of Kul-tobe certainly predate the *Ancient Sogdian Letters* (early 4th century CE), though their chronology is heavily disputed (ranging between 2nd century BC and 3rd century CE). These early texts reveal the fragmentary state of Sogdian political entities as early as the 1-2 centuries CE, the lack of political unity in Sogdian heartlands as well as the coexistence of several Sogdian kingdoms of Čāč, Samarkand, Naqšab, a fact which remained unchanged up until the Islamic conquest of Sogdiana in the 8th century.

Our volume also emphasizes Turco-Sogdian linguistic and historical ties due to the publication of two groups of Sogdian texts with strong ties to certain Turkic clans. Sogdians played a pivotal role in the formation of the administrative system of the first Turkic khaganate in the 6th century exerting a significant influence on the development of Old Turkic chancelleries and literacy including the beginnings of the Old Turkic runic alphabet with its well-known ties to the Sogdian Aramaic script. Slightly later, the Uighur alphabet was also created based on the Sogdian alphabet, which served as the basis for the Mongol and Manchu alphabets. As it is known, the ancient Mongol alphabet (developed from its Sogdian-Uighur predecessors) is still being used as the official alphabet of Inner Mongolia (in China).

In this context, the publication of the Sogdian versions of Old Turkic inscriptions helps us to understand the eminent role played by Sogdian scribes and merchants in early Turkic

history in Inner and Central Asia. The three main Sogdian inscriptions discovered in Mongolia of Bugut, Karabalgasun and Sevrey are closely connected to the first Turkic khaganate and the Uighur khaganate and to the history of the so-called royal Ashina clan, a well-known early Turkic family, which was the possible ancestor of several important Turkic dynasties and empires between the 5th and 12th centuries.

On the other hand, later Sogdian epigraphical materials from the Semirechye region (parts of present-day southern Kazakhstan and northern Kyrgyzstan) from the 10-11th centuries prove the close cultural and linguistic interactions between the last generations of Sogdian settlers and Turkic speaking Karluk tribes. These are the last attested traces of the once widespread and influential Sogdian literacy network in Central Asia. The epigraphic materials preserved in Terek-sai (KG-TS-01/02) and Kulan-sai gorges (KG-KS-01) are the latest important Sogdian inscriptions where already a significant Turkic linguistic and cultural influence can be detected in many elements of these late Sogdian inscriptions.

It appears that the process of Turkification was in a very advanced phase in the local Sogdian colonies of Semirechye which eventually led to the complete assimilation of these Sogdian settlements in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan by the 11-12th centuries, though the Flemish Franciscan missionary Rubruck and the Armenian author Hethum still refer to possible Sogdian groups active in this area as late as the 13-14th centuries. Turco-Sogdian bilingualism of local 'Sogdaq' people of the region is also confirmed by Maḥmūd Kāšgarī in the 11th century as well. The Kulan-sai inscription is allegedly the latest dated Sogdian inscription from 1027 from present-day Kyrgyzstan written in the early Qarluq period already after the fall of the Samanids.

The present volume represents a very important selection for '*Kenner und Liebhaber*' (Experts and amateurs) and can be used as a good manual for classes on the preislamic history of Central Asia. On the other hand, the geographical restrictions of this edition (namely the exclusion of Chinese Sogdian texts) help us to understand the role the Sogdian once played in the formation of nomadic empires in Central and Inner Asia, where Sogdian once enjoyed the status of *lingua franca* between the 4th and 9th centuries CE. This kind of Turco-Iranian cultural interaction played a very important role in the formation of several major empires in this period, therefore Sogdian sources are essential and indispensable for a better understanding of late antique and early medieval steppe history. ■