

On the Silk Road. Trade in the Tarim?

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Background and Issues

When the geographer Ferdinand von Richtofen (1833-1905) first coined the term ‘The Silk Road’ (*die Seidenstrasse*) in 1877 it was in relation to the early period of purported trade between Roman Europe and Han China and referred specifically to the route described by Marinus of Tyre.¹ The interest in historical long-distance trade between Rome, India, and China continued with the studies of scholars such as Warmington (1928) and Raschke (1978), weighted towards the textual sources and concerned with both land and sea routes. Raschke, with an impressive array of footnotes and a dismissive attitude of the importance of artefacts (677), set about challenging several of the oft repeated ‘facts’ about Eurasian trade, among them that the technology of sericulture was guarded by China (622-3), that there was an imbalance of trade between Rome and China owing to the demand for silk (n.256) and, most significantly for this paper, the central idea of the Silk Road itself, significant and sustained long-distance trade in prestige goods.² He

1. Chin 2013, who discusses the plan for a Europe-China railway link. Also see Waugh, 2007. As he points out, Richtofen was also interested in other routes, including by sea.

2. The term ‘Silk Road(s)’ was not immediately adopted, as both Waugh and Chin point out (op. cit.). A brief overview of its increasing usage, starting in Japan, China and Korea and then moving to European adoption, is given in Whitfield 2007. This piece also argues that it has some usefulness as a concept in the current nascent stage of scholarship. Warwick Ball dismisses the concept as a ‘meaningless neologism’ (Ball

argued that the textual evidence suggested only small scale and local trade and that, although monks carried and distributed prestige goods, they were not part of a trade network. He also argued that there was little Chinese state involvement in trade until the Tang period (618-907).³

Raschke accepts that there was prosperity in the oasis kingdoms of Central Asia but argued that this was a product of irrigation agriculture (640-1).⁴ This is an argument also found among scholars questioning the extent of trade in the Roman Empire: 'the bulk of the population was involved with producing food and the main basis of wealth was agriculture. Village settlements were largely self-reliant and the scale of interregional trade was small. The status of traders was low and external trade involved only prestige goods for elite consumption' (Ray 1994: 1).⁵

A recent expression of scepticism in the extent of prestige trade is by Hansen (2012), arguing in relation to the Tarim and China. She concurs with Raschke in arguing that trade was small scale and primarily local (235-7).⁶ She argues that prosperity came from the Chinese state in the payments to their military garrisons (237).⁷

1998). Also see Whitfield 2015: 'Introduction'.

3. Whereas Richtofen had argued that there was Chinese involvement in the Han period.

4. '...the sites of Central Asia had for centuries relied for their prosperity on irrigation agriculture.' ... 'This alone easily explains the wealth and prosperity of this region without assuming an economy based on trade.' (Raschke 1978: 640-1).

5. Summarizing the conclusions of Jones 1974: 30 and Finley 1973.

6. '...not much of a commercial route.' '...trade existed but it was limited.' 'Markets existed in these different towns, but they offered far more local goods for sale than exotic imports.' (Hansen 2012: 235-7). However, it is recognized that this is not in itself an argument against sustained prestige trade. Volume is not directly related to value, and by necessity goods from afar would have cost more. Luxury goods have a smaller market, but a higher value one. See below.

7. 'The massive transfer of wealth from Central China to the northwest, where many soldiers were stationed, accounted for the flourishing Silk Road trade when the Tang dynasty was at its strongest, before 755... these underpinned the region's prosperity.' (Hansen 201: 237). By the eighth century the payments were enormous: 1.8 million bolts of silk to Hexi military command (Arakawa 2013: 250-1). This must certainly have been a factor in the region's prosperity although much of the discussion below involves the pre-Tang period as well when relations with the Tarim were not so stable. Raschke also argues that there were large quantities of silk in the Tarim owing to

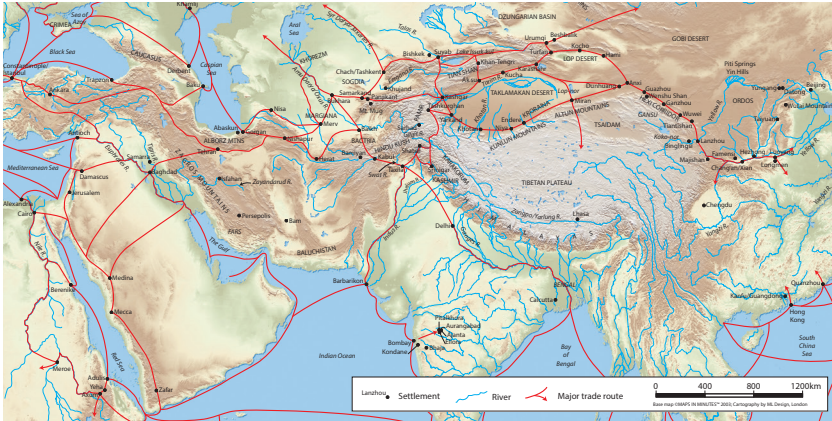


Figure 1: Map showing the region and the lapis mine locations

The early link made by Richtofen between Rome and China with silk as its focus is, in some ways, unfortunate in that it has almost certainly distracted scholars from possibly more fruitful studies, for example, the examination of linked interregional networks trading in a large variety of commodities other than silk.⁸ The absence of direct contact between Rome and China, the focus of Raschke's attack, is not evidence for the lack of interregional trade in prestige goods in Eurasia, yet it is sometimes presented as such owing to this literal linear interpretation of the 'Silk Road' concept. Hansen (2012) also directs her arguments against what she terms this 'conventional view' of the Silk Road.

As I have argued elsewhere (2015), rather than by giving validity to this linear interpretation, one which is easy to refute, it would be more useful to explore a broader definition of the concept. The alternative is to reject the term entirely, as Warwick Ball (2007: 80) suggests, but this would be both difficult, given its common usage, and perhaps counter-productive.⁹ It can remain useful in our present state of scholarship if it is defined clearly yet broadly.

Chinese government policy, in the distribution of which 'plunder and tribute played the primary role' rather than trade. (Raschke 1978: 619)

8. Including trade in human goods as well – slaves appear in many of the extant documents. See the Sogdian contract for a female slave discussed by Frantz Grenet "La Commerce des femmes sur la route de la soie." In Whitfield 2009: 34-5.

9. Hugh Pope (2005) called it 'a romantic deception.' See also Rezakhani 2010.

In recent years, a historical archaeology approach has started to challenge some of the early arguments about the Roman-Indian trade links. Tomber (2008), for example, examines archaeological finds from ports to argue for trade through to the seventh century with active involvement of all the regional players, including the Romans. But her approach, relying heavily on pottery and coin types and their distribution, has yet to be applied to the Tarim states for this period.¹⁰ The rich potential of isotopic analysis is also in its infancy in this area. It would be rash, for example, to dismiss the glass finds on the Tarim as non-Roman, as Raschke does (628), now that there are new techniques available.¹¹

This paper takes a historical archaeology approach, but considering built structures rather than pots or coins, namely the Buddhist temples and shrines of the Tarim region. It is not theoretical but speculative, recognizing the need for further systematic studies in economic history, material culture, archaeology, linguistics, and textual studies and transmissions. It is intended to build on studies — such as that of de la Vaissière (2005) — that have sought to change the geographical focus of the ‘Silk Road’ debate from the Europe-China east-west linear axis to

10. There is an extensive study of the bronze age and early iron age by Han Jianye (2007 韩建业 《新疆的青铜时代和早期铁器时代文化》，文物出版社，DSHKX 1986/4, 78–82); Wang Binghua 王炳华: “Xinjiang chutu caitao” 新疆出土彩陶.; Mu Shunying 穆舜英 and Qi Xiaoshan 祁小山: Xinjiang caitao 新疆彩陶. Beijing: Wenwuchubanshe 1998. 郭物 新疆史前晚期社会的考古学研究

Tomber also makes use of evidence from coins, as does Helen Wang’s excellent study and comprehensive catalogue (Wang 2004) and a more recent collection of articles (Hansen and Wang 2013). Wang focuses on the use of coins and other money in the Tarim rather than what the distribution of coins can tell about the movement of peoples and her catalogue remains to be fully exploited in an approach such as Tomber’s.

11. Among his arguments is that the glasswares found are too poor quality to justify their trade over a long-distance. However, this is to assume parity of value across cultures. The trade of Chinese porcelain that would have been considered second-rate in China but was highly prized in Europe shows the dangers in this. Certain glasswares found in Northwest China are now accepted as Mediterranean (see Whitfield 2009: 80-3). There is also evidence of glass being sent by sea, as in the Hellenistic bowl found in a ca. first century BC tomb near Guangdong in Southern China (Whitfield 2009: 81 where it is mistakenly listed as Roman, See also Whitfield 2017: Chapter 2). There is also evidence, as Raschke suggests, of local and regional production, such as Sasanian glass. As ever, the picture is complex.

a Central Asian interregional hub with the north-south networks also playing an important role. Although not addressing the debate prompted by a World Systems approach as to the nature of pre-thirteenth century BC world systems, it notes that the Tarim is usually a void on the map in these debates.¹² As I have explored elsewhere (2016), there is certainly, in Beaujard's terms, a 'sphere of interaction.'¹³ The primary intention of this paper is to argue that the weight of material and textual evidence is still best explained by sustained interregional trade in high-value goods and that this explanation cannot be dismissed without more compelling and contrary evidence. The archaeological remains have been chosen because, although inevitably partial, they are plentiful, spread throughout the region, and well documented, thanks to the early explorers and more recent archaeology.¹⁴ Although there remains little consensus about dating, this disagreement is not pertinent to the main argument of this paper.¹⁵ This paper is also focused on interregional trade between the Tarim and lands to its west, rather than with China to its east — the latter the main focus of Raschke and Hansen.

The importance of Chinese traditional textual sources is recognized. However, given that, as Holcombe notes, 'three subjects that mainstream traditional Chinese historians seldom addressed were trade, Buddhism and foreigners' (1999: 285), their relevance to this discussion is of limited value. Further evidence is required in order to understand the extent of any distortion and make the necessary adjustments to the Chinese historiographical lens. Other texts, such as inscriptions and the Buddhist biographies and manuscripts in the many languages of the Tarim, are also an important source.¹⁶

12. It might be worth considering the Tarim at different periods in terms of Oka's TSM theory, as discussed in this volume.

13. Beaujard 2010: 'I speak of spheres of interaction when exchanges within an area do not produce a significant transregional division of labor (unlike a world-system).' (9, n.21) and also see his paper in this volume.

14. Rhie 2007-10 for an overview and bibliographies of the early explorers. New finds continue to be made. See, for example, the temples at Domoko (Wu 2013).

15. Undoubtedly, there were chronological and regional variations and developments through the Tarim regarding interaction in the first millennium, and one of the arguments of this paper is that studies of these need to be made before there can be any firm conclusions.

16. See Neelis 1997, Hartmann 2004, McRae and Nattier 2012 for important

The Material Evidence 1: Buddhist Shrines of the Tarim

The Tarim Basin, about twice the size of Sweden, covers an area larger than any European country apart from Russia. But much of Tarim is uninhabitable desert and settlements are located on the northern and southern edges of the Taklamakan where meltwater from the mountains creates rich oases. During the first millennium AD, the major oases were the capitals of small kingdoms. They were culturally, linguistically and politically distinct, although all subject to periodic incursions and control by the empires on their peripheries, the Kushan, Chinese, Tibetan, and Turkic (and others thereafter). The kingdoms were centered on Kashgar (Shule), Khotan, the eastern Taklamakan and Lop Desert (Kroraina), Turfan, Korla, and Kucha.¹⁷

The area is rich in archaeology owing to two factors. Firstly, many of the ancient settlements, especially in the south, were abandoned over time probably owing to changing watercourses making them unviable. The abandoned structures were covered by the desert sands; new settlements were built elsewhere thus ensuring the originals were not built over or pillaged for materials. Secondly, the arid nature of the desert enabled preservation of organic materials. However, in the north, the ancient sites are closer to newer settlements and have suffered more from looting and reuse of their material for building and agriculture. Throughout the regions, the relic chambers of stupas have all been broken into and almost the only remaining finds are votive offerings of manuscript fragments.¹⁸ The scouring effects of the wind and sand along with flash floods have also destroyed much. For archaeologists, there is the difficulty of excavating and dating in sand. In addition, many

discussions on interregional interactions concentrating on inscriptions and manuscripts.

17. Scholarship in this area is in its infancy: none of the kingdoms, for example, is the subject of an historical monograph (Zhang and Rong's history of Khotan (1993) follows Rémusat 1820 in being more a compilation of historical sources). For an overview of most of these kingdoms, their archaeology and history, see Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004 and Hansen 2012.

18. Stein suggests the robberies took place by the sixteenth century based on the sixteenth-century records of Muzā Haider, (Stein 1907: 82). He also notes the remains of birds' nests in one of the robbers' tunnels into a Krorainic stupa strongly suggesting the robbery was effected when there were still birds in the area, certainly pre-sixteenth century (Stein 1921: 390).

sites almost certainly await sifts in the dunes to be discovered. However, there remain over forty stupas discovered to date and fifteen cave temple sites, the former found in all the Taklamakan kingdoms, the latter almost exclusively in the northern kingdoms.¹⁹

The stupa, probably originating in India in about the third century BC, was a funerary mound covering relics of the Buddha or his disciples. Its function widened over the course of the following centuries: some cover objects used by the Buddha or his disciples, others commemorate actions or events in the life of the Buddha and his disciples, while still others symbolize aspects of Buddhist theology or are built as shrines. In all cases, however, the stupa was a focus for ritual, including circumambulation. Stupas often occur together in groups and were also incorporated into Buddhist monasteries and cave temples.

The transmission and development of the stupa in the Tarim is a topic I have discussed elsewhere (2016) and so I will only summarize the conclusions here. In Gandhāra and Central Asia starting from the second or first century BC but especially from the first few centuries AD, a development of the stupa can be observed from its classical Indian form – a hemispherical dome on a circular base – into a variety of diverse and more complex forms. The stupa was heightened, both by being placed on bases, usually square and increasingly multistoried, and by the verticalization of the dome from a hemisphere into a parabolic or egg shape. It also becomes more massive and complex, with the bases becoming taller and more adorned and ornamented.

Some of these developments took place progressively and some seemingly in parallel and all emerged over the course of a few centuries across Gandhāra and Central Asia. Some seem clearly to be based on textual authority. For example, Kanishka's stupa at Shāh-jī kī Dherī in the Peshawar Valley, Gandhāra, Top-i-Rustam in Balkh, Afghanistan and the Bhamala stupa at Taxila all show a development of the original square base into a cruciform shape owing to the addition of staircases protruding out from the base on each side. This follows a scriptural description found in the third-century *Divyāvadāna* that describes a stupa as having four staircases, three platforms, an egg-like dome, as well as the other usual elements.²⁰

19. These are estimates based on archaeological reports. I am including cave temples as far east as Dunhuang, but not others further east in the Hexi corridor.

20. Rhie 2007-10: Vol. 1: 254.



Figure 2: *Stupa M.III. at Miran with robbers hole. Photographer: Vic Swift. The British Library, Photo 1187/2(167).*



Figure 3: *One of the stupas at Subashi, on the east bank. Photographer John Falconer. The British Library, Photo 1125/16(671).*

The stupas in the Tarim show a similar diversity of forms over the same period, starting from the classical type on a circular base, such as at Topa Tim near Kashgar and shrines M.III. and M.V. at Miran (Kroraina), through to the four-staircase form, seen at Rawak in Khotan, and the tower stupas at Turfan (Gaochang, Sirkip) and Subashi in Kucha (Fig. 2, Fig 3.). Stein noted the interregional similarities on his first expedition, particularly in relation to the three-story square-based form: ‘The identity of this feature only helps to emphasize still more the close agreement which exists in regard to general architectural arrangement between all the Turkestan stupas examined by me and the corresponding structures extant in the Kabul valley and the Indian north-west frontier’ (1907: 83).²¹

Architectural diffusion

Architectural diffusion requires a certain level of infrastructure in the receiving cultures and transmission must always involve complexity.²² Both pragmatic and cultural memory might be involved in transmitting architectural styles.²³ Building descriptions found in textual sources, such as the one discussed above, and the emulation of paintings and artefacts could also have played a role.²⁴ While traditional stupas are not

21. An argument explored by Buffler 2009. The possible influence of Zoroastrian fire temples in the development of the tower stupa has also been suggested. See Dallapiccola 1980: 46 for a discussion.

22. For a recent set of papers concerning the mechanics of interaction for both the portable and the monumental in the late medieval world see Grossman and Walker 2012.

23. Grossman discusses memory in the context of buildings of the Crusader Mediterranean. She refers to the work of Carruthers on the nature of memory in the European medieval world (Grossman 2012, Carruthers 1998). Chen has discussed the building of stupas as an act of ‘continuity with the past’ and also looked at communal memory and cultural memory in Buddhist historiography and in the construction of ordination platforms (Chen 2007).

24. In a different context, Redford considers how portable models of architecture, e.g. ceramics, ‘established an intercultural receptivity to large scale architectural forms and the reproduction of these architectural models in new locales.’ (Redford 2012 and quotation from Grossman and Walker 2012: 9). Stupa models in clay and wood were found in considerable numbers in the Tarim stupas, seemingly as votive offerings as found elsewhere but they might also have a prior role (For some examples see Stein

particularly complex architecturally, the builders would also have had to gain knowledge of working with earth and brick to form monumental structures.²⁵ Apart from builders and patrons, the construction of a stupa would also have involved the support of the local authorities and the community.²⁶

Little study has been made of any of the logistics of architecture in the Tarim.²⁷ There were settlements here since at least 2000 BC with sophisticated grave culture (using wood) but little above ground architecture is extant or studied.²⁸ From the second/first centuries BC, there were walls, beacon towers, and other military buildings built by the Chinese armies with tamped earth, tamarisk, reeds and wood for strengthening, sun-dried bricks, and mud plaster.²⁹ Stone is not readily available although used for steppe tombs to the north of the Tianshan and Chinese tombs in the east. It is reasonable to assume that local builders were accustomed to using reinforced tamped earth and sun-dried bricks for large structures, but the stupa is a new and more complex style of building.³⁰ Their emergence and number strongly suggests that those with knowledge of stupas – both how to build them and their purpose — moved into this region and that Buddhism was established in some of these early Silk Road kingdoms by the first few centuries AD.³¹ Even if some of the early patrons were not local, shrines are not built without a community to maintain and worship at them (Fig. 4).³² Faxian, for

1921: 158, 161, 931, 1105, etc.).

25. Oliveiri sees them as ‘more sculptures than buildings’ but argues that their size leads to complexity (2014: 337).

26. For a brief discussion of this and review of previous studies see Olivieri 2014: 337-9.

27. While Rhie discusses the buildings from a stylistic and art historical point of view she does not cover building practices, transmissions or economics.

28. Apart from graves, the remains of tamped earth and brick city walls are the main remains found to date.

29. They could have made use of local builders and laborers, including conscripts from local populations.

30. There is seemingly little standardization of brick size across the extant structures. Stein noted the brick sizes of all the structures he excavated, including the stupas, and made a general hypothesis about the larger bricks denoting earlier buildings.

31. Shimada discusses the role of nuns and monks in supervising building works in India (2013: 158-159)

32. There is evidence of an influx of settlers in the third century from Gandhara



Figure 4: Detail of a large silk piece found on the Miran M.III. stupa showing one of the dedications in Gandhari in kharosthi script. The British Library, Or.8212/190.

example, who travelled from AD 399-414, mentions that a community of a thousand monks and their disciples were associated with a stupa holding a Buddha tooth relic.³³

Although there is little evidence of the inspiration and process of building in the Tarim, there is evidence of the involvement of monks in Buddhist architectural transmission.³⁴ The Chinese *Biographies*

bringing their language and script with them and settling in Kroraina, site of some of the earliest stupas (Zürcher 2012). The manuscripts in Gāndhārī written in Kharoṣṭhī script often include Indian names, notably those on a length of silk found on a stupa in Miran, seemingly as an offering (Stein 1921: 495 - where he also identifies Iranian names on this piece).

33. Probably in Skardu. (Legge 1965: 17-18).

34. Some manuscripts from the Tarim, Dunhuang, and China concern the accounts for building caves and monasteries and mention the different workmen involved such as, for example, in AD 775 in China: earth movers, masons, carpenters, squarers, roofers, door and window makers, plasterers, brickmakers and temporary laborers (Gernet 1995: 18-9). See also his discussion on construction and its effects on the community (17).

of *Eminent Monks* devotes a chapter to monks who gain merit, many through building stupas.³⁵ Chen discusses the building of an ordination platform in AD 754 in Tōdai-ji, Kyoto, with the emperor as patron and a monk, Gaijin, as architect. Gaijin designed it after an ordination platform he had seen in the Chinese capital Chang'an (present-day Xian), that of Daoxuan. Moreover, Gaijin recorded that he also had Daoxuan's text *Illustrated Scripture on the Ordination Platform* (Chen 2007: 101-2). The Chinese monks who travelled in the Tarim reported several accounts of local stupas being built on the demand of monks from foreign lands, such as one near Khotan patronized by the king.³⁶ There is also the case of Xuanzang who, on his return to Chang'an in 645, requested the building of a stupa in Chang'an (also with imperial patronage) modelled on that of King Kanishka (Wong 2012). These examples show that, in some cases at least, monks acted as the transmitters and designers of new architectural forms and that these forms were intended to act as a link with an existing tradition in another region.³⁷

The emergence of new forms of growing complexity of the stupas in the Tarim and their stylistic affinity to those being built across the mountains to the west suggest multiple active and sustained dialogues between the Gandharan and Bactrian communities and large, local Buddhist communities. They also suggest Buddhist communities in the region were receptive to new styles of stupas, presumably described by travelers or texts or shown in models or paintings. The evidence from the archaeological remains of sizeable and active Buddhist communities is supported by textual sources. A third century Chinese history records a thousand Buddhist stupas and temples in the ancient city of Kucha.³⁸ The account of Buddhist activity in Khotan by Faxian records tens of thousands of monks, great monasteries, gold and silver statues, and the existence of small stupas in front of the residents' doors (Legge 1965: 16-17). It is recorded that three thousand Buddhist monks moved from

35. Mentioned by Kieschnick (2003: 161). Although, as Kieschnick also points out, judging by the inscriptions on extant objects in China, the majority of donors were lay people (162). See also Schopen 2006 and Shimada 2013, who discusses the range of donors to stupas, described them as 'The Architecture of Collective Patronage.' (163).

36. Liu 1997: 120 quoting from Songyun's travels. See below n.63.

37. And, in some cases, another time – a link with the past, as discussed by Chen 2007. Kieschnick discusses the role of Buddhists in bridge building (2003: 203ff).

38. *Jinshu* (History of the Jin).

the Tarim to settle under the Northern Wei (386-535).³⁹ The continued transmission and translation in local languages of Buddhist texts also supports the strength and continuance of these interregional links.⁴⁰

Buddhism and merchants in the Tarim

Although some scholars might question the timings of the growth of Buddhism, there is a consensus that by the third and fourth centuries Buddhism was established and flourishing in the Tarim kingdoms.⁴¹ This presence is supported by the textual evidence – even the Buddhist-blind Chinese histories — the archaeology, art, and architecture. They all point to a large Buddhist population with the surplus wealth that enabled patronage to build and maintain the stupas. There are two issues that will be discussed first, namely the motivation and means for Buddhists to travel across the Pamirs: why and how Buddhists traveled through the Tarim.

One answer to the question “why?” is relatively straightforward: namely, as missionaries. Buddhist missionary activities were given impetus and state sanction under King Aśoka (304–232 BC), who patronized Buddhism after his defeat of Kalinga and vowed to disseminate his faith throughout the world. According to tradition he sent his son and daughter to Sri Lanka and prominent monks to then Afghanistan, to west Asia and the near east, to East Asia and Southeast Asia. Inscriptions above cave temples in Sri Lanka support the arrival of Buddhism in this period. From the earliest period, therefore, Buddhism was a proselytizing faith with a precedent for long-distance travel.

There is no evidence for the arrival of Buddhism in the Tarim during King Aśoka’s reign, and the impetus and conditions for this propagation eastwards seem to have occurred under the Kushan Empire (first to fourth

39. Holcombe 1999: 288, citing *Fozu tongji*.

40. For references see above n.16.

41. Zürcher, for example, claims that the Tarim prior to the third century BC was a Buddhist wasteland, but does not dispute the influence of Buddhism after this date. He sees a major catalyst being the influx of a Gāndhārī speaking population at this time – evidenced by the use of Gāndhārī written in Kharoṣṭhī for the administrative documents discovered in Kroraina (Zürcher 2012). Walter, in contrast, sees Buddhism as taking hold in Kucha from the first century AD and being one of the primary factors in the conversion of China from the third century (Walter 1998).

century AD).⁴² The Kushans had close links with the kingdom of Shule at Kashgar and their influence is seen across to Khotan and Kroraina.⁴³ The Kushan rulers, although probably not Buddhists themselves, were supportive of the religion and from the start patronized the building of stupas, notably that of Shāh-jī kī Dherī near Peshawar by Kanishka I (Dobbins 1971). Buddhist monks could take advantage of the security enabled by the diplomatic and military links across the Pamirs by the Kushan to spread their message eastwards to the Tarim states.⁴⁴ As Buddhism became established, monks and lay-believers traveled for other reasons: for pilgrimage, to source new texts, and to learn from teachers.⁴⁵

This raises the second question: how were the Buddhist missionaries supported as they moved into and across the Tarim?

By this time, Buddhism had developed monasticism in which, in theory, nuns and monks rejected worldly goods and were reliant on donations from lay supporters.⁴⁶ The supporters acquired religious merit

42. Lam 2013. He points out that one reason for the success of Buddhism was its lack of interference in political affairs which ‘promoted a non-threatening image of Buddhism in the eyes of the military and political elite.’ (441).

43. And into China – for example, the family of the Kushan lay Buddhist Zhi Qian (fl. 222-c.253) is reported to have moved to China two generations before he became influential at the court of the Three Kingdoms Wu (Holcombe 1999: 286). The issuing of coins in Kroraina with legends in the language and script used in Gandhāra supports the importance of the links (Cribb 1984).

44. Warder suggest that it was adherents of the Darmaguptaka sect that led this, as cited by Mukherjee (1996: 14-15.) He argues that Gāndhārī was the language of the transmission, also used in Kroraina in the southern Tarim and written in Kharoṣṭhī script. However, most of the documents discovered to date are administrative archives and not Buddhist.

45. The movement was increasingly multi-directional, so monks from China, for example, travelled through the Tarim en route to India, bringing back with them not only texts and objects, but memories of Buddhist structures. Most famously, as mentioned above, the seventh-century Chinese monk, Xuanzang, on his return to China asked the emperor to build a stupa in the capital in the style of that of King Kaniskha (Wong 2012).

46. For discussions on early Buddhist monasticism in India, see Schopen 2004, especially Chapter II, where he discusses some of the ambiguities of this relationship, and Shimada 2013: 149-155 where he discusses the development of this idea of

that could be shared with others. From the start, merchants and rulers were both courted by Buddhist communities. In return for donations, they would be offered safe travels and refuge en route, along with status and legitimacy. ‘Buddhism legitimated private commercial wealth as a vehicle for serving sacred needs through generous donations, and Buddhism lubricated foreign exchange by overcoming local prejudice with a radically more cosmopolitan, international perspective’ (Holcombe 1999: 280).⁴⁷ This link is confirmed in early Buddhist literature, including the story of the Buddha’s first two lay disciples, Trapusa and Bhalika, both merchants. They received relics of the Buddha’s hair and nails to be enshrined in stupas in their home countries.

The lack of a desire to interfere in the management of political authority by the Buddhist community in this period undoubtedly helped this cosmopolitan perspective: believers looked to creating a Buddhist civilization that transcended state boundaries. This ‘portability across cultures’ undoubtedly provided some security against political change: Buddhism continued to grow in Central Asia despite the lack of support by many of the regimes (Lam 2013: 444).⁴⁸ The dependence, or otherwise, of Buddhism on the apparatus of states and, by extension, the importance of state apparatus in inter-regional cultural transmission is worth further discussion, although beyond the scope of this paper.

But the close link with merchants was a factor in the success of this interregional growth (Neelis 1997). The Buddha was known as the ‘Great caravan leader’ (*mahasarthavaha*) for his role in protecting and leading followers from the world of *samsāra* to the world of enlightenment. The Buddhist teacher Nagasena explains to King Menander of Bactria that the Buddha ‘is like a caravan owner to men in that he brings them beyond the sandy desert of rebirths.’ (Rhys-Davids 1890-4: 274).⁴⁹ Xinru Liu

patronage. See also Shaw 2011 and Gernet 1995 for practices in the Tarim and China.

47. Shimada, however, questions the role of rulers in patronage in early Buddhism (2013: 160-163). See also Lam 2013 for a discussion of the role of the Kushan kings.

48. It has been argued that, after the Kushan, there was another florescence of Buddhism in Central Asia under the Hephthalite rule. The Hephthalites were not Buddhist but, it is argued, the unification and stability they brought to the region enabled a new spread of Buddhism, when it reached as far as Merv in Margiana. (Gernet 2002).

49. Rhys-Davids 1890-4: 274. Cited by Neelis in “Buddhism and Trade” online at <https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/exhibit/religion/buddhism/buddhism.html>, also see Neelis 2013.

observes that ‘Abundant experience with long-distance trade provided the inspiration for these images of the Buddha as a guide for travelers and merchants.’ (1997: 114–5). The bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara became the patron saint of sea-faring merchants and appears in depictions of Chapter 25 of *The Lotus Sutra* on the cave walls at Dunhuang, for example, protecting merchants traveling by land and sea from bandits and sea monsters respectively.

Ray (1994) and Holcombe (1999) have shown the links between trade and the spread of Buddhism across India and to Southeast Asia and Japan respectively.⁵⁰ This research is currently being extended by the Buddhist Maritime Project.⁵¹ This endeavor involves the Archaeological Survey of India working with scholars to map the clusters of monasteries found around trade ports and their hinterland.

The relationship with Buddhism went further than traveling companions. Scholars have noted the involvement of Buddhism in pawnbroking, usury, and investment of wealth.⁵² Although monastic rules did not allow private wealth, this rule was clearly sidestepped by many: Holcombe gives an example of a Chinese official who extorted several million cash (copper coins) from one monk (1999: 282). There are also numerous manuscripts from the Tarim where monks are involved in contracts. As Gernet points out, ‘donation and usury—two conflicting practices—became the two principal sources of the Buddhist communities’ wealth.’ (1995: 163). He cites a passage from the *Sarvāstivāda Vinaya* to show how some goods were used as endowments with the interest going to the Buddhist community:

‘The merchants of Vaisali sold stupa property for profit in order to pay homage to the stupa. These merchants, about to depart to distant countries in order to enrich themselves, had goods belonging to the stupa in their possession. They said to the bhikṣu: “Reverends, this stupa property you ought to use to earn

50. Ray notes that Buddhist institutions were ‘ideally suited to act as pioneers in newly settled area but also to provide an identity for and cohesiveness for trading groups.’ (1994: 5)

51. Led by Professor Lewis Lancaster working with the Archaeological Survey of India. See http://youtu.be/liE_AHvFivM

52. See Schopen 2004: 29-30, quoting a saying of the Buddha on how to make a loan and how to write a written loan contract. Also see Gernet 1995: 153ff.

interest to pay homage to the stupa.” The Buddha declared: “I authorize the lay servants of the monastery as well as lay believers to draw interest from the property of the stupa in order to pay homage to them.’(163 n. 33)⁵³

Therefore, throughout south and Southeast Asia we see a symbiotic link between Buddhists and merchants, enabling both the spread of Buddhism and the growth of trade through this region. If there were merchants making the journey by land through Kushan to the Tarim kingdoms, then this pattern of behavior should have been continued, unless it were not possible. Indeed some textual sources also show a link between the Buddhists with merchants and rulers in this area. For example, as mentioned above, Songyun records the local story about the founding of Buddhism in Khotan when a merchant introduced a monk to the king. The monk subsequently built a stupa with the king’s patronage.⁵⁴ In addition, Walter (1998: 5) and Ghose (2008: 13) discuss the case of Kucha where the ruling elite was the first to absorb and propagate Buddhism. The king of Kucha is reported to have made a golden throne for Kumārajīva and the kings from afar offered to prostrate themselves to enable him to climb up when they came to the ceremony for the initiation of his former teacher into Buddhism (Ghose 2008: 13).

Scholars do not dispute the existence of traders in the Tarim. The question lies as to whether this trade was primarily small-scale and local, or whether it included sustained interregional prestige trade.⁵⁵ There is evidence for such trade between the Tarim and China for a period before the Silk Road, seen in the Chinese demand for Khotanese jade and its wide-spread use throughout the kingdoms of pre-unified China.⁵⁶ However, there is little evidence to support similar sustained

53. Shimada gives other examples of such endowments (2013: 156).

54. Liu 1997: 120 quoting from Songyun’s travels. Of course, such stories might not accurately reflect local conditions but might be popular stories adapted from India and applied in a Central Asian setting.

55. Qualifying the scale of trade is very difficult. Hansen argues that ‘the actual volume of trade was small’, using as an example a document mentioned that a merchant had two camels, four cattle and a donkey. However, a camel load of wool is very different in value from a camel load of musk. Volume is only part of the story and one always relatively restricted by land travel.

56. Sherratt 2006: 38; Mallory and Mair 2008: 4. Legends in later Tibetan and Chinese sources tell that Khotan was founded during the reign of King Aśoka (ca. 272-

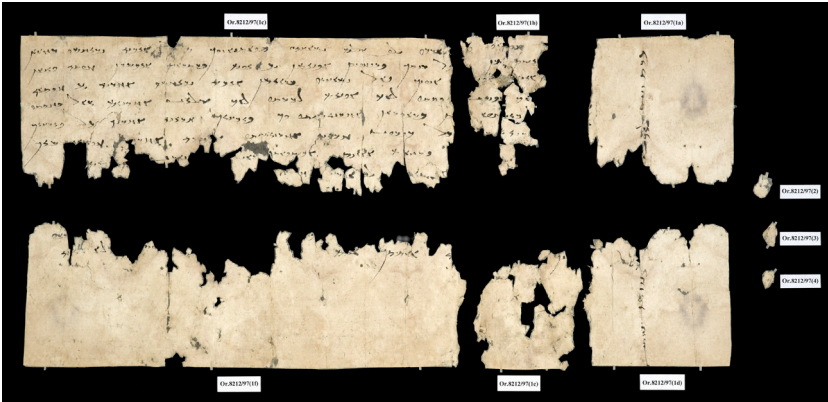


Figure 5: *The Sogdian letter from AD 313-4 mentioning silk. The British Library, Or.8212/97.*

trade between the Tarim and its other neighbors across the Tarim before the Silk Road period.⁵⁷ In terms of those leading the trade, much recent scholarship has concentrated on the role of the Sogdians.⁵⁸ There is also evidence for the presence of other traders, such as Jewish Radhanites, Persians, Indians, and other Central Asians, but Sogdians are believed to have been dominant in the Tarim region.⁵⁹

31 BC) in India. The earliest dated artefacts are coins from the first century AD with legends in both Kharoṣṭhī and Chinese (see Wang 2004 and Cribb 1984). Awaiting a systematic study on this but it is found in different cultures in a pre-united Central Asia, for example, in use of burial suits in southern kingdoms in China (Lin 2012).

57. Although there were links with neighbours across the Tianshan to the steppe, as evidenced by burial goods, the extent of these and the involved of trade has yet to be fully explored.

58. See especially de la Vaissière 2005.

59. de la Vaissière 2005: 180-1 He also considers Persian and Jewish merchants — the former are also mentioned as travelling with the Sogdians although he suggests that the Persians mainly controlled the routes west, the common boundary being Merv (just as there might have been a boundary of interest with Indian traders at Shaital). The evidence for Buddhism at Merv has been placed variously from the second century to the fifth century, although latter is now generally accepted (Callieri 1996 and de la Vaissière 2005: 78). Parthians and others are mentioned as traders by the Chinese: ‘Some of the inhabitants are merchants who travel by carts or boats to neighbouring countries, sometimes journeying several thousand li. The coins of the country are made of silver and bear the face of the king.’ (*Shiji* 123: 3162, trans. Watson 1958: 234).

Although evidence for Buddhism in Sogdia at this time is disputed, Sogdian merchants would have been in regular contact with Buddhist culture through their southern routes to the borders of India.⁶⁰ Whether they travelled into India or traded with Indian merchants on the frontier is not relevant, they would have passed through Buddhist lands on their way and encountered Buddhism. Some of the other merchants travelling with them seem to have been Buddhist.⁶¹ In addition, the Buddhist Sogdians living outside Sogdia might also have attached themselves to the Sogdian merchants while travelling through the Tarim.⁶² Information about several such figures exists because of their importance in spreading Buddhism in China.⁶³ De la Vaissière (2005) hypothesizes that their importance might have been due to the fact that such monks were from merchant families and were more inclined to journey into the Tarim. While there is little evidence of anti-Buddhist sentiment in Sogdian society, the question remains as to whether they would have supported Buddhist monks wishing to travel with them either as protectors, patrons or both. They might have been more inclined to support fellow Sogdians. There is also evidence of merchants who converted to Buddhism, such as An Xuan. He arrived in Luoyang in Central China in AD 181 as a merchant and there became a monk.⁶⁴

Although nowhere near conclusive for support and patronage, there is no evidence that merchants from Sogdia, sometimes traveling with merchants who were Buddhist, would have shunned the company of Buddhist monks who wished to travel with them to spread their message. It is a potential scenario although far from proven.⁶⁵

60. Walter (2006) and Compareti (2008) argue for Buddhism in Sogdia from the Kushan period. De la Vaissière argues there is no evidence until the seventh century and that the Buddhist Sogdians mentioned in the Chinese records were from families who had moved to India and elsewhere (de la Vaissière 2005: 77-9).

61. For example, de la Vaissière (2005: 180) quotes a Chinese document naming a Tocharian called 'Fuyan' which he tentatively translates as 'favour of Buddha.'

62. 'in precisely those regions where great commerce and diffusion of Buddhism overlapped.' (de la Vaissière 2005: 77).

63. Their role was briefly discussed by Zürcher 1995: 23-4 who mentioned their language skills, a point picked up by de la Vaissière in relation to the Sogdian émigrés: 'These monks learned the Indian languages in the emigration, and this enabled them to translate the Buddhist texts into Chinese.' (2005: 78). The Sogdians are listed by Walter (2006: 64-6).

64. Zürcher 1972: 1, 23. An Xuan was probably a Parthian.

65. Of course, monks might also have travelled with diplomatic missions, although

There is also the question of support and patronage when monks arrived in local towns. Many of the monks probably travelled no further than the Tarim, settling down there or at least spending sustained periods in the local communities.⁶⁶ In the early days before there were large monastic communities, the monks would have required support. In South and Southeast Asia, rich and influential merchants introduced monks to local rulers, leading to patronage. As discussed above, there is certainly evidence of early links between Buddhism and the ruling elite. While more research is required the paucity of sources will probably mean that any conclusions remain speculative and to some extent based on models from Buddhist expansion elsewhere.

The Sogdians are mentioned as early as in an inscription of Darius the Great as the source of semi-precious stones such as lapis lazuli. This fact brings us to the second part of the material culture under consideration, the existence of extensive areas of Buddhist paintings in both stupas and cave temples and the materials required for their production.

The Material Evidence 2: Paintings of the Tarim

Liu has argued that the role of merchants for Buddhists was more than as patrons and protectors, that they were also essential for the supply of the goods required for the practice of Buddhism (1997 and 2009). Specifically, she argues that demand for the seven Buddhist treasures (*saptaratna*) stimulated long-distance trade between Northwestern India, Central Asia, and China.⁶⁷

The seven treasures, or jewels, were materials high in value but low in volume, such as gold, silver, crystal, lapis lazuli, carnelian, coral, and pearls. Such materials are intrinsically valuable and suitable for long-distance trade by land, and Liu suggests that their Buddhist ritual value may have

these were also often linked to trade and included merchants.

66. For example, Dharmagupta who reached Changan in 590 had lived for two years in Shule (Kashgar) and then spent seven years to reach Chang'an, so must have also spent considerable periods in residence at one of more of the other Tarim kingdoms. He travelled along the northern Taklamakan, through Kucha, Karashar, Turfan, and Hami. Dharmagupta is recorded in Chinese sources because he reached China, but there were potentially many more monks who decided to settle in the Tarim and whose names do not appear in any extant sources.

67. Lam questions the role of the Seven Treasures (2013: 443).

augmented their economic as well as their spiritual worth. Since Buddhist devotees sought these items as suitable donations, the links between long-distance trade and Buddhist monastic networks were strengthened. This created and sustained the demand for these commodities between India and China during the first to the fifth centuries AD.⁶⁸ The processes of expanding lucrative long-distance trade networks and the long-distance transmission of Buddhism were mutually reinforced.

The seven treasures are found in the reliquary chambers of stupas and were used as offerings and for decoration of stupas. The Tarim stupas contained relic chambers, as did their Gandharan and Bactrian prototypes, but all the former had been robbed before their excavation in the early twentieth century. However, the contents of relic chambers in Western Central Asia and the Famen Temple in China make it a reasonable assumption that these stupas, especially the monumental structures such as Rawak, would have contained high value goods brought from a distance, including the relics housed in caskets made of the seven treasures and wrapped in fine silk (Fig. 6).⁶⁹ Liu's argument could be extended in order to explore the materials required for the paintings in stupas and in particular, in cave temples which survive in large numbers in this region.

Stupas with ambulatories, such as in the Tarim sites of Miran and Keriya, can be considered as simple temples. The ambulatories of stupas and temple walls incorporated wall paintings, as seen, for example, at stupas in Miran and at temple sites in Keriya and Khotan.⁷⁰ Most of these are fragmentary, but large areas of wall paintings survive in the cave temples of the Tarim and Hexi.⁷¹ In the Tarim, the sites are predominantly

68. Liu focuses on China and India and does not specially address the Tarim region.

69. Raschke suggests that monks might have brought these with them. Evidence for patronage and the import of items from elsewhere is found at other sites, such as Dunhuang and Famen Temple. It is also plausible that smaller stupas contained lower value items, such as parts of manuscript sutras, for example.

70. See Stein 1921: 493ff. for a discussion of the murals at Miran. Many new murals are being discovered in temples, such as at Dandan-Uliq (Zhang et al 2008) and Domoko.

71. The interest in cave temples here is primarily concerned with the logistics of their decoration rather than their architectural or artistic influences. I have covered the former elsewhere (Whitfield 2016) and will not repeat my findings here. There are numerous studies approaching the cave paintings from an art historical viewpoint, as well as a growing body of excellent conservation studies.



Figure 6: *The stupa at Rawak, showing layered base and remains of the stairs. The British Library, Photo 1187/2(255).*



Figure 7: *Detail of paintings on the south wall of Cave 45 at Dunhuang Mogao showing merchants attacked by bandit and calling on the help of the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. Courtesy of the Dunhuang Academy.*



Figure 8: *Buddhist cave site at Kizil, Photographer Vic Swift. The British Library, Photo 392/34(236)*

in the north, probably dictated by the topography with water-cut gorges suitable for cave excavation close to the places of population, such as near Kucha and Turfan. The sites of population in the south, such as Khotan and Kroraina, were more distant from mountains and the mountains more barren making sites unsustainable. The sites continue along the Hexi corridor, notably at Dunhuang, Maijishan and Binglingsi, into Northern and Central China. Yungang (mid to late fifth century) and Longmen (late fifth and early sixth century) are the most renowned examples, both built under the patronage of the Tuoba rulers of the Northern Wei.

The caves in India, Central Asia and the Tarim were richly decorated with paintings and sculptures. The paintings covered all the walls and ceilings, representing a considerable area. For example, it is estimated that the paintings in the Dunhuang Mogao caves in the Hexi corridor just to the east of the Tarim cover 45,000 m² (Fig. 7) and those at Kizil (Fig. 8), one of the fourteen cave sites in the region, originally covered 10,000 m².⁷² These are produced in fresco-secco, painted onto dry plastered walls.⁷³

72. The remains of cave 85 at Dunhuang, classified as a large cave, comprise about 350 m² of wall paintings, although the cave is missing part of its antechamber (Wong and Agnew 2013: 85). When complete, this is comparable to the Sistine Chapel ceiling, at about 500 m².

73. For a discussion of murals across a wider Silk Road area, including West Asia, see

Both inorganic and organic pigments were used, although there was regional variation. The caves in Kucha, for example, show red from vermilion and red ochre, green from copper minerals such as atacamite, and gypsum for white (Li 2010: 49). From Dunhuang, all of these pigments were used in addition to azurite, minium, other copper compounds, and organic compounds such as indigoid, lac, and various yellows (Wong and Agnew 2013: 169-177).⁷⁴

Some of the sources for the pigments were not available locally and several were from mines in the western Tianshan and the Hindu Kush.⁷⁵ Notable is lapis lazuli which we see used in caves from Ajanta and elsewhere in India, through to Bamiyan and then to Kucha, Dunhuang, and Maijishan (Gettens 1938; Li 2010: 49-50; Chandra Set 2010; Artioli et al. 2008). Lapis was mined in what is now eastern Afghanistan and was exported westwards from an early date, although there is little evidence of pre-Silk Road use in the Tarim or China.⁷⁶ The ‘extravagant use’ of a pigment well-known in Europe as being more valuable than gold, immediately struck the German archaeologists who subsequently removed many of the paintings from Kizil.⁷⁷ There is plentiful evidence

Yamauchi et al. 2007.

74. This includes a discussion on the issues of identifying organic colorants. See also Appendix 13.A in this volume (“Literary Evidence of the Use of Organic Colorants in Chinese Painting During the Tang Dynasty at Mogao.” (381)).

75. Recently some work has been done on isotopic analysis of the lead-based pigments showing the potential for further work in this area to identify the sources, but this is still in its early stages (Brill 2007). Hence the concentration here on one pigment whose primary source is incontrovertible.

76. The source of lapis lazuli is fairly non-controversial, although there were other sources and also similar minerals, notably soldalite, but Badakhstan was the main source (Good 2008: 28-34). Hill 2009: 611-12 provides a summary and other references to early trade. As pointed out in these, isotopic analysis should be able to provide more precise details on origins of the minerals. See Schafer 1985: 230-4 for its use in Tang-period (618-907) China. It is used for the eyebrows in the mask of Tutankhamun and early examples have also been found in Syria and elsewhere. Possible examples of pre-Silk Road use in China have been found but are disputed (Berke 2010: 229-30).

77. “...the extravagant use of a brilliant blue – the well-known ultramarine which, in the time of Benvenuto Cellini, was frequently employed by the Italian painters, and was bought at double its weight in gold.” von le Coq 1926.



Figure 9: *Detail of a wall painting from the Buddhist caves at Kizil showing use of lapis. Museum für Asiatische Kunst, III 8420.*

that lapis was also highly valued in this area and commanded a high price (Fig. 9).⁷⁸ Lapis was also used as one of the seven Buddhist treasures and it is probable that its use as a pigment in the Tarim cave temples was introduced by Buddhism.⁷⁹ But it soon started to be used in a secular setting, such as on painted pottery tomb figures in a tomb in Luoyang, central China, of the Northern Wei dynasty (386-534 AD).⁸⁰

The Tarim caves continued to be excavated, decorated, and renovated from at least the fourth century and for a thousand years.⁸¹ The scale and constant rate of cave building — and stupa and free-standing temples decoration — would have required a steady and secure supply of pigments or the material to make them.⁸²

78. Schafer 1985: 230-4.

79. And in China, where it is known in painting manuals as ‘Buddhist blue.’ (see below n.104)

80. Liu et al. 2013.

81. See Li 2010: 49-51 showing the use of lapis in these caves at least through to the 10th century.

82. The pigments were probably ground locally, although Wiedemann and Bayer

Even at a conservative estimate, this represents a considerable supply at a considerable cost.⁸³ Both need to be considered. Patrons of the caves — whether local rulers, guilds of merchants, pious lay people, or monks and nuns — had to ensure the materials were available for the artists. A sustained supply network and considerable funds were required.⁸⁴ This network and wealth must have been available in the Tarim by the fourth to fifth centuries, if not before, when sustained stupa and cave construction starts.⁸⁵

suggest that Han blue was available in octagonal pigment sticks (2007: 379). As with architecture in the Tarim, there is little work on the logistics of cave paintings, most referring to Chinese practices. Sarah Fraser's study covers the practice of artists in the design and execution of wall paintings at Dunhuang, but not the supply and funding of the raw materials required. But this must have been a question of concern to rich patrons who wanted to see the work completed. See Schafer 1985 for a discussion of supply. The nineteenth-century painting manual by Yu Feian is a useful source as it refers back to earlier sources and also has chapters on the preparation of pigments with interesting insights into the labor involved. For example: 'Xiang you has said, "Making two hundred grams of cinnabar requires one day of manual labour," but I feel that it requires two days.' (Yu 1989: 56). Lapis is listed as 'Granulated blue', but he goes on to say: 'Also called Buddha blue ... This is a pigment that came to China from the Western Regions.' and he says it comes in packages of 2400 g (8). His chapters on pigment preparation do not discuss lapis. The lack of early Chinese sources on the preparation and use of lapis reinforce the hypothesis that these skills came into the Tarim from India/Central Asia, probably brought with monks and artists.

83. Because of the lack of work in this area it is difficult to produce any firm figures. Estimates vary as to the amount of blue pigment obtainable from the mineral but are in the region of 30-50g per 500g to 1kg.

84. Just as the case with architecture, those with a knowledge of Buddhist iconography, stories, and paintings were also required. Walter (1998: 26-27) shows something of this in her example of caves at Kizil supported by the king and involving an Indian and Syrian artist and their disciples as painters. In another case, the Khotanese king sent artists to Kizil to help with the caves, suggested a link between the kings of these neighboring kingdoms.

85. Before the period when Hansen notes that the region was flooded with Chinese silk. There remains both Raschke and Hansen's argument that the wealth of the Kizil rulers, for example, came from irrigation agriculture. This paper does not seek to argue that Chinese silk and agriculture were not factors in the wealth at various places and various times, but rather that these do not preclude trade as another factor.

This prior condition of network and surplus could be repeated for most of the other commodities necessary for the decoration and worship at the shrines and cave temples, from the gold and silks used to adorn the many stupas, the seven treasures for the relic chambers and as votive offerings, to the ingredients for the incense used in the frequent public and private ceremonies.

Conclusion

From the material evidence three factors can be identified concerning Buddhism in the Tarim and which require explanation.

1. Regular and sustained interregional movement of Buddhists and others transmitting artistic and architectural styles;
2. Regular and sustained interregional movement of goods used for building, decoration, and worship at stupas and temples;
3. Local surplus wealth to enable the building, decoration, and maintenance of stupas and temples.

Borrowing the principle of Occam's razor, trade is the most parsimonious explanation to account for all of these. If trade is rejected as the primary explanation, then compelling evidence is needed for its lack and for alternatives and not just an absence of supportive textual evidence. I would argue that our scholarly energies would be best concentrated on interrogating the considerable data – textual and archaeological — to test the hypothesis of sustained interregional trade networks around Central Asia and beyond in more detail and not to let Chinese historiography or a too literal understanding of the Silk Road concept divert us.

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