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Article

Sogdian Merchants on the Great Silk Road during the Period of the Kangju State

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Abstract: This article examines the role of Sogdian merchants in the trade and diplomatic contacys between Central Asia and China during the period of Kangju state, when the Great Silk Road took shape. The study draws on four bodies of evidence: the Chinese dynastic histories, in particular the Han shu and the history of the Wei dynasty; the Sogdian "Ancient Letters" of the early third century CE; the Sogdian rock inscription of the Upper Indus recorded at Shatial; and recent archeological finds of Sogdian material culture on Chinese territory. The evidence indicates that the Sogdians were the principal intermediaries alng the eastern sections of the route; that families of Sogdians merchants were established in India and China as early as the second and third centuries CE; and that by the fourth and fifth centuries the communities of Luoyang and Guzang were consolidated enough for their members to enter administrative and military service and to found Zoroastrian sanctuaries. The inscription of the Upper Indus, which name traders from Maymurgh, Kesh and other districts of Sogd alongside tamphas known from Samarkand coins, show that this movement spanned several generations.

Keywords: Sogdians, Great Silk Road, Sino-Central Asian relations, Ancient lettrs, Samarkand, Upper Indus inscriptions.

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1. Introduction

It is well established that the period of the Kangju state coincides with the stage at which the Great Silk Road came into being and developed. In this period economic relations between East and West entered a new phase and the commercial contacts between China and agriculture were carried from the cities of Sogd for sale across the territories extending as far as the central regions of China and it is known that the Sogdians were the principal intermediaries in this traffic [1].

Although this intermediary role is widely acknowledged, the evidence for it is dispersed across several categories of material that are rarely examined in conjunction: the Chinese annalistic tradition, the rock inscriptions of the Upper Indus, the archeological finds recovered on Chinese territory [2]. The present article brings these materials together in order to establish three things: how early and how densely Sogdian merchants were present in China; what the epistolary and epigraphic evidence reveals about the organization of their trade and the routes it followed; what the Chinese source permit us to conclude about the political character of the relationship between the Han empire and the Central Asian polities [3].

2. Methods

Methodologically the article proceeds by source criticism and by the comparative-historical method. Notices drawn from the Chinese annalistic tradition are set against the Sogdian documentary and epigraphic record and against the archaeological finds, and the resulting picture is compared with the conclusions of earlier scholarship. Chinese and Sogdian toponyms and personal names are given in their conventional English forms, the variants used in the cited sources being noted where this is relevant to the argument.

3. Results

If we pay attention to the geographical distribution of areas where Sogdian written sources have been discovered, we can see that Sogdian writing spread across a vast territory extending from Central China to the Black Sea [4]. The Silk Road played an exceptionally important role in the spread of the Sogdian language and script across these regions. Moreover, the Sogdians' reputation as skilled merchants and active transmitters of cultural achievements was a significant factor in the widespread dissemination of their language and writing. This phenomenon has been particularly well preserved in toponymy [5]. To date, evidence has also been found indicating the existence of Sogdian settlements in the Black Sea region, particularly in Crimea. According to K. Baipakova, more than 300 urban settlements and rural sites inhabited by Sogdians emerged in the Talas Valley and the basins of the Chu and Ili rivers.

During the rule of the Kangars the Sogdians conducted the principal commercial activity along the Great Silk Road and penetrated as far as the interior regions of China. The multiplication of Sogdian settlements precisely in the period of the Kangju state is evidence of this [6]. In that period Sogd was an important trading centre, and not only the region itself but China too had an interest in economic cooperation with it.

Scholarship records the activity of Sogdians in China during the period of the Kangju state. One such merchant was Kang Senghui, a representative of the Sogdian ethnos, as may be inferred from his surname: Kang was the abbreviated form of the word Kangju. Many other examples of this method of naming foreigners exist in China [7].

Kang Senghui, who was in China in the middle of the third century CE, wrote of his predecessor An Shigao: "There was a bodhisattva (Buddhist monk) named An Kang, whose name was Shigao. He was the son of the king of Anxi (called An for Bukhara in the Chinese sources)…" [8]. The occurrence of these characters in Chinese onomastics, in particular An and Kang, indicates that monks bearing such names were of Western origin, and this view is confirmed by Chinese works. An official of Nanjing, moreover, described Kang Senghui as a man who had come from the land of Hu, that is, the Western Regions. Born at the beginning of the third century, Kang Senghui arrived in the southern capital in 247 and played an important part there as a translator. His biography records that there were families of Sogdian merchants in India in the second century CE, and that other Sogdian families had settled in China [9].

The "Ancient Letters", which belong to the beginning of the third century CE, also contain evidence on this subject. The letters were addressed to four recipients. The first was written to Chatis, the mother of Miwnay, concerning the writer's own circumstances; the second was the letter of Nanai-Kanak to Varzakk; the third was a letter from a girl named Shayn to Nanaidhat; and the fourth was the letter of the merchant Aspandhat to Frikhwataw. Written for despatch from Dunhuang to Samarkand, these letters preserve information on a community of Sogdian merchants, the name of whose city has been effaced from the document, on the Sogdians of Luoyang, on the city of Samarkand, and on the trade routes leading from Dunhuang to Sogd[10], [11]. This material makes it possible to recover important evidence on the earliest phase of the relations between the territories of historical Uzbekistan and China.

Chapter 102 of the history of the Wei dynasty states: "The merchants of the state of Sogd formerly came in greater numbers to the land of Luoyang to trade. They could often be encountered at Guzang". The historical cities of Luoyang and Guzang, the modern

Wuwei, were major trading centres situated on the ancient Hexi Corridor of the Great Silk Road. Of particular significance is the notice that envoys came from Sogd in the spring of 437 to the Northern Wei state, which had been founded in 386. This strengthens the view that Sogd maintained relations with China, and that the Sogdians penetrated rapidly into Chinese territory, already in the fourth and fifth centuries.

In the 1970s the German–Pakistani expedition led by Ahmad Hasan Dani and Karl Jettmar discovered a very large number of inscriptions carved into the rocks of the Shatial crossing, not far from the bridge over the Indus. At this site thousands of petroglyphs and some two thousand written inscriptions in seventeen languages were found, of which 250 have been established as Sogdian. The Sogdians traded actively along the mountain route through Shatial and Chilas in the Karakoram valley, and continued their movement in southern and eastern directions. These inscriptions, studied by H. Humbach, have been interpreted as belonging to the fourth century [12].

The inscriptions mention the names of merchants who had come from Maymurgh, Kesh and other districts of Sogd, and beside them are reproduced the tamghas found on coins struck at Samarkand. It is clear from this that the movement of the Sogdians towards the East had been in progress for several hundred years, and that several generations of merchants passed through this place. Many Sogdian inscriptions are very short, consisting only of a name or of a single phrase. Some of them record the time at which they were written: by leaving his name and the date on a rock in the mountains, a merchant conveyed information to the others. One of the Sogdian texts was written by the Samarkand merchant Nanai-Vandak, whose purpose was to leave a message in that place for the merchants who would come after him. As the head of the Sogdian merchants, Nanai-Vandak supervised their activity. This crossing lay on the southern part of the Great Silk Road, which passed towards the southern margins of the Taklamakan desert and joined the northern route in the region of Dunhuang. The road ran along the Great Wall of China and reached Chang'an, the ancient capital of the country. In recent years numerous objects characteristic of Sogdian culture and dating to the period of the Northern Wei dynasty, among them vessels made of silver and gold, have been found in the Datang [Datong?] region of China. The interpretation of these finds makes it clear that in China the Sogdians were engaged not only in commerce but also in administrative and military affairs. More than twenty Samarkandians, among them Huchjifu Kangji, are recorded among the officials. In the period of the Northern Wei dynasty the city of Luoyang was made the capital of the state. Those who came from Central and South Asia, the Sogdians among them, also settled in this city, and showed zeal in the building of Zoroastrian sanctuaries at Luoyang.

As E. Rtveladze records, China appointed a deputy and a military inspector for the administration of the western region, that is, Sogd and the territories adjoining it. A notice in the Han shu is significant in this connection. According to it, Chinese envoys "were unable to obtain either food for themselves or animals for transport without ready money, and the cause of this was their distance from China". Had the dependence of these polities been appreciable, it is argued, persons in the service of the Han empire would not have found themselves in such a position.

It is further recorded that the establishment by the Central Asian polities of considerably firmer commercial and diplomatic relations with China was assisted by the campaign of the Chinese commander Ban Chao (32–102) into the western region. According to the testimony of the Han shu, Ban Chao passed with his army through the whole of Central Asia and reached even the western sea, probably the Caspian or the Aral. After this campaign envoys came from Central Asia to the imperial residence bearing gifts. These occasions appear, however, to have been sporadic: according to the data of the same source, the polities of the western region now broke off their relations with China and now restored them . What are meant here are

lprincipally the five polities that formed part of the Kangju state at that time, namely Bukhara, Kesh, Samarkand, Chach and Khwarazm.

In the second century CE swift horses and camels were taken from the territories of

Central Asia, from such polities as Samarkand, Bukhara, Kesh, Kabudhan and Maymurgh, and sold in China. It is also known that various goods were presented by the rulers of Central Asia to the Chinese emperors, and the notice preserved in the Chinese annals deserves attention in this respect. The ruler of Bukhara, sending a letter to the ruler of China, states the following: "I now send as a gift two Iranian mules, one brilliant Fulin (Byzantine) carpet, fifteen kilograms of Yu-kin musk and one hundred jin (60 kg) of natural candle wax. Now, in the train of these gifts, I ask Your Majesty to confer upon my person a title of the third rank. My wife, the queen Khatun, likewise sends two chobi carpets and one ornamented carpet. If His Majesty the Emperor should show favour, I ask that saddlery, bridles, arms and armour, garments and belts be bestowed upon me, and garments and cosmetics upon my wife Khatun".

These data indicate that, together with the sale of various products in China, arms and armour and courtly garments were brought from there to Central Asia. The evidence on this point is clarified further by the description of splendidly dressed performers recorded in the Han shu cited above.

4. Discussion

The four categories of evidence converge upon a single conclusion. Within the period of the Kangju state the Sogdians were not occasional participants in the exchange between East and West but its principa intermediaries, and their presence in China was continuous rather than episodic. The biography of Kang Senghui places families of Sogdian merchants in India in the second century and in China by the third; the "Ancient Letters" show an organised merchant community in correspondence between Dunhuang and Samarkand at the beginning of the third century; the history of the Wei dynasty records that Sogdian merchants were a familiar presence at Luoyang and Guzang; and the inscriptions of the Upper Indus, with their several generations of names and their Samarkand tamghas, show that the movement eastward had by then been under way for centuries.

The character of this presence also changes over the period in question. The appearance of more than twenty Samarkandians among the officials of the Northern Wei, and the part taken by Sogdians in founding Zoroastrian sanctuaries at Luoyang, indicate communities settled firmly enough to enter the administrative and military service of the host state and to maintain religious institutions of their own. What the sources describe at this stage is therefore a diaspora rather than a succession of visiting traders.

The political reading of these contacts requires greater caution. The notice of the Han shu that Chinese envoys could obtain neither food nor transport animals without ready money suggests that the polities of the western region were not in a position of appreciable dependence, and the same source records that relations were repeatedly broken off and restored. The appointment of a deputy and a military inspector, and the arrival of envoys bearing gifts after the campaign of Ban Chao, are accordingly better read as evidence of intensive commercial and diplomatic contact than of political subordination. That China occupied the Central Asian region and established its authority there is not confirmed by the other sources.

The evidence on commodities points in both directions. Horses, camels, musk, carpets and wax moved eastward, while arms and armour and courtly garments were sought from China in return, so that the exchange cannot be reduced to a flow of Central Asian goods towards the Chinese court [13]. The request of the ruler of Bukhara for a title of the third rank, set beside the inventory of goods he sent, shows that commercial and diplomatic motives were closely interwoven in these contacts.

Two limitations should be noted. The Chinese annalistic notices are used here largely through later compilation and translation, and the Sogdian inscriptions of the Upper Indus are for the most part extremely brief, often consisting of a single name [14], [15]. The reconstruction offered above therefore rests on the convergence of independent bodies of material rather than on continuous documentation from any one of them.

5. Conclusion

The period of the Kangju state coincides with the formation and early development of the Great Silk Road, and the evidence examined here shows that the Sogdians were the principal intermediaries of the trade which that route carried. The Chinese written sources, the Sogdian "Ancient Letters", the rock inscriptions of the Upper Indus and the recent archaeological finds made on Chinese territory together establish that families of Sogdian merchants were present in India and China from the second and third centuries CE; that by the fourth and fifth centuries the Sogdian communities of Luoyang and Guzang were consolidated enough for their members to enter administrative and military service and to take part in founding Zoroastrian sanctuaries; and that the movement eastward spanned several generations of traders, along the Karakoram route as well as along the southern margins of the Taklamakan. At the same time the sources attest intensive commercial and diplomatic contact without supporting the conclusion that China exercised political authority over the Central Asian polities. The exchange was reciprocal: horses, camels, musk and carpets moved towards the Chinese court, while arms, armour and courtly garments were sought in return. These findings make the earliest phase of the relations between the territories of historical Uzbekistan and China accessible in greater detail, and they indicate that the further study of Sogdian epigraphic and documentary material, and in particular of the material still being recovered on Chinese territory, is the most promising direction for refining the picture.

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