

Orientations

VOLUME 30 NUMBER 4 APRIL 1999



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The vast range of well-preserved artefacts and documents found at the oasis of Turfan in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region of China has given scholars the opportunity to re-examine and rewrite the history of the Silk Road. Following the Third Silk Road Conference held at Yale University from 10 to 12 July 1998, five papers were selected, with the assistance of the organizer Valerie Hansen, and adapted for publication in this issue.

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Cover: Uighur Princes
From Cave 9, Bezeklik, Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region
9th century
Mural painting
Height 62.4 cm, width 59.5 cm
Museum für Indische Kunst, Berlin, MIK III 6876a
(Photography by Jürgen Liepe)

Orientations (ISSN 0030-5448) is published 10 times annually by Orientations Magazine Ltd, 17th Floor, 200 Lockhart Road, Hong Kong
Tel: 2511 1368; fax: 2507 4620
E-mail: info@orientations.com.hk
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Printed by Magnum (Offset) Printing Company Limited

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A Brief History of the Turfan Oasis

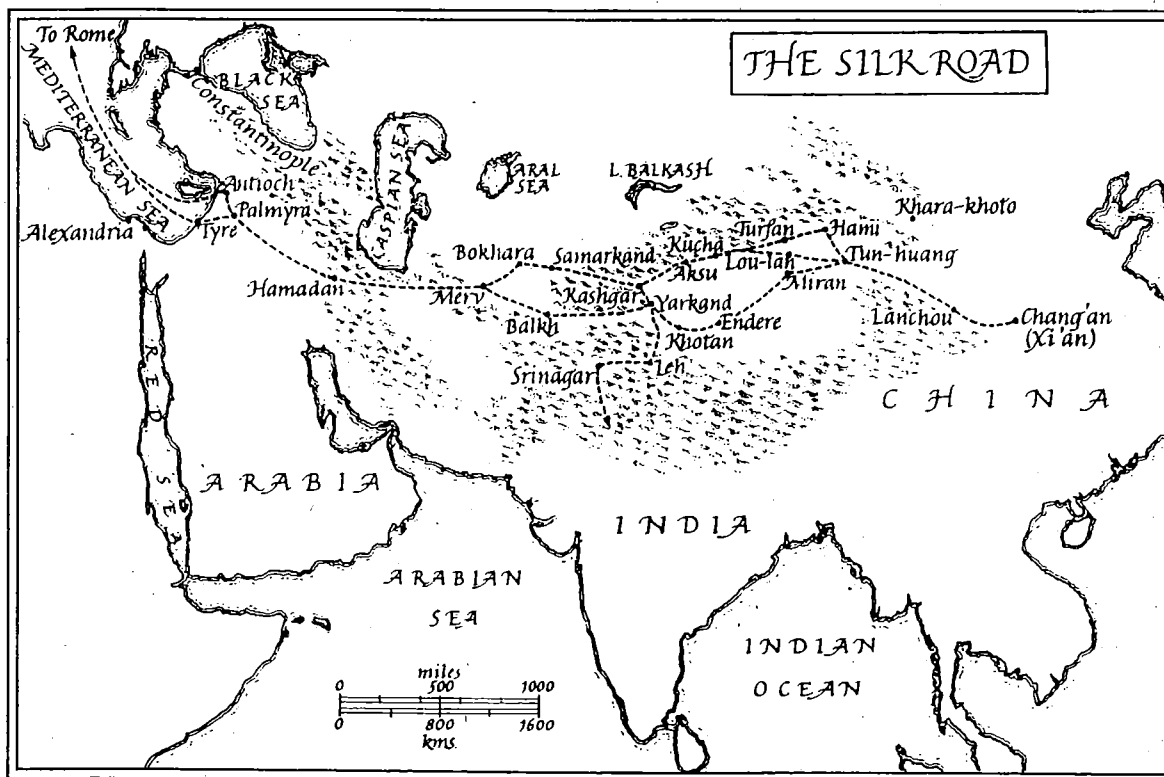
Valerie Hansen

Just as the Dead Sea Scrolls have recast the history of early Christianity, the range of perfectly preserved artefacts and documents found at the oasis of Turfan in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, China, forces us to rewrite the history of the Silk Road. Contrary to popular belief, the Silk Road was not a single highway stretching all the way from China to Europe. In different periods, various routes extended from China to Iran, India, Syria, and even as far as Rome (Fig. 1). With the exception of the most famous pilgrims and travellers, very few people journeyed from one end point to another. Most goods were transhipped from one trading depot to the next, where they changed hands and were taken onward by another merchant. Turfan was one of the oases where people of diverse cultures, languages and religions lived together in genuinely multicultural communities during the first millennium.

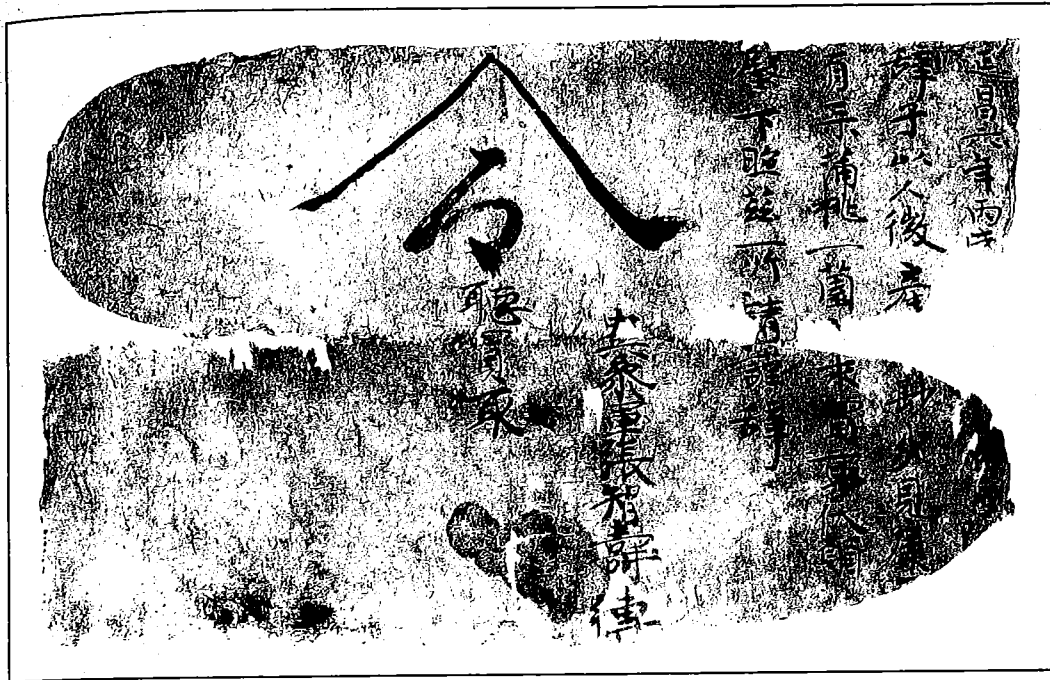
Turfan's low elevation places much of the oasis more than 100 metres below sea level, with the lowest point 154 metres below sea level, second only to the Dead Sea. The small oasis of Turfan lies 160 kilometres southeast of the city of Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang. Historically, it was on the northern Silk Route, which skirted the Taklamakan desert and linked China with India and Iran. Turfan's climate is infamous: the Chinese called it 'the prefecture of fire' (Huozhou) during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries because its summer temperatures can soar to more than 47 degrees centigrade. However great the heat, though, Turfan is always dry, and that dryness has preserved a vast array of documents and artefacts.

Chinese historical records describe the original inhabitants of the region as nomadic peoples living in felt tents, who moved with their herds in search of water and grass, or lived as farmers. When, in the second century BCE, during the frontier wars on their northwest border, the Chinese first came into contact with the indigenous peoples, they had formed a small polity whose name the Chinese transcribed as Jushi. In 60 BCE the Chinese established a garrison in Turfan, which was the first permanent settlement of Chinese among the Jushi people. Wang Binghua's essay provides our first glimpse of the artefacts of the Jushi, who, like many other steppe peoples, produced small ornaments, often depicting animals, in precious metals that could be carried easily from place to place.

The presence of Han dynasty (206 BCE-CE 220) coins in their tombs also shows that the Jushi traded with the Chinese. The Jushi kings supported Buddhist monks who came from India, and in 382, they sent a monk to the Chinese capital, where he recited thousands of verses by heart. Nobuyoshi Yamabe's article presents a new view concerning the relationship between written Buddhist texts, cave paintings and orally transmitted teachings in the fifth century – with particular reference to the *Guan Wuliangshou Jing* (*Amitayus Visualization Sutra*) and Cave 20 at Toyok – when the local rulers of Turfan endowed monasteries and financed the copying of Buddhist texts. Although Chinese historical records provide few details, it is clear that waves of Chinese settlers fled the wars of a divided China in the third and fourth centuries, and by the year 500, when the



(Fig. 1) Map of the Silk Road
(After Annabel Walker, *Aurel Stein: Pioneer of the Silk Road*, London, 1995, p. 57)



(Fig. 2) Document recycled as soles for burial shoes From Turfan, Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region Gaochang kingdom period (500-640) Ink on paper Height 24 cm, width 40 cm (After Xinjiang Weiwuer Zizhiqu Bowuguan, ed., *Xinjiang Chutu Wenwu*, Shanghai, 1975, p. 42, fig. 69)

(Fig. 3) Tomb figure From Tomb 206, Astana, Turfan, Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region Seventh century Wood, paper and silk Height 30 cm (After Xinjiang Weiwuer Zizhiqu Bowuguan, ed., *Xinjiang Chutu Wenwu*, Shanghai, 1975, p. 82, fig. 121)

independent kingdom of Gaochang was founded, Turfan had become a largely Chinese settlement with very few of the original Jushi inhabitants left. Hundreds of paper documents from Turfan provide much more information about the period between 500 and 640 than is available for earlier periods. The Chinese settlers had the unusual, and still unexplained, custom of burying their dead with paper hats, belts and shoes. Because paper was scarce, they recycled paper that had writing on one or both sides, sometimes painting over it so that the characters could not be seen. Often they used discarded official documents, such as the one shown in Figure 2. This order from the ruler of the Gaochang kingdom concerning the grant of an orchard was cut up to make the soles of paper shoes for the dead – the needlemarks are clearly visible around the edges. Other recycled pieces include private records such as contracts, family letters and writing exercises. Archaeologists have pieced together some two thousand documents from scraps found in the Astana graveyard near Turfan, a cemetery which contains some three thousand Chinese-style tombs, each with a walkway leading down to one or two rooms.

The Gaochang kingdom managed to maintain its independence by playing the Western Turks, a federation of Turkic tribes, off against the newly founded Tang dynasty (618-906) until 640, when Chinese troops conquered the oasis. Chinese histories reveal that the defeated royal Qu family and other powerful families, including the Zhangs, who supplied the kings with their wives, were sentenced to internal exile in Luoyang, in present-day Henan province.

Because the Chinese treated Turfan as a prefecture much like any other in the empire, they implemented the equal-field system there. Local officials compiled registers listing the family members of each household, updated them annually, and redistributed the land of the oasis to the different residents, depending on their sex and age. The census of 640 gave the population of Turfan as 37,700 people in 8,000 households, and also counted 4,300 horses. As there was a chronic shortage of land, the Chinese authorities were unable to give each resident his or her full share as stipulated by the law of the time, the Tang Code, but they kept strict records of how much land everyone received and how much they were still owed. Before the dis-



covery of the Turfan documents, scholars wondered whether the measures described in the Tang Code were ever carried out. The Turfan documents prove conclusively that the system existed in Turfan, but we can still only guess at the extent of implementation in other parts of China.

Although many of the excavated documents were written in Turfan, some were not. The clothing, delicate coiffure and elaborate make-up of a female tomb figure embody the height of fashion in the seventh century capital of Chang'an (present-day Xi'an in Shaanxi province) (Fig. 3). She wears a dress made with the popular Iranian motif of pearl roundels, further testimony to the strong influences on fashion from the Persian-speaking Sogdian merchants resident in Turfan, who, Angela Sheng suggests in her article in this issue, commissioned an unusual group of textiles. The documents incorporated into this elegant figure indicate she was manufactured in Chang'an. These pawn tickets, which were rolled up to make the arms, list the item pawned (often a suit of clothes), the name of the owner, the date, the number of coins received and the owner's address. After the pawnshop owner recorded the date on which the loan was repaid, the record was cancelled with two broad brushstrokes (Fig. 4). Other excavated documents are from pawnshop accounts showing bi-weekly instalment payments made in medicine, cloth, beans and wheat bran – clear evidence of the use of barter even in China's largest cities at the time. Interestingly, of the 152 people whose names appear, 25 are women, showing that women must have been involved to a large extent in the commercial economy of their day.

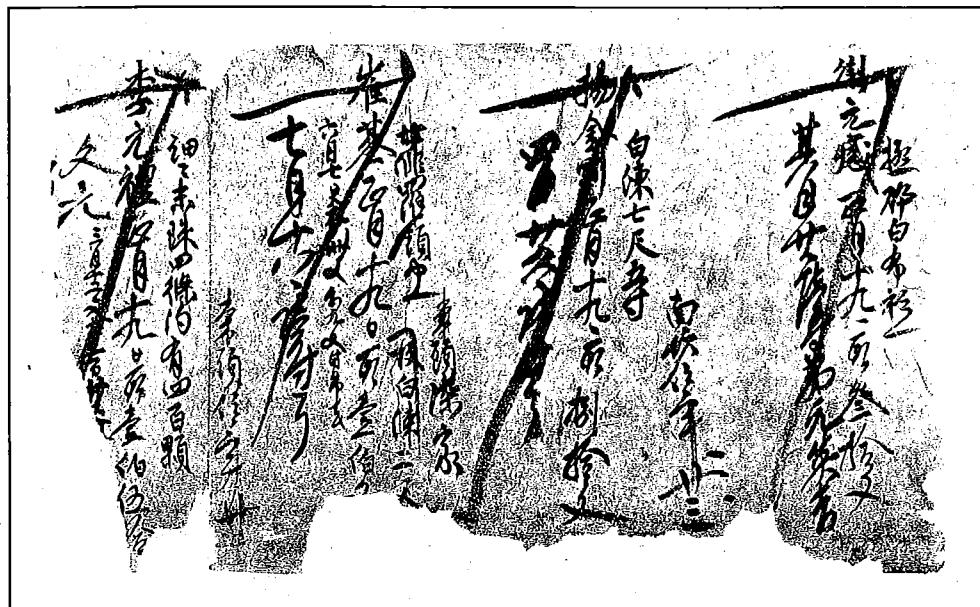
Another tomb figure – this time a magnificent statue of a Buddhist guardian – was made in Luoyang or Chang'an in different sections, Janet Baker proposes, and then shipped to Turfan, where it was buried in the same tomb as the female figure above (see the article by Janet Baker in this issue, fig. 1).

The Tang dynasty regulated travelling merchants as strictly as farmers, requiring them to carry official passports every time they crossed from one prefecture to another. Surviving documents demonstrate just how open Turfan society was to non-Chinese in the seventh and eighth centuries. Most of the non-Chinese came from the region of Sogdiana around the trading metropolis of Samarkand (located in modern-day Uzbekistan), although a few came from India. The Sogdians

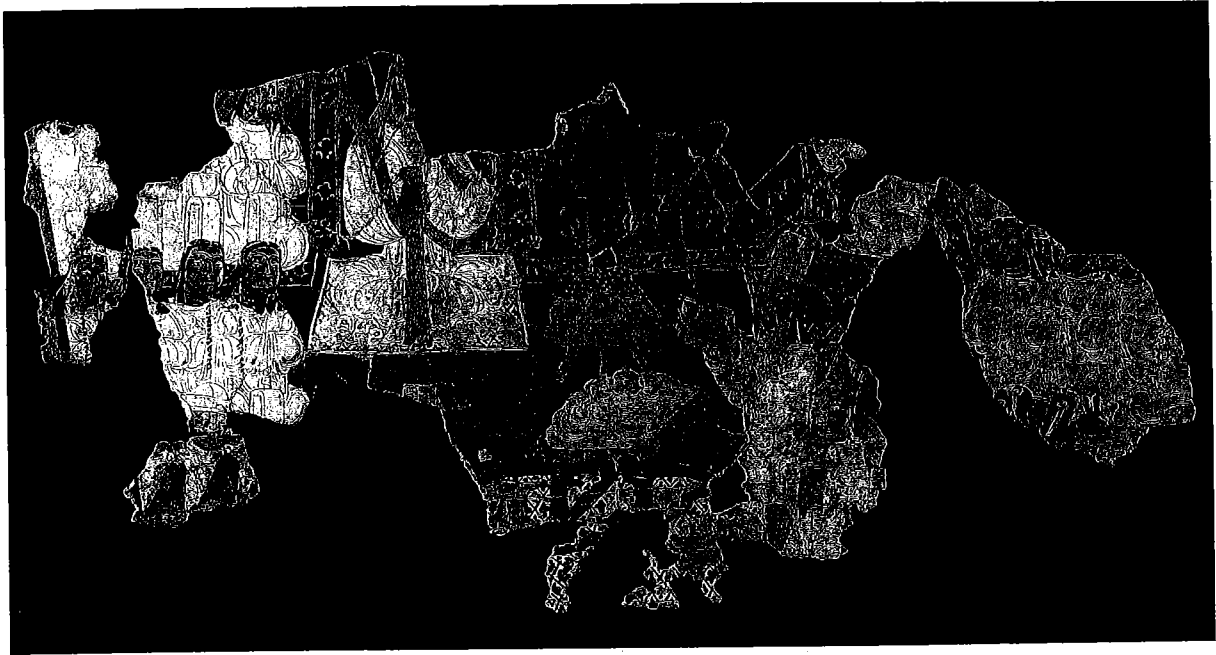
spoke their own dialect of Middle Persian. Some Sogdians settled permanently in Turfan, where they received allocations of land under the equal-field system and where their distinctive names appear on household registers. Some of these households specialized in producing Sogdian slave girls who were in great demand among the Chinese as musicians; one household register filled with Sogdian names lists some 61 people, many of them young women and children, apparently destined to be sold as slaves.

Other Sogdians opted for a non-resident status that allowed them to move from oasis to oasis with their goods and rendered them subject to commercial taxes. As long as they carried the appropriate documentation, a kind of passport that listed all the names of the people and the numbers of animals travelling with them, they could travel all the way from Chang'an to the oases of northwest China. Whether resident in Turfan or not, the Sogdians had access to the Chinese court system, and some of the most informative documents are those concerning legal disputes. In one case, from between 665 and 673, a Sogdian merchant sued a Chinese merchant who had been his brother's business partner and who had failed to pay back a loan of 275 bolts of cloth he had borrowed. He took the case to court because his brother had never returned from a business trip, apparently having been kidnapped by Turkic tribes. Because he did not have a copy of the original loan contract, he was at a disadvantage, and the Chinese merchant initially denied borrowing the cloth. However, when he unexpectedly produced witnesses – two Sogdian merchants who had served as guarantors when the initial contract was drawn up – the Chinese merchant was forced to pay the loan back. This case shows that Chinese and Sogdian merchants did go into partnership together even though they had no common language, and it reveals, as well, the wide geographic range of the merchants who were resident in Chang'an but travelled all the way to the various oasis-entrepôts of northwest China.

The Sogdians brought the Iranian religions of Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism with them to Turfan. Little evidence of Zoroastrian practices survives, though there is some indication that the Gaochang kingdom financed sacrifices of animals at fire altars. Mani (216-276), the founder of Manichaeism, preached in his native Aramaic about the struggle of darkness and light to control the universe. Figure 5 shows a Manichaean



(Fig. 4) Pawnshop ticket
From Turfan, Xinjiang
Uighur Autonomous Region
Gaochang kingdom period (500-640)
Ink on paper
Height 20 cm, width 47.5 cm
(After Zhongguo Wenwu
Yanjiusuo, ed., *Tulufan
Chutu Wenwushu* 2,
Beijing, 1994, p. 334)



(Fig. 5) Leaf from a Manichaean book
 From Gaochang city walls, Turfan, Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region
 8th/9th century
 Manuscript painting
 Height 12.4 cm, width 25.5 cm
 Museum für Indische Kunst, Berlin, MIKIII 4979

miniature depicting the feast of Bema, which commemorated Mani's death. The right side of the head of the presiding priest is missing, but one can see his golden stole. At the centre of the painting is a stand holding watermelons, grapes and honeydew melons, all foods that Manichaean devotees believed could increase the amount of light in the devotee. Below them are loaves of bread baked in the shapes of the sun and moon, both bearers of light. The painting was found in the dirt walls of Gaochang city at the turn of the century and brought to Berlin by Albert von le Coq (1860-1930). Banned in Iran, Manichaean teachings circulated in central China during the eighth century, and probably earlier, as we learn from the official histories, but in 732 the Chinese court actually forbade Manichaeism among Chinese subjects (though not Sogdians).

In 755, the part-Sogdian general An Lushan (703-57) led a rebellion that brought the Tang dynasty to its knees, and the central government lost control over much of its far-flung empire, including Turfan. The Tang were forced to ask the Uighurs, themselves a Turkic-speaking people, for assistance against the rebels.

When the Uighurs retook the Chinese city of Luoyang from the rebels they encountered Sogdian Manichaean priests, and, in 762, the Uighur ruler Bögü Qan converted to Manichaeism, which he made the state religion of the Uighurs. In 803, the Uighurs gained control of Turfan and the Mongolian steppe until 840, when the Kirghiz forced the Uighurs to retreat to the Tarim Basin. In succeeding centuries the Uighurs controlled different oasis cities, including Beiting, the subject of Nancy Steinhardt's article, for varying amounts of time, and they patronized both Buddhism and Manichaeism. Some caves at Turfan have a layer of Buddhist wall paintings superimposed on Manichaean paintings, a clear indication that local patrons had no compunction about obliterating the paintings of a religion whose teachings they opposed. Turfan remained under Uighur control until 1283, when it fell to the Mongols, and it remained in the hands of different Mongol groups until 1756,

the year of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) conquest.

When German expeditions visited Turfan between 1904 and 1907, they excavated among the dirt ruins of the once-great Uighur cities, where they found thousands of fragments of Manichaean texts in Parthian, Middle Persian, Sogdian and Uighur. These texts, combined with Manichaean texts recorded in Coptic and preserved in Egypt, have made it possible for scholars to reconstruct the teachings of a world religion that we would have otherwise only known about from descriptions written by its critics, the most famous of whom was surely Saint Augustine of Hippo (350-430). In addition to the Germans, a host of foreign explorers, including the Hungarian-born naturalized Briton Aurel Stein (1862-1943), the Finn C.G.E. Mannerheim (1867-1951), the Frenchman Paul Pelliot (1878-1945), the Japanese Otani Kozui (1876-1948), the Russian S. F. Oldenburg (1863-1934) and the Swede Sven Hedin (1864-1952) removed a mass of documents and artefacts and then published their dramatic finds, which have kept scholars busy ever since.

The author would like to thank the Henry Luce Foundation for providing funding for the three-year collaborative project involving Yale University, Beijing University, the Xinjiang Institute of Archaeology, the Xinjiang Museum and the Turfan Museum.

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