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Year One

Along the Silk Road

Sogdian Traders

by Patrick Wertmann

Many different peoples traveled the ancient Silk Road, most of their names and cultures almost completely forgotten today. Among them are the Sogdians. Their home country, Sogdiana, was located between the Central Asian rivers Syr Darya and Amu

Darya. Their city-states, with capitals such as Bukhara and Samarkand, were ruled by wealthy aristocrats and traders.

Many Changes

For a time during the first millennium B.C.E., Sogdiana was incorporated into the Persian

Empire as a province. Sogdiana became part of Alexander the Great's Macedonia when he seized power in 327 B.C.E. and eventually took control of the area, linking it with the Mediterranean world. Two hundred years later, when the first



This was the heart of ancient Samarkand. Today it is known as Registan Square. The three buildings flanking the square are *madrassas* (Islamic schools).

"That's it! You've got it! Come, now, walk to me!" Sogdians were known in China not only for their trading skills but also for their

ability to breed and train horses, and this trainer seems to be enjoying his work.



The Find!

In 1907, an archaeological discovery at a guard post west of the oasis town of Dunhuang gave the world a personal look into the world of the Sogdians. Analysis shows that the find dates to somewhat later than the Year One, but the "look" is fascinating.

The find was a bundle of five never-opened letters. Written in Sogdian, a language that only a few experts can still read, they contain first-hand information about the lives of those who wrote them. Thanks to the mention of events that are known from Chinese history books, historians were able to date the letters to the early fourth century C.E. They were addressed to either fellow

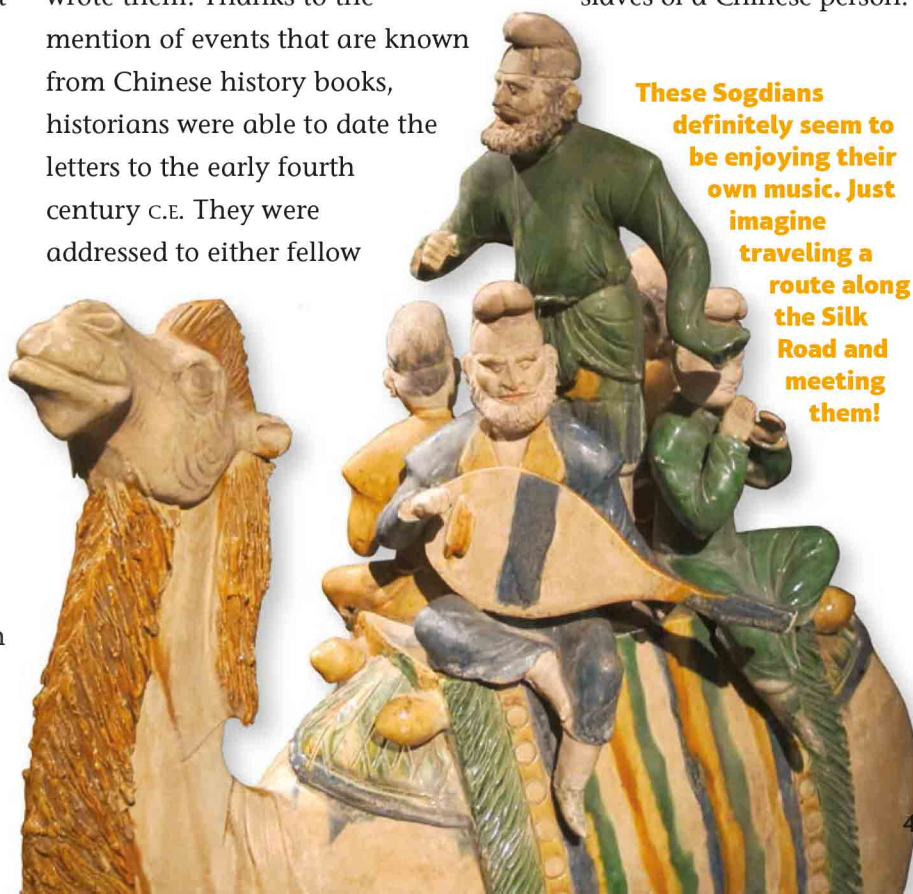
merchants, family, or friends back home. Most relate to the trade of goods such as silver, linen, musk, and pepper.

Two letters focus on a human tragedy. They were written by a Sogdian lady who was penniless after she and her daughter were abandoned in Dunhuang. Custom dictated that women could not travel alone, so this lady desperately begs her husband to bring both of them back home. She must have guessed that her unfaithful spouse would never answer her letter, for she ends with the words, "I would rather be a dog's or a pig's wife than yours!" A short paragraph added to one letter by the daughter reveals their tragic destiny: They became the slaves of a Chinese person.

Chinese envoy reached Sogdiana, diplomatic and economic relations were established with the Han Empire. Sogdiana's geographic position at the center of so many different peoples—east to west—definitely helped the country become a cultural intermediary among them all.

In the Year One, the traders traveling east to central China and beyond were mostly Sogdians. Their incentive was always the very profitable trade in Chinese silk. In exchange for this highly prized commodity, they supplied the elites in China with western luxuries, especially horses for their troops in battle. Along the way, some traders settled down in places such as Turfan and Loulan, which were important hubs on the Silk Road network.

These Sogdians definitely seem to be enjoying their own music. Just imagine traveling a route along the Silk Road and meeting them!





Quite festive, don't you think? This painting, with three men enjoying a very lavish banquet, once adorned the wall of a wealthy Sogdian trader or aristocrat.

and grasp coins in his hands as if they were glued there. [...] [These people] excel at commerce and love profit.

When a man turns twenty, he will travel to the neighboring kingdoms. They will go everywhere profit is to be made.

'Reading the Finds'

In recent years, Sogdian specialists have been studying with great enthusiasm the traces that these people left behind.

These traces may, in turn, offer

A Golden Age

While the Sogdians had played a key role in Silk Road trade since at least the Year One, it was during the sixth and seventh centuries that they experienced their **Golden Age**. Large parts of central and eastern Asia were then dominated by two powerful empires: the Turks, with their political center in the area of modern Mongolia, and China's Sui and Tang dynasties, with their capital in Chang'an (present-day Xi'an).

Well known for their ability to speak many languages, the Sogdians often acted as interpreters. They were also considered clever and recognized as excellent businessmen who

brought wealth to their clients.

In fact, history books from that period testify to their skills.

For example, *The Old Book of Tang* notes:

When they [Sogdians] give birth to a son, they put honey in his mouth and glue on the palm of his hand in the hope that when he grows up, he will speak sweet words



Unfortunately, all that remains of Sogdian cities today are ruins, such as these that once were part of the town of Panjikent.

additional insights into one of history's most exciting networks of cultural and economic exchange. Ruins of Sogdian ancient cities in central Asia, including Panjikent and Afrasiab, have been excavated.

In May 2000 came the chance find of a tomb in Xi'an. Within were the remains of a man. Apart from his belt, nothing else had survived of his original apparel. Thanks to a tomb inscription, it was possible to identify him as An Jia, the son of an aristocratic Chinese lady and a Sogdian immigrant from Bukhara. An Jia died in 579 C.E. at the age of 62.

Inside his grave was a screened stone couch, decorated with scenes illustrating his life in China. His clothing was that typically worn by Sogdians—a fur-brimmed hat and a caftan, a type of robe reaching down to the knees that is still worn today in many parts of western and central Asia. Some scenes show An Jia on diplomatic missions, trade expeditions, and adventurous travels into far-away countries. Others picture him as an equestrian engaged in thrilling hunts and as the host of



Left: "Let's go, I'm ready!" the camel seems to be telling his Sogdian trader-rider, who has loaded sacks of trade items on the saddle behind him. Above: Camels and horses travel trade routes in this relief found on the sarcophagus of a Sogdian named Shi.

lavish banquets accompanied by exotic dancers and foreign music.

Your Turn

Imagine having to choose scenes that would best represent you and your life. What would they be?

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This colorful relief decorated the funerary couch of a Sogdian man named An Jia. He and his wife sit in a pavilion attended by servants.

