EAST AND WEST
CULTURE, DIPLOMACY AND INTERACTIONS

Saved from Desert Sands

Re-discovering Objects on the Silk Roads



Edited by
Kelsey Granger and Imre Galambos

BRILL

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East and West

CULTURE, DIPLOMACY AND INTERACTIONS

Edited by

Chuxiong George Wei (*Shanghai Normal University*)

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Conventions

Academic conventions relevant to Chinese studies have been followed throughout, including the use of Hanyu Pinyin romanisation where appropriate and the use of traditional characters in all cases. Each chapter is treated as an individual piece, meaning that dates and characters for place-names, reign eras, texts, and dynasties are repeated anew. While the chapters contribute to the general message of the volume, they are also presented here as self-contained 'articles' with their own bibliography to aid those who wish to use this volume for teaching or research.

Many of the studies in this volume make extensive use of the Dunhuang 敦煌 manuscripts discovered in Cave 17 of the Mogao Caves 莫高窟. These manuscripts are now housed in several institutions around the world, each with their own pressmark system. Manuscripts from the Pelliot Collection held in the Bibliothèque nationale de France are usually classified using the designation 'Pelliot chinois' followed by a number, referenced throughout this volume as P.123 … If written in another language, for instance Tibetan, the first instance of the manuscript is given as 'Pelliot tibétain 123 …' and thence as PT.123 … Manuscripts from the Stein Collection held in the British Library are collected under the longer-form pressmark Or8210/S.123, referenced throughout this volume as S.123 … Manuscripts cited from other institutions or collections are clearly identified, such as those from the Oldenburg Collection in St. Petersburg, cited as Дх123 … Other materials, including printed materials and documents from other sites, are identified with the full pressmark to avoid confusion.

Nowadays, many of the Dunhuang manuscripts and paintings have been digitised, with photographs being available at gallica.bnf.fr for the Bibliothèque nationale de France materials and on the websites of the British Library and British Museum collections for their respective holdings. The International Dunhuang Project has a detailed online catalogue of these collections and additional holdings, accessible at idp.bl.uk.

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Mélodie Doumy joined the British Library in 2015, where she is working as Curator of Chinese collections with a specific focus on the Stein Collection and the International Dunhuang Project (IDP). She has led two major funded

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Following an established career at Sotheby's Chinese Works of Art Department, Hajni Elias obtained her Ph.D. in 2018 from the University of Cambridge. She is currently an Affiliated Lecturer at the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies and the History of Art Department at the University of Cambridge. She has widely published articles in the field of Chinese art, history, and culture and is awaiting the publication of her book *Remembrance in Clay and Stone: Early Memorial and Funerary Culture of Southwest China* (Columbia University Press, 2024).

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Christopher J. Foster

Christopher J. Foster is an independent scholar. He previously served as a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at SOAS, University of London, and as the Stanley Ho Junior Research Fellow in Chinese Studies at Pembroke College, University of Oxford. He now works for the China Section of the Library of Congress. His research concerns premodern China, focusing on intellectual history, manuscript culture, primary education, and canonisation. He has recently published on new discoveries of bamboo and wood-strip manuscripts in China in Thurston and Fernández-Götz eds., *Power from Below in Premodern Societies* (Cambridge University Press, 2021) and the journal *Early China*.

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Imre Galambos is a specialist of medieval Chinese manuscripts, primarily focusing on material excavated from Dunhuang and Khara-khoto. Upon obtaining his Ph.D. from UC Berkeley, he worked for nearly ten years for the International

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Kelsey Granger is an Alexander von Humboldt Foundation Research Fellow at Ludwig Maximilian University, Munich. She focuses on material culture in seventh- to twelfth-century China with a particular interest in the commodification of the environment. Her doctoral project, completed at the University of Cambridge in 2022, centred on the phenomenon of lapdog-keeping among Tang and Song elites as well as the practice's remarkable Silk Road connections. Related canine research has been published in the *Bulletin of SOAS* and the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, for which she received the 2023 Sir George Staunton Prize.

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CHAPTER 1

Re-discovering Objects: Material Culture on the Silk Roads

Kelsey Granger and Imre Galambos

This is a volume centred on objects. The definition of what constitutes an object is relatively flexible, ranging from ritual daggers to silver dishes to painted scrolls. Several studies herein focus on text-bearing manuscripts but engage with material aspects such as paper quality or physical dimensions first and textual content, if relevant, second. These studies therefore treat manuscripts as first and foremost physical objects, rather than first and foremost texts.[1]

This is also a volume centred on the Silk Roads, a phrase that has taken on a plurality of meanings since it was forwarded by Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833–1905) in 1877.[2] This volume does not aim to present a thorough account of Silk Roads history, instead offering a series of focused studies that illuminate parts of this interwoven tapestry.

The term 'Silk Road(s)' is not without its controversies and contradictions, often invoking a sense of romanticism rather than academic specificity. Its temporal and spatial scope has been continually widened, now usually referring to the overland and maritime routes that connected Afro-Eurasia. This breadth may suggest that the term 'Silk Road(s)' has little analytical value in scholarship.[3] Nonetheless, it can still be a useful paradigm if we focus on the 'movement' or 'travel' of people and things, as suggested by Armin Selbitschka

1 An example of this methodology can be seen in Richter 2013 on a much earlier 300 BCE manuscript.

2 Von Richthofen 1877a and 1877b. The term was actually used sporadically in German-language geographic works as early as 1838 when it was mentioned once by Carl Ritter in the eighth volume of his *Die Erdkunde im Verhältnis zur Natur und zur Geschichte des Menschen*, though without the explanatory context offered later by von Richthofen. See Mertens 2019 on Ritter's use of the German phrase *Seidenstraße*. Suggested further readings on the history of the Silk Roads regions are given at the end of this introduction.

3 Critics of the utility of the 'Silk Road(s)' as a term include Ball 1998 and Rezakhani 2010. The phrase is now, as Scott C. Levi points out, so popular that it would be almost impossible to completely discard it; Levi 2020, 38. We must, then, finds ways to more closely define its meaning to ensure its utility in scholarship.

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and Xin Wen.[4] This unites people and things into one image: people moved things and things moved people.[5] A wide variety of foodstuffs, animals, plants, minerals, vessels, and textiles – practical and luxury alike – joined travellers on their journeys. These objects could be extraordinary or mundane, they could be made for travel and export or be made to *look* travelled and exotic, and could be inscribed with or accompanied by textual records.

As the sole physical remnants of complex historical processes, interrogating Silk Roads objects remains our main conduit to access local interactions with this wider network of 'trade, travel, war, and faith'.[6] Such an approach further counters the assumed primacy of commerce, trade, and merchants as the only actors on the Silk Roads, opening our eyes to consider movement motivated by religious, pragmatic, and diplomatic concerns. By focusing on the non-textual in particular, we aim to demonstrate its significance in accessing and assessing Silk Roads history.

The studies in this volume largely fall within the scope of two Chinese dynasties that expanded westwards towards the Tarim Basin – the Han 漢 empire (202 BCE–220 CE) and the Tang 唐 empire (618–907). Not all of the sites discussed, however, were necessarily part of either empire when the objects in question were produced. The first three studies focus on the newly-established Han garrisons in the Hexi Corridor and on Niya 尼雅, part of an independent kingdom in the Tarim Basin. The remaining studies situated in the Tang dynasty and thereafter focus on the independent Dali 大理 kingdom in the southwest of modern-day China, the trading nexuses of Tang China's coast and capitals, and the site of Dunhuang 敦煌 which experienced Tang, Tibetan, and independent rulership throughout this timeframe, including the short-lived Jinshan 金山 kingdom. The objects studied from these sites forge dialogues with China, the Tarim Basin oasis kingdoms, India, the Persian Gulf, Sogdiana, and even modern-day auction houses and collections in Sweden and London. The contributors themselves vary in their own research methodologies, uniting the approaches of art historians, archaeologists, curators, codicologists, and historians.

Despite the seeming breadth of possibility malleable terms like 'Silk Roads', 'objects', and 'movement' may entail, the contributions are tied together by

4 Selbitschka 2018; Wen 2023.

5 Of course, intangible ideas, religions, technologies, and diseases also moved alongside people and things, most of which can be partially accessed via surviving artefacts.

6 Quoted from the title of the exhibition 'The Silk Road: Trade, Travel, War and Faith' held at the British Library in 2004 in association with the British Museum. For the catalogue bearing the same title, see Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004.

two threads. First, these chapters all derived from talks given at the Dunhuang and Silk Road Seminar series we organised at the University of Cambridge's Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies. This seminar series brought together scholars of the Silk Roads to present cutting-edge research on the textual, material, and social history of these regions. Realising that most of the eighty-plus speakers in the series' history talked about excavated texts and, in particular, textual content, without necessarily touching on materiality, we began to wonder: what would happen if we asked speakers to start with materiality? In other words, what can the study of objects and materiality tell us that textual content alone cannot? This was both a question and a methodological test, particularly challenging when working with text-bearing manuscripts and slips, that elicited the responses published here. Despite the range of sites and types of objects, these chapters are united by answering this central question: have we, in focusing on textual content over physical and material aspects, missed vital nuance and information? The answer(s) have been surprising.

1 Discovery and Re-discovery

The concept of the Silk Roads has been subject to continual discovery and re-discovery across the past century. Sand-buried cities, sealed library caves, and stunning cave murals were all 'discovered' in the West as a result of the many geological and archaeological expeditions of the early twentieth century, themselves tied up in the geopolitics of the so-called Great Game.[7]

After the geological survey of his mentor von Richthofen, the Swedish geographer Sven Hedin (1865–1952) was the first to draw other explorers to investigate the archaeological remains of the Tarim Basin.[8] So followed the expeditions of Aurel Stein (1862–1943) on behalf of Britain, Paul Pelliot (1878–1945) for France, Albert von Le Coq (1860–1930) and Albert Grünwedel (1856–1935) for Germany, Sergey Oldenburg (1863–1934) for Russia, Count Ōtani Kōzui 大谷光瑞 (1876–1948) for Japan, and Langdon Warner (1881–1955)

7 The Great Game here refers to a period of tension between the Russian and British Empires over control and influence in Central Asia in the nineteenth century. The nature and extent of spy networks or of military intentions in Central Asia is subject to continued reassessment.

8 Sven Hedin led four expeditions into Central Asia: the first in 1893–1897 focusing on the Taklamakan Desert and including the buried city Dandan-Uiliq; the second in 1899–1902 focusing on Lop Nur and including the buried city Loulan; the third in 1905–1908 centring on the Tibetan plateau and Trans-Himalayas; and, in collaboration with Chinese explorers, the Sino-Swedish expedition of 1927–1935 which covered a range of sites in the regions of Lop Nur, Taklamakan, and Mongolia.

for the USA.[9] Each brought back manuscripts, artefacts, and murals that are now scattered across institutions around the world.[10] Their stories of daring adventures and narrow escapes from certain death captured popular attention much like real-life 'Indiana Jones' stories, imbuing the Silk Roads with enduring romance and mystique.

These expeditions also brought to light striking artefacts emblematic of East-West cultural contacts as well as texts written using a range of previously unknown scripts and languages. Such finds, including the earliest complete printed book, encouraged serious study of the region, particularly in seeking to trace Western influences out into the East.[11] The concept of, and evidence for, the Silk Roads as a conduit between East and West had been discovered. What lay between East and West was taken to be an empty in-between without the agency to disrupt, affect, or enhance this long-distance and sustained exchange of goods and technologies.

After a paucity of studies in the wake of World War II, the Silk Roads have since been re-discovered as a topic of scholarly enquiry.[12] So too has the term

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9 A summary of these expeditions is given in Rong 2013, 177–203 and the entertaining, though inaccurate, popular work Hopkirk 1980. Notable works on particular expeditions include Stein 1933, Mirsky 1977, and Whitfield 2004 on the Stein expeditions; Dreyer 2015 on the German Turfan expeditions; and Galambos and Kitsudō 2012 on the Ōtani expeditions. See also Jacobs 2011 on later reactions in China to the foreign acquisition of Dunhuang manuscripts.

10 Most of the Stein Collection is divided between the British Library (manuscripts), British Museum (paintings, objects), and Victoria and Albert Museum (textiles); while the Pelliot Collection is housed in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (manuscripts) and Musée Guimet (paintings, objects). The Berlin Turfan Collection has undergone perhaps the most traumatic and complicated journey, which included the Allied bombing of Berlin during World War II and the split of East and West Germany. The surviving manuscript fragments are now mostly held in the Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften with additional holdings in the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin. Paintings and objects were initially housed in the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin but, after sustaining damage during the bombing of World War II, were eventually re-united in the Museum für Asiatische Kunst. This collection has since been moved to the Humboldt Forum, Berlin. The Russian collections are housed at the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts in the Russian Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg (manuscripts) and the State Hermitage Museum (paintings, objects). Warner's finds, also now damaged, are housed in the Harvard Art Museums. The Ōtani Collection, resulting from the only expeditions carried out by a private individual, is now held at Ryukoku University as well as across various institutions and private collections.

11 On the earliest-dated complete printed book, the 868 wood-block print of the *Diamond sutra* acquired by Stein in Dunhuang, see Wood and Barnard 2010.

12 See Whitfield 2007; Andrea 2014; and Jacobs 2020 on the re-emergence of scholarship on the Silk Roads.

re-emerged all the more prominently in popular culture, being liberally used in tourism, business, and politics to refer to the broad concepts of 'globalisation' and 'interconnectivity'.[13] People are more inclined than ever to read and learn about, even view and visit, Silk Road sites. Such interest has galvanised annual events, exhibits, and even permanent digital displays.[14] The romance, allure, and breadth of the Silk Roads in popular culture has perhaps diverged from scholarship's closer scrutiny and re-working of the phrase. Indeed, scholarship has now evolved beyond seeing Central Asia as an 'in-between' space which contributed little to the flow of goods, ideas, and technologies. Instead, the Silk Roads have been utilised to illuminate how history happens *in*, rather than through, Central Asia.[15] Theories of large-scale, long-distance trade directly between China at one end and Europe at the other have also been dismantled.[16] Exchanges were far more local and smaller in scale than is often imagined. The components 'Silk' and 'Road' have been scrutinised and nuanced; the time-frame widened; and the geographic scope expanded to include the maritime trade routes.[17] But much of this work, effective as it is, has relied primarily on texts.

13 The phrase 'New Silk Roads' is referenced in a number of infrastructure projects, including the digital, maritime, and overland infrastructure projects of the 'Belt and Road Initiative'.

14 This includes the annual UNESCO Silk Road Week launched in 2020 involving multiple exhibitions at various Chinese museums and a guest country of honour also hosting a related exhibit. There are also permanent digital exhibitions on the topic of the Silk Roads, including the Smithsonian's *The Sogdians: Influencers on the Silk Roads*, available online here: https://sogdians.si.edu/ and *Nara to Norwich* organised by the Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures, available online here: https://naratonorwich.org/. See also Waugh 2023 for further examples of in-person and digital Silk Roads exhibitions.

15 Histories which forward Central Asia in Silk Roads history include de la Vaissière 2005 on Sogdiana and 2024 on Central Asia more broadly; Beckwith 2009; Hansen 2012; and Levi 2020 on Bukhara. This approach also builds on a concurrent re-definition of 'sedentary' and 'nomadic' trans-cultural interactions on the steppe, particularly in challenging the supposed parasitic relationship between pastoral societies and sedentary societies. Studies forwarding nomadic pastoralists as key agents in Silk Roads history and in the North-South orientation of such exchange include Christian 2000; Barfield 2001; and Honeychurch 2015. See also Whitfield 2008 on the problematic dichotomies of Central Asia vis-à-vis China in scholarship.

16 Journeys could still cover great distances, but few people ever journeyed from one end of the Silk Roads to the other; see Hansen 2012, esp. 82, 113–40, and 238. Only Sogdian traders are frequently understood to have undertaken far longer-distance journeys; see Skaff 2003.

17 On the history and evolution of the term 'Silk Road(s)' across the twentieth century, see Waugh 2007; Whitfield 2007; Chin 2013; Levi 2020, 37–69; and Jacobs 2020.

The expeditions of the early twentieth century arguably laid the foundations for current scholarship on the Silk Roads. The wealth of material finds excavated in the Hexi Corridor and Tarim Basin across the twentieth century lie in sharp contrast to a relative dearth of records discussing the same regions in official historiography. Over 50,000 wood-slips have been excavated from two sites in the Hexi Corridor, the gateway into China, from the period of Han expansion.[18] And at Dunhuang, the famed discovery of the Library Cave yielded over 60,000 manuscripts.[19] The staggering quantities of excavated finds effectively 'fill in' the dead-spots in official historiography, and by default are the primary textual sources for such research.

It is noteworthy that the number of finds often only refers to text-bearing artefacts. The total number of non-textual objects uncovered is unknown but must be significant. Collections from the same site or expedition have been needlessly divided on the basis of textual content – with the Stein, Pelliot, and Berlin Collections housing the manuscripts in a different institution to the respective objects and paintings. These non-text-bearing artefacts are also far more vulnerable than their text-bearing counterparts to transition in and out of collections with significant gaps in their provenance records.

The text-object divide becomes all the more apparent in the digital age. The work of the International Dunhuang Project has allowed scholars to 're-discover' finds they would have once needed to travel or purchase a number of catalogues to view. A search for manuscripts on the website returns 115,266 results. A search for artefacts returns just 1,402 results.[20] The slow but steady migration and dissipation of objects into various museum holdings and private collections, often without digital images or detailed provenance records, already presents researchers with quite the challenge.[21] The scattered nature of these holdings means research is similarly scattered, largely being limited to photographed items from a single museum collection or exhibition. This not only makes the integration of objects into present studies difficult, but also

18 Around 23,000 slips and 400 pieces of paper were unearthed from Xuanquan 懸泉. The Sino-Swedish Expedition uncovered around 10,000 slips at Juyan 居延, with a later survey uncovering a further 20,000 slips.

19 See Rong 2013, 137–76 and 267–426 on the major collections of Dunhuang manuscripts and their contents.

20 Even when adding the 1,261 results for paintings and 1,116 results for textiles, which both suffer major overlaps on the basis of silk paintings being counted in both categories, this still remains a paltry number compared to the manuscripts.

21 This is not, of course, the case for all institutions. For examples, the British Museum has continued to digitise parts of the Stein Collection artefacts from Astana and Khara-khoto.

reveals a long-standing prioritisation of textual content in excavations, collections, and digitisation priorities.[22]

This volume, in focusing on the material, has challenged our contributors to work with the familiar and the unfamiliar alike. This includes manuscripts from the more familiar Stein, Pelliot, and Oldenburg Collections, now studied from new, material-focused angles. Such studies highlight the sporadic inclusion of accurate measurements, photography of both sides of the manuscript, and the use of lightboxes in digital holdings, making material analysis often contingent on in-person handling. The studies on objects encountered similar problems, relying on limited photography and, depending on the institution, little additional contextualisation. If working beyond one site or collection, finding similar objects relied on manually searching the digital holdings of auction houses and museum galleries. These methodological challenges, not necessarily encountered in every study herein, highlight how scholarship has not yet fully integrated objects and material analysis in this latest re-discovery of the Silk Roads.

2 Texts as Objects

Can a text ever be totally divorced from its materiality? Texts can be neatly divided by script and language, naturally including and excluding scholars on this basis. Textual content dictates who can study and access its meaning. Materiality can also, to an extent, be divided on the basis of scientific tools or lenses, such as paper analysis, but by and large can be 'read' by anyone regardless of their particular regional specialty. Materiality is, compared to texts, more inclusive since it transcends language. One would perhaps expect that this would only encourage the appreciation of shared materiality between and across regional specialisms, but the effect has been much the opposite. The exclusivity of texts has prioritised the transcription, translation, and contextualisation of this content above even considerations of the text's material production. As Jean-Pierre Drège has recently stated, early studies of Dunhuang manuscripts took little to no interest in the materiality of these artefacts, leaving associated palaeography to languish in an embryonic state for over a century.[23]

But texts are inherently and unavoidably tied to materiality, whether written on paper, etched into ceramics, or painted onto walls. The ongoing

22 See Selbitschka 2020 on this text-centric approach in action in the broader archaeology and excavation of Chinese tombs.

23 Drège 2018.

'material turn' in the humanities would have perhaps confused those alive in the past, to whom physical object and textual content were inseparable. As finds from Turfan show, texts could even become objects, with scrap written paper being repurposed to make shoes and hats.[24] We already know from more recent studies on codicology and palaeography that materiality provides fascinating insights into the production, period, and provenance of text-bearing artefacts.[25] This is made evident in the studies in this volume that discuss the materiality of manuscripts and slips. Firstly, *Christopher J. Foster* utilises physical dimensions to accurately reconstruct the arrangement of textual content on slips excavated from Niya. In doing so, he illuminates the circulation of different versions of Chinese scribal primers on the fringes of the Han empire. *Nadine Bregler* also explores physical dimensions, here of paper manuscripts, to illustrate how the scroll format shaped the ways users engaged with and responded to textual content. And *Jing Feng's* codicological and material analysis of a series of booklets from the Dunhuang corpus reveals the wider movement of paper through Dunhuang. As these chapters attest, texts cannot be neatly divorced from their materiality. Their content, function, and circulation were invariably shaped by their dimensions and material form.

The separation of textual content from materiality also brings us to the thorny topic of literacy. We commonly overestimate the extent of the literate portion of premodern societies, even though the majority of the local population would not have been literate. This, of course, does not mean that these people could not participate in textual production, as they would have commissioned copies of scriptures for their deceased loved ones, carried charms and apotropaic texts on their persons, or worshipped in front of inscribed images at the temple. They would have commonly encountered texts as they went about their day but would have by and large perceived them visually and tactilely, rather than textually. They would have experienced texts as images rather than words.

In a sense, everyone perceives the non-textual aspects of written content, but those who can read also engage with it as language. Literacy is somewhat of a moving target when thinking about premodern societies along the Silk Roads, a region historically inhabited by multilingual populations. A variety of languages co-existed and were used in conjunction on a daily basis. Even if someone was literate in, say, Sogdian or Tibetan, they would not necessarily have been able to read Chinese, even if their contracts or travel permits were

24 See Selbitschka 2021 and 2023 on Turfan grave goods.

25 Notable codicological works include Drège and Moretti 2014; Helman-Ważny 2016; Helman-Ważny and van Schaik 2013; and Galambos 2020.

written in that language. Many of the visitors to medieval Dunhuang would have been exposed to a range of texts written in languages they could, at best, only partially understand. They would have perceived and experienced many of these texts in a non-textual manner, without the ability – or need – to understand their literal meaning.

Often, a text could fulfil its function perfectly well simply by being present. There are countless examples wherein a text proves its efficacy without anyone reading it, whether revolving inside prayer wheels spun by pilgrims, fluttering on banners blown in the wind, or serving as an apotropaic charm sewn inside someone's clothes. With these points in mind, it is clear that for a proportion of those who interacted with any text, it was perceived visually in the vein of a 'silent' object. This is further shown by *Mélodie Doumy* who discusses the use and reuse of a geomantic sketch from the Dunhuang corpus. The additions and alterations made to both sides of the manuscript highlight differing levels of engagement with the original content of the manuscript: an instructive geomantic diagram of hill formations. Later users simply saw the manuscript as a writing surface, and even re-glued the sheets together to provide further writing space at the cost of the sketch's readability. The textual, here illustrative, content was 'silent' for some users. Its physical form, however, remained relevant. For a proportion of their users, texts and objects were not experienced as separate categories.

3 Texts about Objects

We must also question whether the study of texts about objects can fully replace the study of the objects themselves. Objects, and texts about objects, were everywhere. We can perhaps imagine this world of things through the following description of Qing 清 dynasty China (1644–1911):

> Products were everywhere [...] Even for those who had never travelled, a world of goods was at hand: Scholars studied them in guides, gazetteers, *materia medica*, and personal accounts; ordinary consumers inspected them in the marketplace. Material objects mattered in early modern China: People thought, wrote, and cared about commodities more than ever before.[26]

26 Schlesinger 2017, 10.

Objects, in fact, had been thought, written, and cared about far earlier than Qing China, and such a passage could just have easily been written about the Silk Roads in the premodern period. Lists of items involved in the gift economy of ninth-century Dunhuang, preserved in the 866 copy of *Essentials of Memorandums to Nobility* (Jishi beiyao 記室備要) on the recto of manuscript P.3723, show that goods as varied as ink-stones, furniture, pomegranates, and horses circulated between people and places.[27] And these items *mattered*, warranting gift letters, legal disputes, odes, and grievances. These texts can help us 'see' objects and things which have not been preserved. Even with the aridity of the Tarim Basin preserving plentiful documents and artefacts, many of the goods that once travelled the Silk Roads have disappeared. The plants have withered, the animals have died, the foodstuffs have rotted. Sometimes, the use of textual descriptions in place of objects is unavoidable.

Nonetheless, texts about objects do not tell us the whole story. Inventory lists of tribute missions preserved in official historiography largely only note exotic products, making no mention of the other things that travellers used and brought along with them.[28] Texts can thus omit individual objects or types of objects. Texts can also mention objects in passing without sufficient detail.[29] Manuscripts mentioning textiles, for instance, may not always describe their weaving or patterning. References to animals, particularly horses and dogs, can be generic without describing what type or quality of animal is meant. A description of any object is certainly useful in research, but it can only be considered partial without comparative physical samples, if such can be found. *Arnaud Bertrand* demonstrates how an appreciation of textual descriptions alongside excavated objects can nuance our understanding of daily life on the frontier of Han China.

Certain sites may also lack texts for a variety of cultural and environmental reasons. Two chapters in this volume use objects to address religiopolitical developments otherwise insufficiently documented in textual records. *Luk Yu-ping's* study of a painted donor image from the Dunhuang collection can be situated in the short-lived Jinshan kingdom that temporarily ruled this region. The specific iconography of the Buddhist figure highlights an intriguing blend of Chinese and non-Chinese elements, suggestive of the founding

27 Even the borderline between sentient being and object was not always clear, as animals and slaves alike could function as commodities, be listed in inventories, and be bought and sold using contracts. While none of the chapters in this volume directly address this issue, it should be kept in mind that objects were not always non-sentient, lifeless items.

28 Xin 2023, 89.

29 The omission of details in texts, as shown by a comparison with archaeological material, is explored in Hood 2021.

of a regional, and political, identity. With so few records of this kingdom, this painting provides unexpected insight into its iconographic and religiopolitical networks. To the south, *Megan Bryson* discusses unusual ritual daggers unearthed from the Dali kingdom. Despite sharing similarities with Himalayan counterparts, the format, iconography, and size of the Dali daggers are more reminiscent of Javanese and Indian examples. This suggests the Dali kingdom was interconnected with these regions along the Southern Silk Road. Both of these kingdoms, lacking plentiful textual records, have instead left us with material records. Relying on texts alone means our vantage-point onto the wider Silk Roads is consequently narrowed and distorted. Forming their own archives of equal importance and relevance to texts, objects are far from 'silent' counterparts – often being powerful examples of how selective textual remains can be.

Objects were just as important as texts. Both circulated together and separately along the Silk Roads. Both played active roles in inducing human movement. Both also out-lived and out-journeyed their human makers and owners. But the lives of objects could even out-live and out-journey textual descriptions which captured only part of their lifespan. *Hajni Elias'* study of a silver dish, for instance, touches on the export trade of silver vessels from China's coast which combined the intangible travel of silverware technologies and mythical iconography into China with the tangible journeys of merchant ships across the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf. The movement and journeys of objects could also be imagined.[30] *Kelsey Granger* explores the imagined journeys distilled in a ceramic of a seated woman in foreign garb with a wine vessel that, while locally-produced, represents a vogue for fabricated exoticism. No textual reference could replicate the impact and effect of this ceramic, nor the interwoven journeys of this silver dish.

All of this is not to say that objects and material culture have been entirely absent in the study of the Silk Roads. One area in which objects dominate is research into the prehistory of the Silk Roads. This, naturally, has been precipitated by the comparative lack of written sources. This archaeological research has shown that the foundations of the Silk Roads date back at least into the Bronze Age, far pre-dating the earliest and oft-cited textual records previously used to arbitrarily date the 'birth' of the Silk Roads to the expansionist policy of Han Chinese Emperor Wu 武 (r. 141 BCE–87 BCE).[31] But this is a timeframe that lacks the same tension between history, archaeology, text, and object.

30 Knutson 2023, 131 who explores the 'imaginative' journeys instilled in itinerant coins.

31 Notable works on the prehistory of the Silk Roads include Kuzmina 2008; Parzinger 2008; Mair and Hickman 2014; Di Cosmo 2020; and Franicevic and Pareja 2023, esp. Pareja 2023.

Visual elements of Silk Roads history have also been displayed in museums and reproduced in books covering the so-called zenith of Silk Roads trade in the Han and Tang periods. However, as Daniel Waugh notes, 'it does seem as though certain objects over and over are the ones chosen to say something about the silk roads'.[32] These blockbuster items, often emblematic of the extreme long-distance movement of luxury goods and associated technologies such as glassware, are exceptional in more ways than one. Exceptional craftsmanship, exceptional preservation, but also exceptional in comparison to the many mundane items that may have been discovered *in situ* alongside the spectacular finds. Museum exhibitions, naturally, will select such artefacts to evidence the connectivity of the Silk Roads, given their need to cover such wide-ranging regions using only a limited number of items. Associated catalogues contextualising these pieces, unquestionably object-centred, seek to provide additional layers of explanation about the connectivity and history of materials, technologies, and iconographies.[33] However in drawing on such exhibitions, these catalogues subsequently focus far more on the exceptional than on the mundane. Are such exceptional finds emblematic of the *real* Silk Roads or of the *imagined* Silk Roads? What would we discover if we situated these items within the broader material culture of the site in question?[34] Instructive as these catalogues may be, is the exceptional really the rule? *Tomas L. Høisæter's* study of seals in the kingdom of Kroraina directly counters notions of grand East-West cultural exchange by situating the exceptional 'Shanshan general (*duwei*)' 鄯善都尉 seal in its proper context.

A notable example of the integration of material culture in recent years is Susan Whitfield's 2018 *Silk, Slaves and Stupas: A Material Culture of the Silk Road* which explores the Silk Roads via ten objects (two text-bearing, one architectural, one human, six objects).[35] This is a wonderful example of how studies of materiality and textual content can and should be integrated. Here, we expand on this approach to include more mundane items as well as objects from private collections, often overlooked in scholarship on the basis of their comparative inaccessibility.

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32 Waugh 2023, 546.

33 See, for instance, Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004 on the related British Library exhibition; Juliano and Lerner 2001 on the related Asia Society Museum exhibition, New York.

34 Selbitschka 2010.

35 Whitfield 2018. Her edited volume of 2019 also shows a superb integration of textual and material analysis, though the treatment of each object is briefer than in her 2018 book and in this volume. A recent addition, Wang and Overbey 2024, focuses on the circulation of manuscripts, textiles, and paintings on the Silk Roads.

4 Themes and Structure

As we have shown, textual content cannot be entirely separated from material concerns. Texts are physical objects, whose dimensions and materiality affect their current state of preservation as well as their prior usage and circulation. Particularly for those who could not or did not need to 'read' the textual content, text-bearing artefacts functioned much like any other object. The presence of text may divide the two categories in modern scholarship and in the arrangement of collections, but this is not reflective of how texts functioned at the time.

Further to this, texts about objects cannot replace the study of objects themselves. Texts omit details and capture only one iteration of an object which could go on to live a multifaceted and ever-changing life. In the case of the silver dish and ceramic, both were, for a time, 'lost' in the sands. On their rediscovery, they became highly-esteemed treasures that circulated in fine arts auction circuits. Even these auction records fail to fully elaborate on the rich lives and journeys of these items. Objects often out-live textual descriptions. Objects can also 'fill in' dead-spots where we lack equivalent textual records, as with the ritual daggers and Buddhist painting from two independent kingdoms. Certain artefacts, the exceptional blockbuster finds, do gain traction in scholarship, often to the detriment of their mundane 'housemates'.

In sum, this is a volume about objects and a volume about the Silk Roads. We do not claim that the material is *more* important than the textual. Both are equally important. But the material has perhaps received a lesser valuation in modern scholarship. The contributions herein thus implicitly focus on material aspects in order to demonstrate the utility and relevance of this approach in future research. These chapters evidence how materiality provides unparalleled insight into codicology, religiopolitical networks, exoticism, women's patronage, daily life, and scribal practices.

The volume opens with archaeologist *Arnaud Bertrand's* chapter on the lives of soldiers in the Hexi Corridor, wherein objects complement our understanding of the duties soldiers undertook while stationed in these remote outposts. Combining texts with objects here not only highlights the administrative connectivity of the region, but also the isolation of the soldiers when conflict, illness, or harsh weather struck. This is situated against Bertrand's summary of excavations in the region, wherein he discusses how archaeological agendas have clearly been shaped by a text-centric approach.

The following two chapters both centre on the site of Niya. The object-focused 'micro-histories' investigated in these chapters allow us access to macro-histories of exchange, whether of technologies, ideas, or a piece of

'home'. Consider the discovery of a Han Chinese scribal primer in distant Niya beyond the borders of the Han empire that *Christopher J. Foster* discusses. Is this evidence for Han scribal culture being forcibly impressed upon the neighbouring script-less regions by travelling scribes far from home, as transmitted textual records may support? Or is this an independent exploitation of Han scribal technology contrary to Han wishes? The micro-history of an object may have personal relevance against the wider socioreligious backdrop. For instance, *Tomas L. Høisæter's* analysis of the changing seal design of a cozbo suggests this allowed him to assert his changing religious identity. The study of seal designs in the kingdom of Kroraina further highlights the exceptional nature of the oft-discussed 'Shanshan *duwei*' seal as not being reflective of actual, everyday practice.

The next two chapters tell the life stories of two objects now housed in private collections. These items reveal a series of real and imagined journeys, involving iconographic programmes from Sogdiana, the Persian Gulf, and India. A silver dish with an unusual animal engraving, the focus of *Hajni Elias'* chapter, elucidates the process of producing export-ware featuring new and unfamiliar designs on new and unfamiliar media. In a similar vein, *Kelsey Granger's* study of ceramics of seated women forwards the hourglass stool as a fascinating vector where religious and secular iconography met. The ceramics embody conflicting uses of borrowed religious iconography and secular imagery, exemplifying a local appetite for fabricated exoticism. These ceramics may also have been commissioned or used by women, and in the absence of many texts that can be confidently identified as having been written by women, we are left with mostly objects through which to reveal their lives, habits, and interests.

Turning to broader religiopolitical contexts, *Megan Bryson's* study of ritual daggers in the Dali kingdom attests to the connectivity of the Yunnan region with Java and India. The unique adaptations exerted on these ritual daggers emphasises the ways micro, local agendas interact with macro, global trends. Similarly, *Luk Yu-ping* contextualises the unique Jinshan Buddhist painting as evidencing the proliferation of Buddhism within the short-lived Jinshan kingdom. In the absence of textual records, this painting crystallises the kingdom's adoption and adaptation of Buddhism that few other surviving witnesses (textual or material) describe. The intentional transformation of religious and ritual objects in these chapters provide a lens through which we can explore wider religious and political affiliations otherwise lost to the sands of time.

Objects are not only passive witnesses to changes enacted by human actors. The items can also be actors themselves. In essence, the object has a say in how it is used by humans. As *Nadine Bregler* demonstrates, the physical format and dimensions of a scroll encouraged varying levels of literate engagement. *Jing*

Feng's study of codices made with thinner, non-local paper further underlines how materiality shaped the formatting of textual content due to ink bleeding through the page. And in the final manuscript study, *Mélodie Doumy* analyses a geomantic sketch to evidence the circulation of manuscripts and mantic arts in Dunhuang. To study an object, then, is to appreciate that even though objects are by default the product of deliberate human action, their materiality also impacts their function, circulation, and (re)use.

Things, whether text-bearing or not, live and die over far longer timeframes than the humans who once fashioned them. Across these long lifespans, things can undergo a series of transformations. A manuscript could begin as a product of deliberate care – made from fine paper and inscribed with graceful handwritten content to accrue religious merit. Over time, the same manuscript could be reused and redefined, perhaps used in educational settings and subject to notes and doodles, or else discarded and borrowed by artists practicing parts of a mural commission. It could even end up repurposed and fashioned into other objects like shoes. So too could a fashionable ceramic figurine be commissioned and produced for a woman's grave only to end up collected, auctioned, and displayed by modern-day art enthusiasts a millennium later. Consideration of the material, of the object and of the text, allow us glimpses into the hands that fashioned and used these objects centuries ago, as well as to trace their (often incidental) preservation and re-discovery by archaeologists and explorers. With these objects now saved from the desert sands, we can begin to recount their life-stories and, as such, re-discover the wider interactions staged between people and things on the Silk Roads.

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CHAPTER 2

Insights into the Lives of Soldiers along the Hexi Corridor during the Western Han Dynasty

Arnaud Bertrand

Abstract

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, archaeological missions in western China (i.e., western Gansu and the Hexi Corridor) have led to the discovery of written and non-written material remains belonging to the officials and soldiers who lived along the border of China's Han empire. Summarising the history of archaeological expeditions and excavations in western Gansu, this chapter highlights how a focus on textual remains over non-textual objects has impacted the focus of archaeological missions, research, and understanding of this region during the Han period. This chapter then unites textual and non-textual remains to present a more complete picture of how these frontiers functioned on a daily basis. These sources amply evidence the harsh desert climate endured by garrisoned soldiers as well as the administrative system which they operated within.

Driven by the more peaceful economic and political situation at the turn of the second and first centuries BCE, Emperor Wu 武 (r. 141 BCE–87 BCE) of the Han 漢 dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) launched a strong policy of territorial expansion, extending the empire in all directions. To the northwest, the objective was to incorporate the narrow Hexi Corridor in Gansu into the imperial commandery system, preventing the Xiongnu 匈奴 (a Ural-Altaic confederation of the Steppe) and the Qiang 羌 (a proto-Tibetan confederation) from accessing the Han interior. Along this corridor, which extended from the eastern borders of the Gobi in the west to the banks of the Yellow River in the east, the Han empire constructed a frontier with defensive lines (i.e., 'long walls' 長城), forts, and frontier cities.[1] A solid administrative system was also established to keep firm grip over trade routes leading towards the Western Regions 西域. As

1 Gradually, four new imperial commanderies were established here between *c.* 111 BCE and 60 BCE, namely Wuwei 武威, Zhangye 張掖, Jiuquan 酒泉, and Dunhuang 敦煌.

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was the case for the other frontiers, thousands of Chinese soldiers were sent to guard the corridor, protect its roads, keep watch in signal towers, and inspect those venturing in or out of the empire.

Nothing more may have been said about these frontier soldiers' lives if it wasn't for the first discoveries made by Sir Aurel Stein during the winter of 1907. As negotiations to explore the famed 'Walled Library of Mogao' were underway, Stein took the delay as an opportunity to lead multiple archaeological missions to the northwest of Dunhuang. He was intrigued by what Charles-Eudes Bonin, a French diplomat who travelled to these regions in 1901, described as 'perfectly visible remains of an old tank road, abandoned, no doubt, for centuries, since the Chinese in the region not only no longer practice it, but have not even remembered it'.[2] Just a few months were enough for Stein and his archaeological team to study the remains of forts, towers, walls, and other extant materials associated with the Western (i.e., 202 BCE–9 CE) and Eastern (i.e., 25–220) Han. Ever since then, countless artefacts dating to this period have been uncovered in both Gansu and Inner Mongolia. Western (mainly Swedish) and Chinese archaeological missions have continued working in the region from the mid-1930s till today, with every expedition yielding significant breakthroughs.

The most significant discoveries, in the eyes of historians, are undoubtedly the thousands of excavated manuscripts, mostly written on wooden slips, that have been unearthed from various sites. The content of these documents often deals with the everyday administrative system developed by the Han within these northwestern commanderies. Official and military correspondence, copied and stored in the archives of commandery units, have been preserved in these arid sites. These documents provide information about many aspects of soldiers' and civilians' lives on the frontier of the Han empire, including records of soldiers' equipment; reports of enemy raids; lists of curative drugs; border inspections; and the hosting of diplomatic travellers from Central Asia. With these slips, we are able to access otherwise unknown details of these people's daily lives. From Stein's discoveries to the most recent survey in 2013, more than 100,000 slips have been recovered from numerous sites along the Hexi Corridor.[3]

2 Bonin 1901, 115–22, 180.

3 Portions of these slips are photographed and transcribed in physical catalogues for each site, with a limited amount also being digitised in online catalogues. As there is no central database of Hexi Corridor materials, researchers often focus on one corpus and use a range of different physical catalogues to try and cover the largest possible amount of excavated slips.

Even so, of the more than 2,000 sites in Gansu identified as dating to the Han period, less than 10% of these sites have been fully excavated.[4] The many fortifications built by the Han, some measuring more than 500 m wide, are simply too big to be part of any single excavation project. By first tracing the history of excavations in this region, I will show how a preference for texts over objects has directly impacted the relevance of archaeological findings and the future scope of excavation projects in the region. I will then forward an approach that unites texts and objects to nuance descriptions of daily life on the frontier. Here, I will largely focus on soldiers operating the signal towers around Dunhuang and their daily tasks – whether lighting the beacons, watching for danger, repairing the towers, or receiving deliveries from afar. While objects are forwarded here where relevant, in the absence of material findings, excavated texts highlight the importance of objects in soldiers' everyday lives. These descriptions mean future discoveries of simple bricks, clothing, or weapons can be contextualised and centred in future studies. Overall, this chapter aims to reaffirm the fact that excavated materials are just as informative as excavated texts in nuancing our understanding of life on the Han frontier, evidencing the value of treating both sources as of equal value in scholarship on Han expansion.

1 Archaeological Missions in Gansu

Since early medieval times, officials from local kingdoms or from Chinese empires were aware of the Hexi Corridor region's important historic past, including Dunhuang manuscripts like the *Illustrated Record of Shazhou* (Shazhou tujing 沙洲圖經) recorded on P.2005 and P.2695.[5] Ancient sites, *guji* 古蹟, were frequently mentioned as part of local geographical knowledge and lore, perhaps connecting contemporary rulership of the region with previous reigns. Abandoned forts and postal stations described in such texts provide us with valuable information concerning frontier constructions in western

For the site of Xuanquan 懸泉, for instance, 23,000 slips were unearthed according to the excavation report Gansu sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo 2000a but to date less than half of these have been published.

4 The number of sites is drawn from both the census of Wu 2005 and more general mapping of Gansu province.

5 See also Lycas 2020, 486.

Gansu. But it wasn't until the turn of the twentieth century that Western explorers would apply an 'archaeological' approach to these forts and defensive lines, subsequently unearthing a number of garrisons, relay stations, and signal towers alongside thousands of administrative documents.

After Aurel Stein's expedition, many others followed. The Sino-Swedish expedition of 1927–1935 led by Sven Hedin, Folke Bergman, Bö Sommarström, and the young scholar Huang Wenbi 黃文弼 enriched our knowledge of the Han dynastic past north of Zhangye city along the Ruoshui River 弱水河.[6] Huang Wenbi, one of the first Chinese archaeologists in an international team, went on to greatly contribute to the study of forts and cities in Xinjiang, including at Gaochang 高昌 (Turfan) and Loulan 樓蘭 (Lop-Nor), with the discovery of the Han period Tuyin 土銀 fort in the latter site delivering new written records.[7] As for Dunhuang itself, the Academia Sinica (Zhongyang yanjiuyuan 中央研究院), then located in Chongqing 重庆, followed by the Beijing Academy continued working on-site until 1949. These excavations were accompanied by Lao Gan 勞幹 and Shi Zhangru 石璋如 from the Institute of History and Philology, experts who also worked on the Yumenguan 玉門關 site.[8] Excavations led by Xiang Da 向達 and carried out in the field by Xia Nai 夏鼐 and Yan Wenru 閻文儒 on the ruins of Han observation towers are also worth mentioning considering their impact on Han dynasty archaeology in this region.[9]

Since the mid-1960s, Han frontier archaeology has expanded its focus. In the area between Guazhou 瓜州 and Dunhuang, archaeologists have unearthed several ancient fortified sites dating to the Han dynasty, some with textual documents. For instance, in 1964 the Dunhuang wenwu yanjiu kaoguzu 敦煌文物研究考古組 in collaboration with the Dunhuang xian wenhuaguan 敦煌縣文化館 excavated two fortified sites in the Gobi Desert, landlocked between the oases of Dunhuang and Guazhou. At about 65 km from Dunhuang, Tianshuijing 甜水井 sites 1 and 2 are located 10 km north of the 314 highway. Though no written records have been recovered from these two sites, archaeological materials (specifically daily life utensils) were published in 1975.[10] This discovery was followed by several others, either along the defensive line like Maquanwan

6 Sommarström 1956.

7 Huang 1948 and 1990, 579–621; see also Jacobs 2014.

8 See Zhao 2021.

9 Xia, Wang, and Lin 2002.

10 Dunhuang wenwu yanjiusuo kaoguzu and Dunhuang xian wenwuguan 1975.

(D21) 馬圈灣 in 1979, or along the central road like the Xuanquan 懸泉 postal relay site which was excavated between 1990 and 1992.[11]

In the twenty-first century, we have seen much concentrated work on Han expansion in the Gansu region with a focus on military forts and excavated documents. New fieldwork has continued in certain sites such as Suoyangcheng 鎖陽城, including prospection missions I led with the Dunhuang Academy (Dunhuang yanjiuyuan 敦煌研究院) from 2011 to 2020.[12] Many new sites were discovered and studied in collaboration with the preservation teams of local museums through a series of rapid prospections. Since 2013, perhaps as a consequence of the One Belt, One Road Initiative, many of these sites were part of a far-reaching preservation policy, being protected from looting and no longer freely accessible for tourists to climb on.

Despite the continued activities of archaeological teams in the Gansu region, research agendas have shifted. Until the end of the 1970s, dynastic histories, Han documents, and field reports were combined to refine knowledge of Chinese expansion in the region. From the 1980s, the gap between the number of works relating to Han documents and those dealing with archaeological artefacts is staggering. Unquestionably, most of the current research focuses almost exclusively on Han wooden slips and administrative documents, especially the many excavated documents detailing the daily lives of Han soldiers and civil servants assigned to commanderies. However, Chinese field studies conducted since the 1960s on Han military buildings have also provided a great deal of information about the lives of civilians and soldiers, aspects often neglected in present scholarship on these sites. These excavations remain secondary compared to the sites which have unveiled epigraphical material, such as Maquanwan or Xuanquan. The Tianshuijing site, among others, is hardly ever mentioned in current scholarship.

This, I feel, is a limitation in modern studies of Han expansionism in Gansu. Prioritising epigraphical sources in research means that field missions are only of interest if they bring to light new documents. Without texts, a new Han signal tower can be considered one among many others, and a new section of wall hardly alters maps already established for so many years. This logic

11 Gansu sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo 2000a, 2000b, and 2000c. Select slips have been transcribed in Hu and Zhang 2001 and Zhang and Hao 2009, though an ongoing catalogue project in eight planned volumes aims to provide photographs and transcriptions of the *c.* 18,000 slips with serial marks; Gansu jiandu bowuguan et al. 2019–2023.

12 Of course, we need to include the major archeological work led by Japanese archaeologists in Gansu such as Tomiya Itaru 富谷至. Japanese teams have always considered both written and non-written sources to present a more complete history of the region; see Tomiya 2003, 2005, and 2013.

underpins the noticeable slowdown in fieldwork carried out in the Dunhuang and Guazhou regions during the past decade. By separating the two sources, textual and archaeological, we then study the history of a commandery from only one side of a coin. Oversimplified histories of the Dunhuang commandery, whether Asian or Western, rarely consider the exact location of Han settlevments, preferring to rely on excavated Han documents supplemented by the dynastic histories, rather than actual excavations. An ongoing issue concerns the frontier cities built during the Han expansion in the Hexi Corridor and likewise the hundred plus cities built in the Gansu region. None of these sites have been fully excavated. The lack of accurate archaeological knowledge about how these cities functioned impacts our understanding of how these sites were constructed. The lack of such excavations is not due to a lack of archaeological data or of technological capacities needed to unearth these cities, but rather a methodological problem: that of trusting the Chinese character over the raw brick.

In this chapter, I instead present a selection of excavated texts and artefacts to show how both sources, when treated as equally important *objects*, can together build a more comprehensive picture of life on the frontier.

2 Surveillance Night and Day: Life in the Signal Towers of Dunhuang

From the outset of the first century BCE, four High Military Commands or *duwei* 都尉 were established for the Dunhuang commandery: Yihe duwei 宜和都尉 in the east, Zhongbu duwei 中部都尉 in the centre, Yumenguan duwei 玉門關都尉 in the northwest, and Yangguan duwei 陽關都尉 in the southwest.[13] The commander of the *duwei* was responsible for hundreds of soldiers scattered across vast territorial ranges. This bureau would be informed in writing of notable situations, such as enemy movement, building upkeep, grain reserve deposits or withdrawals, desertions, etc. Daily reports were all stored within the archives of each command centre and thereafter transmitted to the governor's office in Dunhuang. This administrative system means we have large numbers of excavated texts detailing several situations faced in each site. Though excavated texts feature prominently herein, it will be seen that objects feature as often, or even moreso, than human actors in these extracts. The information gleaned from these excavated documents, when combined with field reports and artefacts, means we can furnish even a simple brick or bundle of branches with its proper context.

13 Wu 2003; Li 2011.

Let's first consider the importance of surveillance in the signal towers along the frontier. Night and day, soldiers on duty needed to look for any movement:

> □和謹候望，明畫天田，察塞外，動靜有聞見輒□□□[14]
>
> … keep watch with zeal, clearly demarcate the celestial fields, observe the movements that take place across the border, all that you will learn, you will immediately (report?) …

During the day, soldiers dug out ditches in front of these signal towers in which reed branches would be placed to better hear approaching footfall and to slow down enemy advances. At nightfall, with visibility being poor, the soldiers used another system to supplement these ditches. The *tiantian* 天田, or celestial fields, system originally corresponded to the demarcation of agricultural fields. The Han re-employed this method to guard against any enemy invasion. A vast platform of earth or an embankment would be raked and smoothed over with sand to preserve the footprints of any intruder. Caltrops could also be placed under the sand to pierce the foot of those who stepped on it, with one example being shown in Figure 2.1.

Soldiers were responsible for the preparation and maintenance of these *tiantian*, and they were also charged with locating footprints by carrying out one or two patrols during the day. Dogs assisted the soldiers during their reconnaissance missions. According to topographic surveys by Stein, both ditches and *tiantian* were set north of the defensive line. Should an attack occur, the ditches would slow the offensive and thus give the soldiers, posted at the top of the towers, time to light the signal fires and send word. For communication along defensive lines, soldiers mainly used torches, flags, or smoke depending on the time of day. From the top of the watch towers, soldiers could light a fire to inform the entire line of a sudden enemy attack:

> 其一騎引弓鄉亭，隧張弩鄉虜，二即去。 … 其令車騎驚試，謹候望驚烽火，請塞下。[15]
>
> Among the horsemen, one of them bent his bow in the direction of the signal tower. The crossbow(s) of the observation post was/were pointed in the direction of the barbarians, two of whom immediately fled … That

14 As given in *Dunhuang Han jian*, 2087 (hereafter DHHJ). The blank squares here indicate the presence of a written character that is now illegible. Translations loosely follow those given in French in Chavannes 1913, 49 no.265.

15 DHHJ, 1676; translation loosely follows Chavannes 1913, 49 no.172.



FIGURE 2.1
Photograph of a caltrop in the Yangguan Museum

> the riders and intendants be ordered to be on alert, keep watch and warn with signal fires, and fall back inside the border.

As part of the Han defence system, these smoke signals were essential in communicating enemy advances. According to Sven Hedin's description of Clay Tower A at the CLIX Camp in Loulan, the fires were lit inside a receptacle made from tiles and chalk that was placed in a bronze cauldron. From the excavation of different signal towers, it seems that the fuel consisted of an assembly of reeds and rushes that were commonly found in these regions close to rivers. Some examples involve layers of reeds arranged one on top of the other attached to pieces of wood for more efficient combustion. On this matter, Aurel Stein notes: 'branches of local wood (tamarisk, poplar) are fixed vertically in the layers of reeds to ensure the strength of the bundle when they are set ablaze'.[16] A photograph of one such stack is given in Figure 2.2, which was excavated near Yumenguan's fortified wall.

16 Stein 1921, 1:110.



FIGURE 2.2 Photograph of a bundle of tamarisk branches unearthed near the fortified wall of Yumenguan

Should the enemy either set up an encampment close to the defensive line or raid the commandery frontier, the signal towers would use flags and bells in addition to smoke signals. Hearing these alerts, the gatekeeps, military garrisons, and agricultural garrisons would reinforce their defences and send a defined number of soldiers to the front.[17] Any defensive or offensive movement would then be reported and transmitted to the *duwei* office. The use of ditches and *tiantian* to ensure time for sending smoke signals underlines the importance of these fires, as is further emphasised here:

> 扁書亭隧顯處，令盡諷誦知之。精候望，即有峰火，亭隧回度舉。毋必 …[18]
>
> Notice to be posted in a visible place (of the residence) of the post office, so that all know it by heart. That one exercises perfect surveillance, and, as soon as there is a fire signal, (all) the stations and towers in turn raise theirs. Let there be no negligence [and obey orders].

17 Xing 2020, 10.

18 DHHJ, 1802; translation loosely follows Chavannes 1913, 97 no.432.

Posting proper surveillance protocol in a public place stresses the importance of signal towers for communicating along defensive lines. Archaeological evidence from these signal towers thus informs us about the daily tasks of soldiers working in and around these sites and their role in protecting Han expansion in this region.

3 Tower D3: Harsh Weather and Constant Repairs

About 60 km southwest of the Yumenguan *duwei* stood a very particular military station, as shown in Figure 2.3. As Stein puts it in his report, it stood:

> … on a narrow gravel-covered ridge […] Both the centre of the ridge and the last outlying clay terrace, or Mesa, were occupied by towers, a fact which, being unusual on this flank of the Limes, was bound to attract my attention at once. As the distance between them was less than three miles, and as the tower on the ridge, T.vi.b, lay well behind the line, this could not have been intended for a mere signalling post. The debris adjoining the tower on the east seemed to indicate quarters somewhat larger than usual. So, the thought soon suggested itself that the position marked by the ruin might have been that of some main station that controlled this flanking section of the Limes.[19]



FIGURE 2.3 Map locating Tower D3

19 Stein 1921, 2:644.

Tower D3, or as Stein labels it, T.VI.B, was an observation post or *sui* 隧 and was one of several towers built to the north and west of the commandery. With attached mud brick quarters, the tower housed a staff of no more than six soldiers who rotated in and out of this posting. Most of the 270 documents discovered at this site refer to orders received by the central government or transmitted by the general of Yumenguan.[20]

Whereas signal towers were built using a rammed earth structure (without any inner structure), this tower was made from baked bricks. A wooden door led to a narrow corridor before reaching the inner chambers, here being comprised of three rooms. The dividing walls were no more than 5 cm thick and were formed by a single row of plastered-faced bricks. One room contained a low sleeping platform constructed from plaster and this space would probably also have been used as an office, since eight wooden documents were found preserved here. The largest room was probably used as accommodation for the men on duty. In the northeastern corner, a fireplace was separated from the rest of the chamber by a thin, round clay wall. In case of low temperatures (the climate here can vary from highs of 40°c–45°c in summer to lows of –15°c in winter), portable braziers were placed elsewhere to heat the inner chambers. Finally, an internal staircase led to the tower observation terrace.

The variability of the climate in this region brings us to another crucial activity: repairs. As Michael Loewe aptly states: 'Watch-towers, barrack-rooms, and defensive walls, once built, required constant repair and maintenance, in view of the ravages of the climate'.[21] The Gobi, which at that time was already a very extensive desert, may appear calm, but when the wind picks up speed, it becomes an incredibly hostile environment. In 2007, for instance, harsh winds upturned ten carriages of a train, and hurricane-force gales measuring 75 mph are recorded every fifteen to twenty days. Some of the highest wind speeds have been measured at over 120 mph.[22] In these conditions, sediment and sand are projected high into the sky and can travel for many miles, destroying any structure they come across.

While patrolling the border was the primary task required of the soldiers, they were also charged with ensuring the structures they served in remained

20 Tower D3 follows Wu Rengxiang's labelling system given in Wu 2005, 198. GPS: 40°10′1.52″N; 93°12′57.52″E.

21 Loewe 1961, 19.

22 Fecht 2020.

intact. The following wooden slips, some discovered from Tower D3 and others from signal towers located in the near vicinity, illustrate the daily task of making bricks ready for inevitable repairs. First, we see two men capable of producing a large quantity of bricks:

> 二人積塼五千五百六十，率人積二千七百八十塼。[23]
>
> Two men piled 5,560 bricks; per man, this makes a total of 2,780 bricks.

However, this was by no means a simple task. Beginners to brick-making proceeded much more slowly, as seen (and excused) here:

> 丁未六，人作塼四百廿，率人七十。初作。[24]
>
> On a *dingwei* day, six men made 420 bricks. That is, for each man, 70 bricks. This is the first time they have done it.

In the following slip, *mafu* 馬夫 is likely a mortar used to protect the wall, and which was made from a mixture of lime and straw. The soldier probably plastered an entire military station in this way:

> 一人馬夫塗亭戶前地。二百七十尺。[25]
>
> A man (plastered) with *mafu* to coat the ground in front of the door, a surface area of 2,710 *chi*.

Furthermore, hammers, scoops, and brick moulds used to repair the fortification have been excavated from Tower D3.[26] Soldiers would also take time to repair the internal structure, with the wooden brackets that held tools and arrow slits needing to be replaced from time to time. Three such brackets from Tower D3 and an arrow slit are given in Figures 2.4 and 2.5.

In addition to general wear and tear to the structures, particularly the well-trodden stairs and roof platforms, enemy attacks also damaged the buildings.

---

23 DHHJ, 1881.

24 DHHJ, 1997.

25 DHHJ, 1787. *Mafu* is also referenced in DHHJ, 1760; translated in Chavannes 1913, 37 no.106.

26 See, for example, DHHJ, 107.

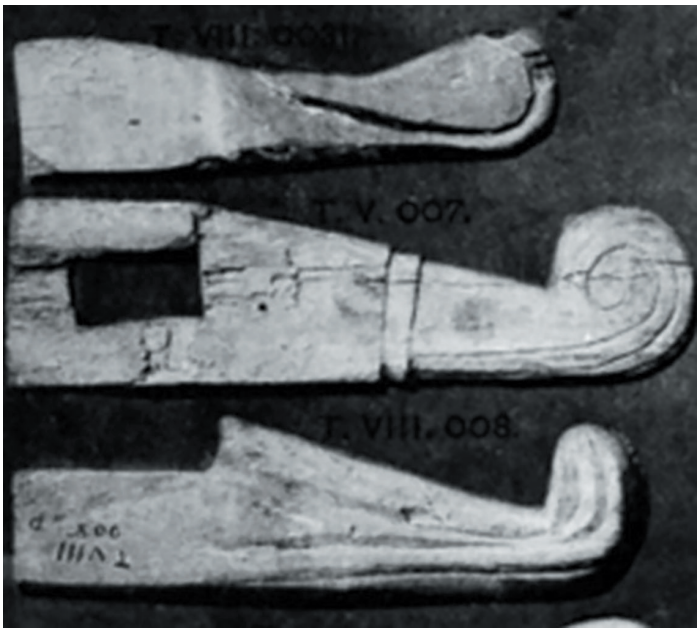


FIGURE 2.4 Wooden door latches from Tower D3



FIGURE 2.5 Photograph of an arrow slit for shooting or observing

Attempts to storm certain towers are often mentioned in the wooden slips, and the following example neatly outlines response protocol to different attacks:

> 望見虜一人以上入塞，燔一積薪，舉二烽，夜二炬火。見十人以上在塞外，燔舉如一人，須揚。望見虜五百人以上，若攻亭障，燔一積薪，舉三烽，夜三炬火。不滿二十人以上，燔舉如五百人同品。虜守亭障燔舉：昼舉亭上烽，夜舉離合火，次亭燧和燔舉如品。[27]
>
> If you observe one enemy or more entering through the barrier, [by day] light one woodpile and raise two signals/flags, by night [raise] two torches. If you observe ten enemies or more outside of the barrier, light and raise [the signals] as if it was for one enemy [entering the barrier], raise [the signal] with application. If you observe five hundred or more enemies attacking a tower or fort, [by day] raise one torch and light three stacks of woodpiles, by night light three stacks of firewood. When there are no more than twenty men, light the signal as if it was for five hundred men. The [signals to be] lit and raised when the enemies besiege a tower or fort: by day set up the signal on top of the tower, by night, wave with torches on top of the look-out [tower]. The signal towers and stations next in line shall light and raise [their signals] accordingly.[28]

In sum, the climate of the region and the proximity of sometimes hostile forces could cause damage to the remote structures of signal towers and outposts. Archaeological findings once again clarify the tasks of soldiers beyond expected duties related to surveillance. Just as ditches and *tiantian* were vital in buying time for the lighting of signal fires, brickmaking, plastering, and general upkeep were essential to maintaining surveillance capabilities in these regions.

4 Rations, Weapons, and Letters: Other Material Finds from Signal Towers and Outposts

Beyond repairing existing structures, one document reveals how a new military outpost west of Dunhuang was established. The following order came from

27 DHHJ, 1828; translation loosely follows Chavannes 1913, 49 no.172.

28 These orders were drawn up by the commandery and sent to each outpost. The rules concerning codes and signals could change from one year to another, and so many documents we have from Dunhuang, but also in other regions of Gansu, bear very similar commands which were updated. See Giele 2011, 18–19. It was also paramount that each soldier learn the code by heart; if one soldier did not follow the official code then, depending on the chain of events, the soldier could be prosecuted.

the bureau of Jiuquan and was discovered within the remains of Tower D3. Although this document is not dated, we can assume it was an order recorded during the first century BCE, since many other documents with similar content were discovered in the Hexi Corridor during this period. This order reads:

> 制詔酒泉太守、敦煌郡：到戍卒二千人茭酒泉郡其假□如品。司馬以下與將卒長吏將屯要害處，屬太守察地刑依阻險堅辟壘遠候望里走倌里。毋 …[29]
>
> Imperial Order to the Governor of Jiuquan (and?) to the Dunhuang Commandery: two thousand soldiers from the garrison of the Jiuquan Commandery will arrive … according to the code. The Colonel/Marshal and his subordinates with the generals, soldiers, leaders, and officials will select a place to set up an agricultural colony. It will be up to the governor [of Dunhuang] to examine the layout of the premises; taking advantage of the natural obstacles, a rampart will be set up to exercise long distance surveillance and establish posts at good distances. Let there be no [negligence and obey orders].

The order was copied by the scribes of every military station it passed through until it reached its destination. Upon receiving documents which were to be archived, a label was written and attached to the message indicating its content. A good example of this can be seen from the following label discovered from Tower D81 (T.XXVII) located on the northeastern bank of the Dunhuang oasis:

> *Front*
> 兵完折傷簿
>
> Register of Intact and Damaged Military Equipment
>
> *Back*
> 始建國天鳳元年：玉門(關都尉)大煎都(候官)兵完堅折傷簿。[30]
>
> First year of the Jianguo tianfeng reign era (14 CE): Record of intact and damaged military equipment from the Dajiandu (houguan) of the Yumenguan (duwei).

29 DHHJ, 1780. On this document, see He 2011, 5.

30 DHHJ, 1925a and b; translation loosely follows Chavannes 1913, 72 no.307.

In Tower D3, writing tools were also found inside the chambers.[31] After being archived in the tower for a month or so, the letter had no more use and so conscripts could have used it to practice their handwriting. By scratching clean the surface, these slips could be re-used for another message.[32]

Inkeeping with the present code, soldiers arriving at these newly-established garrisons came with their own rations, as is confirmed in transmitted texts, and were given equipment by their own commandery.[33] The light commandery equipment the soldiers came with was registered at the general military headquarter before they were authorised to travel to the outpost. Some of these military materials (i.e., blades, shields, and crossbows) are referenced in the following documents discovered in Tower D3 which date to the second half of the first century BCE:[34]

> 戍卒河東郡汾陰高汜里，張賢，三石具弩。[35]
>
> Garrison soldier Zhang Xian from Gaobang Hamlet, Fenyin [District], Hedong Commandery. A crossbow of the force 3 *shi*.
>
> 戍卒河東郡皮氏長子里，趙樂世，四石具弩。[36]
>
> Garrison Soldier Zhao Yueshi from Zhangzi Hamlet, Pishi [District], Hedong Commandery. A crossbow of the force 4 *shi*.

Both conscripts came from Hedong Commandery 河東郡 east of the Yellow River in Shanxi and just over 1,500 km from Dunhuang. This was known to have been an important place for military enrolment during the former Han period.[37] Other soldiers, such as Du Chong 杜充, did not have the chance to come

31 Another writing brush was found in Tower D5 and is housed in the Dunhuang Historical Museum 敦煌歷史博物館.

32 On this subject, see Drège 2014 and Hou 2014, 58–73.

33 *Hanshu* 94B.3824–25.

34 On blades and their use in the military outposts of the Hexi Corridor, see Sanft 2016. A double-edged iron blade from Tower D3 is photographed in Stein 1921, 4: pl. 52.

35 DHHJ, 1891; translation loosely follows Chavannes 1913, 29 no.73.

36 DHHJ, 1921; translation loosely follows Chavannes 1913, 29 no.74.

37 Trombert delivers a quite extensive argumentation on the omnipresence of civilians and soldiers coming from the Hedong Commandery, see Trombert 2021, 131–34.

with their own equipment, and had to borrow a shield and another weapon (perhaps a pair of small blades?) of inferior quality:

> 戍卒河東郡汾陰宜都里，杜充。所假姑臧赤盾一，口兩，端小傷各一所。[38]
>
> Garrison soldier Du Chong from Yidu Hamlet, Fenyin District, Hedong Commandery. What he received on loan is: one red shield and a spare pair of … (small blades?) slightly damaged at both extremities.

For every weapon that was given to these soldiers, a thorough quality check was made on the weapon's return, as in the following:

> • 右厭胡隧卒四人口， … 口矢六百口，其九十三羽完(干?)呼，冊七羽敝干口呼，六十一羽敝干完。三百九十七完。服一完。[39]
>
> For the four soldiers from Yanhu Tower, … 600 arrows. Of these bolts, (we count) 93 with feathers intact but with a split shaft (?); 47 with damaged feathers and a split shaft; 61 with damaged feathers and an intact shaft. 397 are totally intact. A quiver is intact.

Once soldiers arrived at their posting at any signal tower, they were charged with making bricks; preparing food; surveillance; and inspecting passers-by. Loewe also suggests that soldiers were perhaps involved in grain transportation; gathering fuel and fodder; and transporting and storing such goods.[40] Here, an expedition to make bricks is discussed:

> 丁未，騎士十人。其一人候，其一人爲養，人作百五十凡墼千二百，其八人作墼。[41]
>
> On a *dingwei* day, [there were] ten riders. One of them stood guard, one of them did the cooking. The other eight made bricks, each man made 150 bricks. In all, 1,200 bricks were made.

---

38 DHHJ, 1921; translation loosely follows Chavannes 1913, 31 no.77.

39 DHHJ, 1784; translation loosely follows Chavannes 28, no.71. The dot here references a similar dot of ink impressed on the wood slip.

40 Loewe 1961, 16.

41 DHHJ, 2157.

In sum, every man had a role to play. Beyond maintaining surveillance over the area and performing upkeep on the stations, these tasks were also often essential for the post's self-sufficiency.

The landscape at that time was far greener than nowadays, and so the lines of communications leading west towards the Lop-Nor region followed the Shule River 疏勒河. With its source at Nanshan 南山 south of the Hexi Corridor, this river was connected with Lake Lop-Nor and the Tarim Basin. In addition, clean water could be obtained from wells dug close to the towers. The aridity of this region has also preserved many of the foodstuffs consumed by the soldiers posted to these remote towers.[42] Every month, conscripts received half their salary in the form of grains (i.e., barley, millet etc.) from the granary of each *duwei* and half in coins.[43] They also received equipment like clothing or weapons and food rations, including salt and grains.

Though soldiers, local scribes, and officials were never entirely isolated from one another (particularly during the Western Han period), the men had to be self-sufficient for a certain time. When, for instance, a soldier fell sick, it would take a few days for the message to reach headquarters. During this time, local soldiers could only attempt to attend to the wounded and cure the sick if, of course, that was even possible. For Gan Chi 榦赤, it was not:

> 戍卒潁川郡陽翟邑口堯里，榦赤，病死 …[44]
>
> Garrison soldier Gan Chi from Yingchuan Commandery, Yangdi Town, … yao Village, died from illness…

Beyond sickness, the remoteness of these outposts could awaken deep-rooted fears among the soldiers. Many centuries later, as the monk Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664) travelled beyond Yumenguan to reach the Western Regions, he encountered an old man who warned him: 'Stop here for a moment on your journey West […] I must warn you that there is a pack of vicious ogres and fierce wolves on this mountain. They eat travellers from the East who are heading West. […] The road is filled with ghosts, demons, and hot blasts so

42 This includes remains of barley, glutinous millet, and foxtail millet unearthed from a beacon tower in 1963 and wooden cooking spoons, all being held in the Dunhuang Historical Museum.

43 For these matters, see Trombert 2021, 151.

44 DHHJ, 2267, also given in Maspero 1953, 29 no.50.



FIGURE 2.6
Scary bearded faces drawn on wood in front of the main doors of the Dunhuang commandery

no travellers had ever reached their goal'.[45] Even though the lock-bar of the tower's main door was intended to keep unwanted *human* intruders out, soldiers placed pointed wooden slips or *songren* 松人 with scary faces here as a kind of protective talisman, as given in Figure 2.6. Indeed, we can only imagine the legends that circulated in these remote areas, where strange noises could frighten even the most courageous of men.

One last consideration of the daily life of soldiers relates to clothing. A garrison soldier named Zhang Fengshang 張奉上 was said to have been loaned several items, as follows:

45 Despite the warnings, Xuanzang replied: 'I'm seeking the authentic Dharma and shall not return to the East until I reach India. I shall have no regrets even if I die on the way'. Transl. in Bhat and Wu 2014, 32.448.

> 皂布袍一領出，緹行□一出，白練裘襲一領出，尚韋二兩一出，□一皂布單衣一領出，狗衣□二兩一出，皂布褲一兩出。[46]
>
> Release of one black hemp robe outgoing; one reddish travelling … outgoing; one white silk fur jacket outgoing; two pairs of leather boots outgoing; one unlined black hemp undercoat outgoing; two pairs of dog clothes outgoing; one pair of black hemp trousers outgoing.

If the clothes given by the local military unit were not sufficient, soldiers could ask their wives to bring new garments. There is no better example of this than the wife of a soldier trying to reach her husband, who was on patrol duty in the Yumenguan *duwei*, to deliver his clothes:

> 元康元年十月壬寅朔甲辰，關嗇夫廣德佐熹敢言之：敦煌壽陵里趙負趣自言夫訢爲千秋隧長，往遺衣。用以令出關，敢言之。
>
> In the first year of the Yuankang era, in the tenth month having *renyin* as the first day, on the *jiachen* day (5th of November, 65 BCE), Xi, the auxiliary of Guangde, dared to say this: Zhao Fuqu [resident] in Shouling Village [district] of Dunhuang herself declares that her husband Xin is the head of the Qianqiu outpost. She goes to meet him to give him clothes. In accordance with the ordinances, let her cross the pass. I say this.[47]

Zhao Fuqu was registered in the district of Dunhuang, and therefore had to travel a great distance to her husband's patrol area. We are able to trace the route she had to take to reach the Tower D3 on the northwestern extremity of the Yumenguan *duwei*. Leaving Dunhuang, she had to follow the road leading north, passing from relay-station to relay-station until arriving at her destination. In total, if we assume she came from Dunhuang where she is registered, she would have covered more than 150 km, as mapped with a dotted white line in Figure 2.7. Since 30 km was the average distance covered by horse, or 22 km by chariot, in a day, it may be assumed that the full journey took at least eight or nine days. This was a long journey which the wife had to prepare for, and for which she had to have administrative proof so that she could pass through each relay-station.

46 DHHJ, 1947; loosely translated from Chavannes 1913, 28–29, no.72.

47 DHHJ, 796.



FIGURE 2.7 Map showing the route of the soldier's wife

5 Using Excavated Artefacts in the Study of Han Frontiers

Soldiers and officials living and working at the frontier of the Han empire were part of a hierarchal administrative system. This much we can glean from both received and excavated materials. However, what transmitted sources veil are the human experiences of these borderlands. Back-breaking labour making bricks and failed first attempts to learn the craft; long journeys to deliver clothes to one's husband out on patrol; preparation of celestial fields; and one man's mission to plaster his entire military station – these moments are just a fraction of the names and experiences yet to be excavated. Not only can these findings humanise what is otherwise a top-down view of frontier expansion and administration, but these artefacts also nuance our understanding of the expectations, restrictions, and interconnections layered on Han civilians and soldiers.

While excavated documents have perhaps outnumbered physical objects in this chapter, the documents themselves are replete with references to objects. A soldier's life, in particular, revolved around objects. He was outfitted with clothing and weapons, which were to be inspected on release and return, and which were scrutinised in dedicated inventories and lists. He was paid in coins and foodstuff, with both cash and grain alike subject to reams of ledgers and reports. Soldiers inspected, used, and made objects every day. Without considering objects, we cannot begin to describe a soldier's duties or a building's functions. Equally, without consulting excavated documents, a brick remains a simple brick, and a bundle of branches a simple bundle of branches. By uniting our findings, bricks are textured by the hands who crafted them, and every bundle of branches is a preparation for invasion. These findings not only allow

us to identify how objects were used, but also affirms the importance of including material findings, when they are unearthed, in scholarship.

While we cannot always understand how frontier soldiers felt, though some like the later poet Li Bai 李白 (701–762) have tried, this archaeological information furnishes day-to-day existence in these remote regions. This is precisely why archaeological projects are so important in the Gansu region, and why an appreciation of texts *and* artefacts is vital for furthering future breakthroughs. Not only should we make more comprehensive use of the field reports and non-textual artefacts discovered thus far, but we also must continue to integrate text and object to forward comprehensive and nuanced readings of Han expansion.

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CHAPTER 3

Writing beyond Han Boundaries: A Scribal Primer at the Niya Site

Christopher J. Foster

Abstract

Along the Southern Silk Road, an oasis state known as Jingjue 精絕 in Chinese or Caḍota in Kharoṣṭhī once flourished at the turn of the first millennium. Among the remains of this state discovered at the site of Niya 尼雅 are hundreds of manuscripts written in both Chinese and Kharoṣṭhī scripts. This chapter conducts a close examination of two fragmentary wood-strip manuscripts bearing text from the *Cang Jie pian* 蒼頡篇, an important primer used by the neighbouring Han 漢 empire (206 BCE–220 CE) to train its scribes. Through attention to the materiality of these two pieces, the chapter extrapolates back to the original appearance of the manuscript(s) to uncover their potential roles and users at the site. Previous scholarship has argued that the Han court purposefully disseminated the *Cang Jie pian* to oasis states to establish a *lingua sinica* and implement a Han political agenda in the region. Here an alternative hypothesis is raised, where the *Cang Jie pian*'s presence at Niya signals an appropriation of Chinese script by local kingdoms along the Han empire's peripheries, exploiting the technology to their own ends.

A series of oases run along the southern edge of the Tarim Basin, whose respite from the harsh Taklamakan sands historically allowed travellers to traverse what is now commonly known as the 'Southern Silk Road'. In antiquity, these desert havens played host to numerous oasis states.[1] Remains of one such oasis state lay to the north of the modern-day city of Niya 尼雅 in Minfeng County 民豐縣, known in Chinese records as the state of Jingjue 精絕 and later in Kharoṣṭhī documents as Caḍota.[2] When Aurel Stein first came across the remains of this 'old town' (hereafter the Niya site) in 1901, he was taken

1 Di Cosmo 2000, 393–407; Høisæter 2017a, 339–63.

2 For descriptions of the community at the Niya site, see Atwood 1991, 161–99; Lin 1996, 53–59; Hansen 2004, 279–315 and 2012, 67–132; and the dissertations by Padwa 2007 and Høisæter 2020.

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aback by the superb preservation afforded by the arid environment, dubbing it his 'own little Pompeii'.[3] Stein would return to the Niya site on each of his subsequent expeditions (1906, 1913, and 1931), and a number of other archaeological surveys were conducted here afterward, including those by the Xinjiang Museum and China's National History Museum in 1959 and, more recently, a joint Sino-Japanese endeavour lasting from 1988 through 1997.[4] Their surveys have detailed ancient orchards and water tanks, discovered colourful silks, and exhumed strikingly life-like mummies.

Hundreds of manuscripts have also been unearthed from the Niya site, written in Kharoṣṭhī and Chinese scripts.[5] These manuscripts are mostly made from wood, though rare exceptions exist, including writing on leather hide, embroidered silk, and other media.[6] Prominent among the Kharoṣṭhī manuscripts are paired tablets, which are wide rectangular or wedge-shaped boards, which when pressed together hide the main text of the document between them.[7] Grooves held cords that bound the two tablets together, and clay pressed into a socket in the covering tablet sealed the bindings. Another notable form of Kharoṣṭhī tablet is the *takthī*-type, namely unpaired rectangular wooden boards that include a small, diamond-shaped handle with a hole for stringing. The vast majority of Chinese manuscripts at the Niya site, however, use simple, slender strips of wood as their writing support, carrying a single column of text.[8] The use of such strips, both circulating in isolation and bound

3 Letter to Percy Stafford Allen (nicknamed Publius) on December 8th 1913, as cited in Mirsky 1977, 363.

4 Stein 1907, 1921, and 1928; documents S.224 and S.225, held in Weston Library, Oxford; Wang 2004; Xinjiang Weiwuer zizhiqu bowuguan kaogudui 1961, 119–22, 126; Zhong Ri gongtong Niya yiji xueshu kaochadui and Nicchū kyōdō Niya iseki gakujutsu chōsatai of three volumes dated to 1996, 1999, and 2007, hereafter SJR; and Zhong Ri Niya yizhi xueshu kaochadui 2014, 3–183, hereafter SJBR.

5 A single document written on a paper pouch in Sogdian was found at the Niya site as well; Sims-Williams and Bi Bo 2018, 83–104.

6 Paleographic sources range from inscribed seals, to an instance where the character *wang* 王 'king' was written on a interred pot, apparently drawn by finger.

7 For publications of the Kharoṣṭhī manuscripts, in addition to the reports by Stein and SJR, see Boyer, Rapson, Senart, and Noble 1920–1929; Burrow 1940; and the catalogue of sources maintained online by www.gandhari.org. Useful overviews may also be found in Padwa 2007, 96–117 and Høisæter 2020, 83–112.

8 For publications of the Chinese manuscripts, see Chavannes 1913 and Wang, Hu, and Wu 2007, 145–50. For a convenient compilation of transcriptions and annotations given by various scholars for the strips found at Niya, see Han 2013. A special subset of strips from Niya are a series of gift tags that have a notched end around which a cord could be wrapped

into multi-strip rolls, is attested by analogous finds, in large quantities, made in the Hexi Corridor from the late second to early first century BCE onward and even further to the east, with the earliest example dating to 433 BCE, where bamboo was commonly utilised for the strips as well.[9]

Among the Chinese manuscripts at the Niya site is a Han 漢 scribal primer, called the *Cang Jie pian* 蒼頡篇 (or 'Cang Jie volumes', Cang Jie being a mythical inventor of writing).[10] Wang Yue 王樾 first identified the presence of the *Cang Jie pian* here, with his study of N14:1 (Figure 3.1), a wood strip collected from the site in 1993.[11] It turns out that this is not an isolated case, and I have recently identified a second strip with *Cang Jie pian* content, N.XIV.20 (Figure 3.2), recovered during Aurel Stein's fourth expedition in 1931.[12] The *Cang Jie pian,* which lists out hundreds of terms, both mundane and sophisticated, in rhyming lines, belonged to a corpus of *shishu* 史書 or *shipian* 史篇 'scribal volumes', on which Han scribes were trained in government-sanctioned schools and tested for advancement to bureaucratic office.[13] This begs the question: what was a Han scribal primer doing so far out in the heart of the Taklamakan Desert, at the small oasis state of Niya?

(e.g., N.XIV.III.1). Exceptions to the strip format for the Niya Chinese manuscripts include a few wider boards with two columns of text (e.g., N.XIV.II.1) and a covering tablet (N.XV.345).

9 Introductory overviews of Chinese wood- and bamboo-strip and tablet manuscripts may be found in Tsien 2013 and Shaughnessy 1997, especially Michael Loewe's chapter therein, 'Wood and Bamboo Administrative Documents of the Han Period', 161–92 for the Hexi Corridor finds. The earliest bamboo strips excavated to date are from the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng 曾侯乙, see Hubei sheng bowuguan 1989 and Habberstad 2014, 181–219.

10 In the present chapter, I reserve the term 'Han' 漢 without further qualification to refer to (1) the Han dynasty as a political entity ; (2) members of that political entity, such as the Han court or Han scribes; and (3) the historical period in which this political entity was operative. Similarly, when not describing a modern entity, 'Chinese' refers to either (1) a script type; or (2) the language.

11 Wang Yue 1998, 55–58. Wang discusses two strips, N14:1 and N14:2, as being found together, however I only consider the first as a witness to the *Cang Jie pian*. See n.45 below. A larger colour photograph of the strip in Figure 3.1 may be found in Wang 2003, 91 and Xinjiang tongshi tulu bianzhua weiyuan hui 2019, 261. The line-drawing itself was based on the image in Chō 2006, 57.

12 Fu 2018; Foster 2021a, 419–64. This chapter translates, updates and expands upon Fu 2018. A high-quality image of N.XIV.20 is also published in Wang, Hu, and Wu 2007, 150. For more on the photographs of Stein's fourth expedition strips, see Wang 1998b; Falconer 1998; and Foster 2021a, 18.

13 Foster 2017a and Foster 2021b, 175–201. Note that my use of 'scribe' refers to those in the Han bureaucracy who had earned *shi* 史 status, and not a general term for 'writer'.

The following chapter, embracing the theoretical commitments of this volume, investigates the materiality of the *Cang Jie pian* strips as a necessary preliminary to answering this question, which is to say, to understanding the lives these artefacts once lived. Materiality here refers not only to the physical form of the strips as writing supports, but also to their textual formatting



FIGURE 3.1
Line-drawing of *Cang Jie pian* strip #N14:1, a re-joined wood strip fragment from the Niya site. It bears lines from the *Cang Jie pian* that read: 'Gorge, ravine, bank, precipice, hillock, hill, past, old, elongate, prolong, stretch, extend, overflowing, [brimming] ...' (谿谷阪險丘陵故舊長緩肆延渙[奐])

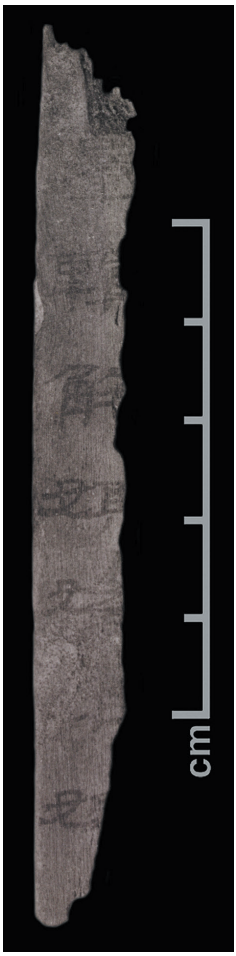


FIGURE 3.2
Cang Jie pian strip #N.XIV.20, a wood strip fragment from the Niya site. It bears lines from the *Cang Jie pian,* that read: 'Axil wrap, bound crossbar (for leaning on in a carriage), untie, discontent, obstinate, darkened (with embarrassment), shamed' ([暈]輵解姎[婷][點]媿).[13]

and calligraphy, as well as the location of their deposition *in situ*. This chapter conducts an experiment, extrapolating from the limited data afforded us by the chance discovery of these two fragmentary pieces of wood to imagine the most likely original appearance of the manuscript or manuscripts to which they once belonged. The objective is to uncover the motivations and influences operative behind production of the Niya *Cang Jie pian* manuscript(s), which can help inform us about the roles and users of the manuscript(s).

1 Presentation of the Writing

A crucial observation at the heart of my experiment concerns the presentation of the writing on the recto of the Niya *Cang Jie pian* manuscript(s), and how

the text maps over onto the physical space of each writing support. Both N14:1 and N.XIV.20 are broken fragments of what were originally longer strips. It is therefore difficult to pinpoint where the extant characters were once located on each strip relative to the given writing support's original appearance when intact. The spacing of the characters vis-à-vis one another and the edges of the (now broken) writing supports, however, provides a clue, and allows us to anchor the currently visible characters on the fragmentary pieces relative to where they once were located on the strips prior to their breaking.

In the case of N14:1, there is an unusually large amount of space left above the first character on the strip, *xi* 谿 'gorge' (~1.3 cm).[14] The characters written on N14:1 are otherwise spaced evenly, and the space left above *xi* far exceeds the range seen between characters elsewhere (~0.3–0.7 cm). Note also the level edge above *xi*, which lacks jagged tears, as seen at the break between *huan* 緩 'prolong' and *si* 肆 'stretch', or with the bottommost edge below the final character, *huan* 渙 'overflowing'. For these reasons, I consider the fragment N14:1 to be what was originally the top part of the strip when the strip was intact.

Similarly, on N.XIV.20 a large amount of space remains after the final character, *kui* 媿 'shamed' (~1 cm).[15] The characters written on N.XIV.20, where visible, are otherwise spaced evenly (~0.4–0.6 cm), although damage to the fragment and the poor resolution of the photograph (e.g., above the first character, *ju* 晷 'axil wrap', or between *xing* 婞 'obstinate' and *dian* 點 'darkened') complicate my assessment of ink traces. The edge underneath *kui* has suffered damage and wear. The empty space after *kui* could be either an avoidance of a middle binding cord, the conclusion of writing at an unknown point on the strip, or the bottom margin of the intact writing support. The case of N.XIV.20 therefore is less definitive than that of N14:1, but of these options I am inclined to treat N.XIV.20 as what was originally the bottom margin of the strip when the strip was intact.

Identifying N14:1 and N.XIV.20 as the top and bottom portions of their respective strips reveals where text from the *Cang Jie pian* mapped out onto the writing supports of the Niya manuscript(s). This is important because it allows for comparison against the formatting of other unearthed *Cang Jie pian* manuscript witnesses. For this comparison, a brief explanation is warranted

14 The following measurements are based on the stated dimensions of N14:1 given by Wang Yue, and the relative distances (counted by pixels) of a digital scan of the image in Chō 2006, 57. Please refer to 'Estimated Measurements for the Intact Strips' for an explanation and complications to my methodology for these calculations.

15 The following measurements are based on the International Dunhuang Project (IDP) digital ruler, and the relative distances (counted by pixels) in Figure 3.2. Again, see 'Estimated Measurements' for an explanation and complications to my methodology for these calculations.

of two different editions of the *Cang Jie pian*. We are fortunate to have a rather detailed record preserved in received sources about the textual history of the *Cang Jie pian* and related scribal primers.[16] One crucial moment occurred at the beginning of the Han dynasty, when 'village teachers' 閭里書師 compiled together a version of the *Cang Jie pian* that consisted of fifty-five chapters, each bearing sixty characters per chapter.

The Peking University *Cang Jie pian* (hereafter PKU) is an early manuscript witness, likely looted from a tomb somewhere in the Han interior.[17] Character counts written at the end of chapters on the PKU manuscript range from 104 to 152 graphs, much longer than the sixty characters of the Village Teachers edition. It therefore represents a pre-Village Teachers edition of the *Cang Jie pian*. Great care is patent in the production of the PKU manuscript. It consists of bamboo strips cut to nearly identical lengths and widths, once bound together by cords at the top, middle and bottom into a single roll. There are paratextual elements such as chapter titles and character counts, and the text is written in fine calligraphy, with each character of uniform size and evenly spaced. One strict formal feature important to our discussion is the fact that each strip bears precisely five lines of base text (i.e., twenty characters) per strip, with each chapter beginning on a separate strip.[18]

Other manuscripts, usually of later dating, have chapters sixty characters in length, representing a Village Teachers edition of the *Cang Jie pian*. One example is the *gu* 觚 prism labelled 9.1 from Juyan 居延 (hereafter JY), an area along the Hexi Corridor.[19] Prisms are wood sticks, thicker and longer than the strips seen for instance in the PKU manuscript, with the stick cut to have multiple writing surfaces.[20] With JY 9.1, there are three sides that form a triangular prism. As with the PKU witness, JY 9.1 includes paratextual elements, here a chapter number (*Diwu* 第五 'Fifth'), and the writing is done by an experienced hand, with the characters of uniform size and evenly spaced. Once again, the JY 9.1 prism appears to be strictly formatted, with each side bearing precisely five lines of base text (i.e., twenty characters).

16 *Hanshu* 30.1719–23; *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 2:1311–15. On the relationship between these two narratives, see Galambos 2006, 45–54 and Appendix 1, 151–64.

17 Beijing daxue chutu wenxian yanjiusuo 2015; Foster 2017b, 167–239. The precise origins of the PKU manuscript remain unknown, showing how valuable information is irrevocably lost in the crime of tomb robbery.

18 Paratextual elements are not included in this count. Since chapters vary in lengths, the final strip of certain chapters can carry less than twenty characters.

19 Jiandu zhengli xiaozu 2014–2017 in 4 vols.

20 For an investigation into the nature of this type of writing support, as well as its relation to primers, see Foster, forthcoming.

Let us return to the presentation of the writing on the Niya *Cang Jie pian* strips, beginning with N14:1. The top of N14:1 begins with the line *xi gu ban xian* 谿谷阪險 'Gorge, ravine, bank, precipice'. The PKU witness includes this line in its *Shanglu* 賞祿 'Award Emoluments' chapter, with the content *xi gu ban xian* reading from what we may now reconstruct to be the eighty-first character of the chapter.[21] Recalling the strict formatting conventions of the PKU witness of the pre-Village Teachers *Cang Jie pian*, the line *xi gu ban xian* must begin a new bamboo strip, and indeed it does on PKU 4.[22] The placement of *xi gu ban xian* at the top of the strip PKU 4 matches the presentation of the same content on N14:1.

Only one witness of the Village Teachers edition of the *Cang Jie pian* includes the line *xi gu ban xian,* namely the so-called 'Han board' manuscript.[23] This manuscript is written on wide wooden boards, with the top of each board rounded, painted red, and bearing a hole for stringing. As with JY 9.1, the 'Han Board' manuscript bears chapter numbers, with each chapter running sixty characters in length. The writing is by an experienced hand, with characters of uniform size and evenly spaced. A single board bears three columns of writing, and once again adheres to a strict formatting convention of twenty characters per column. In the 'Han board' witness, the line *xi gu ban xian* reads from the twenty-first character of chapter #4, appearing at the start of the second column of text at the top of board HB 4.[24] Unfortunately, the 'Han board' manuscript is highly problematic, not the least of which because it is unprovenanced and awaits thorough authentication.[25]

Yet indirect evidence from the other archaeologically excavated witnesses helps to corroborate the fact that in the Village Teachers edition of the *Cang Jie pian*, the line *xi gu ban xian* read from the twenty-first character of chapter #4. In the Village Teachers edition of the *Cang Jie pian*, the longer chapters seen in the PKU witness of the pre-Village Teachers edition were divided into smaller units, often with minimal or no changes to the content of the text otherwise.

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21 Beijing daxue chutu wenxian yanjiusuo 2015, 3, 14, 41, 71, and 74. On reconstructing the missing content from the beginning of this chapter, see Zhang 2015b.

22 What was the first strip to the PKU *Shanglu* chapter is now missing, with only the second character of the chapter title, *lu* 祿, preserved on what the editors have labelled PKU 1. This is why characters eighty-one to a hundred are found on PKU 4 as opposed to PKU 5, as we might otherwise expect.

23 Liu 2019; Foster 2021a, 452–63.

24 Liu 2019, photographs 5, transcriptions 16–21.

25 Foster 2021a, 458–59. The most detailed conversation to date on the authenticity of the 'Han board' manuscript, arguing that it is a genuine ancient artefact, is Zhang 2020, 333–52.

The *gu* prism JY 9.1 and wood shavings now held in the British Library (hereafter YT), such as YT 3382 and YT 3675, for example, compared against the PKU witness, indicate that the Village Teachers edition of the *Cang Jie pian* divided the content from the PKU *Shanglu* chapter into two separate sixty-character chapters (#3 and #4), and part of another chapter (#5), with *xi gu ban xian* constituting the sixth line of chapter #4 (i.e., characters twenty one to twenty four).[26] If we project the same formatting found on JY 9.1 (chapter #5) back to the content immediately preceding it (chapter #4), then *xi gu ban xian* would begin the second strip, side, or column of that writing support. In short, the placement of *xi gu ban xian* at the top of the second column of HB 4, or as projected for a manuscript with similarly strict formatting to JY 9.1, matches the presentation of the same content on N14:1. Thus N14:1 reflects formatting conventions found on witnesses of both the pre-Village Teachers and Village Teachers editions of the *Cang Jie pian*.

With the second *Cang Jie pian* strip at Niya, N.XIV.20, at the end of the fragmentary piece is the line *yang, xing, dian, kui* 姎婷點媿 'Discontent, obstinate, darkened (with embarrassment), shamed'.[27] The N.XIV.20 fragment, as observed before, is a less definitive case, but I consider it to be the bottom of the strip when intact. The content on N.XIV.20 parallels that found on PKU 40, which also concludes the text written on this latter strip. There is, in this way, a match between the placement of *kui* vis-à-vis the writing support of N.XIV.20, and that of the PKU witness of a pre-Village Teachers edition of the *Cang Jie pian*. Reconstruction of the chapters in this part of the PKU witness remains uncertain—the line *yang, xing, dian, kui* may belong to either the *Jigou* 齎購 'Present Reward' chapter, or the chapter following it (of still unknown title, i.e., ?#5).[28] PKU 40 is also a re-joined strip, with the last two characters, *dian* and *kui*, being written on a separate piece than that carrying the content before it, *yang, xing,* etc., though there is no reason to doubt the re-joining here.

26 Reconstruction of the Village Teachers edition is discussed in more detail in Foster, forthcoming.

27 This interpretative transcription of the partial characters is based on the discussion in Fu 2018. My translation follows Zhu Fenghan in reading *yang* 姎, a feminine first person pronoun, as a loan for *yang* 怏 'discontented', see Beijing daxue chutu wenxian yanjiusuo 2015, 108 n.5.

28 I have compiled transcriptions for the major *Cang Jie pian* manuscript discoveries into a dataset based on rhyming relationships. Links to the dataset, and a brief introduction, may be found at: Foster 2020, https://calc.hypotheses.org/?p=2525. Reconstructions of chapters may be found in the dataset, with the reasoning for certain divisions in both the PKU pre-Village Teachers and Village Teachers editions explained in the 'Notes' column. The titles and numbering of these chapters is indebted in large part to the 'Han board' witness, which warrants caution.

Once again, the only witness of the Village Teachers edition of the *Cang Jie pian* that includes the line *yang, xing, dian, kui* is the 'Han board' manuscript. HB 43甲 has *kui* in the second line of its first column of text, not at the conclusion of the column. This implies edition-level variation in content between the pre-Village Teachers and Village Teachers editions, and moreover that N.XIV.20 *does not* conform to a strictly formatted Village Teachers edition of the *Cang Jie pian*, where each strip, side, or column bears twenty characters. Evidence from the 'Han board' manuscript must be treated with caution, however, and in this instance the data is even more tenuous, as HB 43甲 is badly deteriorated and the photographs unclear, forcing us to rely on Liu Huan's 劉桓 transcriptions. That Liu is unable to transcribe any of the characters prior to *kui* on HB 43甲 raises uncertainty over whether or not this is the same content as N.XIV.20.[29] Unlike the content on N14:1, indirect evidence does not exist for reconstruction of this part of the Village Teachers edition as well.[30] Thus the case for N.XIV.20 is burdened in multiple ways. It likely reflects formatting conventions found on the PKU witness of pre-Village Teachers edition of the *Cang Jie pian*, but its relationship to the Village Teachers edition awaits clarification.

To summarise then, the placement of the line *xi gu ban xian* 谿谷阪險 at the top of N14:1 matches the presentation of this same content in both pre-Village Teachers and Village Teachers editions of the *Cang Jie pian*, as seen on other manuscripts that follow the strict formatting convention of writing twenty characters per strip, side, or column, with chapters starting on a new writing support. The placement of *yang, xing, dian, kui* 姎婷點媿 at the bottom of N.XIV.20 likewise mirrors, with less certainty, the presentation of parallel content in the PKU witness of the pre-Village Teachers edition, following the same formatting conventions. I raise these comparisons not to suggest that all *Cang Jie pian* manuscripts strictly formatted their texts in this fashion. Casual practice writing which copied content from the *Cang Jie pian* certainly did not demand it (e.g., YT 3382).[31] There is also at least one witness of a pre-Village Teachers edition *Cang Jie pian* that either defies this formatting convention,

29 That HB 42 concludes with the third line of PKU 40, and the gap on HB 43 甲 would accommodate the fourth and fifth lines of PKU 40, offers indirect evidence that it is parallel.

30 The content on N.XIV.20 in the Village Teachers edition of the *Cang Jie pian* appears to bridge either the #41–42 or the #43–44 chapters, based on my reconstruction, but little else can be asserted at this point.

31 The shaving YT 3382 could not have been cut off a wood piece writing out twenty-characters per surface, with chapters beginning on a new writing support, as is the convention for the PKU, JY 9.1, and 'Han board' witnesses, since punctuation indicating a chapter divide appears in between characters written on this piece.

or whose content varies substantially enough from the PKU witness that the line *xi gu ban xian* from N14:1 falls on a different point of the writing support (i.e., not at the very top of a strip).[32]

But I do believe that the correlation between the presentation of writing on the Niya *Cang Jie pian* manuscript(s) and the formatting of other *Cang Jie pian* witnesses is not merely coincidental. Adherence to strict textual formatting conventions demands attention to the appearance of a given manuscript. On both N14:1 and N.XIV.20, the Chinese characters are written in Han clerical forms that are neatly executed, with each character kept to a uniform size and spaced evenly, being clearly transcribed by a trained hand. Wang Yue declares that, on N14:1, 'the calligraphy is done in a fine hand, betraying a skill beyond the ordinary', while Wang Jiqing 王冀青 notes that the characters on N.XIV.20 are done 'in careful and neat strokes'.[33] In other words, the neatly composed characters on the two Niya *Cang Jie pian* strips already show care invested into the presentation of the writing on these pieces. How the N14:1 and N.XIV.20 *Cang Jie pian* manuscripts looked mattered to their creators. Whomever compiled the Niya *Cang Jie pian* manuscript(s) followed strict formatting conventions, operative in Han manuscript culture elsewhere.

At least, that is the case for the writing on the recto. One line of counterevidence now needs to be addressed. According to Wang Yue, the remnants of three characters appear at the top of the verso of N14:1, being: 亼仝人. Wang states that this writing is extremely faint and contrasts with the appearance of the bold writing on the recto.[34] Lacking a photograph of the verso, it is difficult to assess the situation. The similarity between the three graphs' forms, as transcribed by Wang, suggests the repetitive copying of a single character, which indicates practice writing. But this need not dissuade us from our previous evaluation. The faintness of the writing on the verso could be an accident of preservation, for instance due to different degrees of sun exposure to either

32 See the Fuyang Shuanggudui 阜陽雙古堆 *Cang Jie pian* (hereafter FY), strip C008, where at least two other characters precede *xi* 谿 on the strip: Fuyang Han jian zhenglizu 1983, 24–33. Note that FY C043 also offers a partial parallel to the first character on N.XIV.20, *ju* 轐 'axle wrap', but its position vis-à-vis the writing support when intact is unclear. Lin Suqing estimates that each character occupied ~1 cm of length, and—here following the editors of the cache—that the strips, when intact, measured 25 cm long. Lin concludes that, even accounting for blank space at the top and bottom of the strips, or gaps left in the writing for a binding cord, the Fuyang *Cang Jie pian* manuscript held more than twenty characters per strip. I am less confident about this claim, however, based on Lin's own measurements in Lin 1987, 63–64.

33 Wang Yue 1998, 56; see my previous translation in Foster 2017a, 97; Wang Jiqing 1998a, 267–68, 285.

34 Wang Yue 1998, 55.

side of the strip.[35] Alternatively, or additionally, it may signal that this writing was done by a different hand, at a different time than the writing on the recto, with the strip perhaps being re-purposed. There are other explanations for the verso text as well. It could be that the text is an imprint from the strip being pressed down on other ink-bearing strips during its long deposit *in situ*.[36] Titles are at times written on the verso of manuscripts as well, though I find this improbable here.[37]

2 Estimated Measurements for the Intact Strips

With the proposal that the N14:1 and N.XIV.20 *Cang Jie pian* manuscripts followed strict formatting conventions in mind, we can estimate measurements for the original physical dimensions of both strips. Unable to visit the Xinjiang Cultural Relics and Archaeological Research Institute 新疆文物考古研究所 in recent years, where N14:1 is reportedly held, I must rely for the time being on published descriptions and photographs of this artefact; though personal inspection of the artefact remains the ideal as photographs can be doctored.[38] The fragment N14:1 is actually two pieces that have been re-joined, with the break falling between *huan* 緩 and *si* 肆. Wang Yue states N14:1 currently has a width of 1.08 cm, thickness of 0.3 cm, and—with the two pieces of N14:1

35 Lin Meicun 林梅村 reports that it was found underneath sand at the bottom of a horse trough. If this was the case, then sun exposure is relevant only if it occurred before this final *in situ* deposition; Lin 2001, 243–44.

36 For an excellent demonstration of how verso imprints can be used in the reconstruction of excavated manuscripts, see Staack 2014, 1–27. Most evidence for imprinting derives from manuscripts unearthed in central China, buried in waterlogged environments. For a potential example from a more arid environment, see SQZ C100 in the Shuiquanzi *Cang Jie pian* manuscript, discussed in Zhang 2015a. SQZ labels refer to Zhang's dissertation.

37 Titles tend to be found towards either the beginning or end of a manuscript. The content on N14:1 is the twenty-first line of the *Shanglu* chapter in the PKU pre-Village Teachers edition, or the sixth line of the fourth chapter to the Village Teachers edition. If N14:1 was bound as a longer manuscript, neither location would be close to the beginning or end of that manuscript, if a *text title*. It is possible that N14:1 might bear a *chapter title* for the fourth chapter, as this would be the second strip of that chapter. Chapter titles for the Village Teachers edition tend to be numerical (e.g., *Disi* 第四 'Fourth'), as opposed to content-based, (e.g., drawing from the first characters of the line, in this case theoretically *Chentong* 疢痛 'Fever and Pain'), see Foster, forthcoming. Neither of these options seem graphically similar to the reported 今仝人.

38 Wang Yue 1998, 55; Zhang 2007, 3:293–308 and, for the *Cang Jie pian* strip, 306–7. On the doctoring of photographs, see Foster 2017b, 188.

re-joined—a length of 15.4 cm.[39] The Sino-Japanese expedition brief report (SJBR) gives a width of 1.2 cm, thickness of 0.3 cm, and partial length of 15 cm.[40] In its width and thickness, N14:1 falls within an expected range for Han period strips among caches of mainly administrative documents discovered in the Hexi Corridor.[41]

Assuming the strip originally carried twenty characters, all evenly spaced akin to the writing still extant on the fragment, we can estimate the length of N14:1 prior to its breaking. If we divide the strip's current length of 15 or 15.4 cm, by the existing character count of either thirteen or thirteen and a half (the half representing a partial character, namely the single horizontal stroke at the bottom of the strip), then multiply by twenty (as the ideal character count per strip following the formatting conventions), we get an estimated length ranging from 22.2–23.7 cm.[42] The standard *chi* 尺 'foot' measure for the Han dynasty (23.1 cm), which was a common length for strips used in the Han military complex in the northwest frontier, falls within this range. The other strip found alongside N14:1, namely N14:2, has an intact length of either 23.1 cm (Wang Yue) or 23.3 cm (SJBR). If these strips are associated with one another (e.g., having been made by or belonging to the same user), then this might further strengthen this claim.[43]

The situation for N.XIV.20 is once again more complicated. Not only are the current whereabouts of the artefact unknown, but also one set of the glass negatives was retouched to clarify the characters' strokes, with problematic results.[44]

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39 Wang Yue 1998, 55.

40 SJBR, 15.

41 Cheng 2017, 102–6. The published reports for each cache vary in the details provided for measurements of the physical dimensions of individual strips, which limits Cheng's discussion. The newly published *Juyan Han jian* 居延漢簡 volumes (Jiandu zhengli xiaozu 2014–2017) offer exemplary documentation for this cache in their appended 'Jiandu wenwu xingzhi yu chutudi ziliao biao' 簡牘文物形制與出土地資料表 charts.

42 The calculation incorporates extra space at the top of the strip before *xi* 谿, and thus accommodates anticipated extra space at the bottom of the strip when it was intact.

43 Wang Yue gives a variable width of 1.07–1.18 cm and thickness of 0.22 cm; SJBR lists a width of 1 cm and thickness of 0.1–0.2 cm. N14:2 bore only two characters of uncertain transcription, given by Wang Yue as (?)扗(?) and Lin Meicun as 廿扗. Wang Yue regards N14:2 as also part of the *Cang Jie pian*, and SJBR gives this as well, but owing to the uncertainty surrounding its transcription, I find this identification premature. Wang Yue 1998, 56; Lin 2001, 249; SJBR, 14–15. Lin confusingly writes on page 244 that this second strip is classified as a *zhujian* 竹簡 'bamboo strip', though it is unclear if Lin is describing the materiality of the strip (i.e., being made out of bamboo) or its physical formatting (i.e., a strip-type writing support, not necessarily made of bamboo). Wang and SJBR both state the strip is made from wood.

44 Wang Jiqing 1998b, 27–28; Falconer 1998, 76; Foster 2021a, 436.

Wang Jiqing estimates that N.XIV.20 was 7.9 cm long and 0.9 cm wide.[45] These measurements, as Wang himself cautions, can only be tentative. When Stein and British Consul George Sherriff photographed this collection of artefacts in Kashgar in 1931, they usually positioned the pieces next to a physical ruler; yet this either did not occur, or is not visible, for every photograph. In such cases, Wang could only make creative comparisons, for instance matching strips on photographs which included a physical ruler with those in photographs without a physical ruler and using the sizes of the former to approximate measurements for the latter.[46] Unfortunately, N.XIV.20 was pictured without a physical ruler and so we rely on the full image of T.0.37 in Wang's study of Stein's photographs as a guide.[47] Besides Wang's measurements, the image for N.XIV.20 on the International Dunhuang Project (IDP) website includes a digital ruler, which gives the length of the fragment at 9.2 cm along its longest line (the left edge), and a width of 1 cm at its widest (near the top of the strip). It is unclear to me, however, how the sizing of the IDP digital ruler was determined.

Nevertheless, we may still pursue an estimate for the original dimensions of N.XIV.20. Wang Jiqing and the IDP digital ruler roughly agree on the width of the fragmented strip, so we shall start here. The strip is damaged on its right side, preserving mostly the left components of each character. If we measure on the IDP image from the left edge of the strip to the right edge of each character's left component (excepting the first character from the top, which lacks a left/right component orientation; and the sixth character from the top, for which the left component is unclear), we get 0.5–0.7 cm. Assuming similar sizing and spacing for the (now largely missing) right components, we can estimate that the original strip was between 1–1.4 cm in width. This again falls within the common range for Han strips unearthed in the Hexi Corridor.

Continuing this theoretical exercise, if we posit that the intact strip once carried twenty characters, matching the formatting discussed before, this again allows an estimate of the strip's original length. The measurement of 7.9–9.2 cm, divided by the seven characters that remain, then multiplied by the twenty characters hypothesised, gives 22.6–26.3 cm for the original intact length.[48] The lower end of this range (based on Wang Jiqing's 7.9 cm) roughly accords with our estimate for N14:1 and the standard *chi* foot measure for the

45 Wang Jiqing 1998a, 267.

46 Wang Jiqing 1998a, 267, 288 n.7.

47 Wang Jiqing 1998b, 62. My hesitation stems from the possibility that this image is cropped in Wang's publication.

48 The calculation incorporates the extra space at the bottom of the strip after *kui* 媿, and thus accommodates anticipated extra space at the top of the strip when it was intact.

Han dynasty. The upper end of this range (based on the IDP ruler and 9.2 cm) does not. Yet the 9.2 cm length includes ~1 cm of space where the wood is severely damaged and the poor resolution to the photograph could obscure ink traces, as stated at the outset of the chapter. Accounting for this reduces the upper limit for the length of the original intact strip, and again accords with our estimate for N14:1.[49]

The estimated measurements for the physical dimensions of both N14:1 and N.XIV.20 prior to their breaking suggest that their original writing supports fit the material conventions in place for the production of wood-strip manuscripts by Han officials. In other words, N14:1 and N.XIV.20 participated in the same manuscript culture seen among Han military complexes in the Hexi Corridor. This could mean either that the artefacts themselves were produced by Han officials, or that Han manuscript culture exerted considerable sway over the community at the Niya site, leading local scribes to mimic Han conventions in their own production of writing supports.

3 A Single Multi-strip Roll or Two Independent Witnesses?

Of great interest is the fact that the content written on N14:1 and N.XIV.20 derives from different chapters of the *Cang Jie pian* regardless of edition. Rhyming provides the basic structure to the *Cang Jie pian*, with each chapter utilising a single rhyme group every eighth character (i.e., the end of every second four-character line). N14:1 bears content from what was the *Shanglu* chapter of the PKU pre-Village Teachers edition and chapter #4 of the Village Teachers edition, which is based on a 之 / 職 cross-rhyme. The content on N.XIV.20 belongs either to the *Jigou* or ?#5 chapter of the PKU pre-Village Teachers edition, and by implication either the forty-second or forty-fourth chapter of the Village Teachers edition, which is based on a 支 rhyme. The identification of N.XIV.20, when placed alongside N14:1, suggests that a substantial portion of the *Cang Jie pian* circulated at the Niya site. Among finds of the *Cang Jie pian* in the Hexi Corridor, the 'opening chapter' is frequently copied, a phenomenon likely related to its pride of place in the text, relatively simple vocabulary, and

49 For example, if we subtract 1 cm from the total length of the extant fragment in our calculation, using 8.2 instead of 9.2 cm, the upper limit is 23.4 cm. If we divide 9.2 cm by seven and half characters instead, positing a likely presence of obscured ink traces, the limit becomes 24.5 cm.

pseudo-narrative sentence structures.[50] The Niya *Cang Jie pian* strips, however, include other sections of the text and, especially with N.XIV.20, list out more difficult vocabulary. Could N14:1 and N.XIV.20 once have belonged to a multi-strip roll, constituting a single but more complete witness of the *Cang Jie pian*, rather than representing two independent manuscript witnesses?

N14:1 and N.XIV.20 are written in the same calligraphic style by a neat hand on writing supports of similar physical dimensions and seem to adhere to strict formatting conventions (both matching the PKU witness of the pre-Village Teachers edition of the *Cang Jie pian*; but potentially conflicting in regard to the Village Teachers edition).[51] There is no duplicated content between them, rather they represent different chapters of the *Cang Jie pian*. The absence of clear binding cord marks or carved notches, however, denies us patent proof that these strips once belonged to a longer roll made up of multiple bound wood strips.[52] The only potential candidate for either a mark or notch is on N14:1, where there is a darkened spot just to the top-right of the character *xian* 險 'precipice', approximately 5 cm from the top of the strip. This is unclear and falls slightly higher than one might expect if the manuscript was bound by two cords. The break on N14:1 between the characters *huan* 緩 'prolong' and *si* 肆 'stretch' falls in the same spot where PKU 4 once carried a binding cord, perhaps resulting from a cord weakening the strip in this spot. If so, then the manuscript was bound by three cords. Regardless, wood strips collected from surface spots in the Hexi Corridor tend not to exhibit marks or notches from binding in the same fashion as entombed rolls, though in a few instances the

50 The 'opening chapter' is the most common section of the text found in other caches of Han strips in the Hexi Corridor. The simplicity of the opening lines ('Cang Jie invented writing, and taught it to later generations' 蒼頡作書以教後嗣), perhaps accounts for its popularity in practice writing. The *Cang Jie pian* opening chapter is based on a 之 / 職 cross-rhyme, as with N14:1's content, but N.XIV.20's content is from a distant part of the text. In Foster, forthcoming, I argue that the 'opening chapter' of the *Cang Jie pian* was a later addition to this previously untitled corpus of scribal volumes. Extant pre-Village Teachers editions of the *Cang Jie pian,* e.g. the PKU and FY manuscripts, do not include content from this chapter. That the opening chapter is absent at Niya hints at another correlation between the *Cang Jie pian* manuscript(s) here and a pre-Village Teachers edition, but with only two strips extant this cannot be claimed with certainty.

51 It is difficult to say if the writing could be by the same hand on each strip. None of the characters on N14:1 share a full orthographic component in common with those on N.XIV.20, and there is limited data for a comparison of stroke types or combinations.

52 Compare for instance with the Shuiquanzi *Cang Jie pian* manuscript, which bears unambiguous binding cord remnants, especially on the bottom portions of many strips; Zhang 2015a, 60–67 and Zhang 2010, pls.8–11.

cord itself has been preserved.[53] There is also the verso writing on N14:1 to consider, though as previously discussed, this could entail a separate act of writing than that responsible for the production of the *Cang Jie pian* on the recto.

Archaeological context offers us another avenue for assessing whether the two *Cang Jie pian* strips were related to one another. If both strips came from the same assemblage, this increases the likelihood they were once bound together into the same multi-strip roll; conversely, if they were taken from distant spots, this likelihood decreases.[54] Unfortunately, the circumstances behind the discovery of both N14:1 and N.XIV.20 are murky. For the former strip, Wang Binghua 王炳華 reports a worker on the Sino-Japanese expedition in 1993 gathered it in the area labelled N.XIV by Stein, which is why Wang Yue calls the strip N14:1. However, they could not recall the specific find spot.[55] The only mention of N14:1 in the full Sino-Japanese expedition report (SJR 1996, 1999, 2007), is in a survey of manuscripts held by the Xinjiang Cultural Relics and Archaeological Research Institute and other local institutions by Zhang Tienan 張鉄男, but these only repeat the physical description given by Wang Yue.[56] In SJBR (2014) published afterwards, however, the strip (which they label as 93C:48) is listed among finds for the area 93A10. The site 93A10 corresponds to Aurel Stein's N.XIII, not N.XIV.[57] N.XIII and N.XIV are both located in the far northwestern part of the Niya site, with only ~1/4 mile separating them.

Adding to the intrigue, Lin Meicun claims the discovery was made near a structure about 7 or 8 km northwest of the site's central stupa, which roughly corresponds to the location of both N.XIII and N.XIV. Lin further notes though that the strip was taken, along with one other, from the bottom of a horse trough (*macao* 馬槽, 1.5–2m long and full of sand) outside the east wall of a room feature.[58] Lin Meicun does not specify the source of this information, but there is reason to believe it derives from Lin Yongjian 林永建 who participated in the Sino-Japanese surveys.[59] Curiously, the Sino-Japanese survey

53 See for instance JY 128.1 (*Yongyuan qiwu bu* 永元器物簿), or DB:238 (*Dijie yuannian lipu* 地節元年曆譜), the latter found in Zhang and Shi 2019, 86–87 and 222–23.

54 Deriving from the same assemblage does not guarantee a prior relationship, however, nor does deriving from separate assemblages necessarily preclude any relationship, especially for surface finds. This applies to dating of the strips via shared assemblages, for which I give further comment below.

55 Wang 2003, 91.

56 Zhang 2007, 3:306–307.

57 SJBR, 15.

58 Lin 2001, 243–44. Lin and Wang Yue both follow Wang Binghua's assertion (Wang 2003) that this was N.XIV, which is why Wang Yue adopted N14:1 as the strip's label.

59 Wang Yue and Lin Meicun both associate the find with Lin Yongjian. Although Lin Yongjian is not listed as an official member of the Chinese team who conducted the

in 1993 briefly notes that at 93A9 (Stein's N.XIV) they encountered—but did not collect—a 'fodder bucket-shaped object made from a hollowed out log' 丸太刳り抜きの飼葉桶形品.[60] Although the SJR team tentatively identified the object as a wooden coffin, from their description alone we may assume a ready resemblance to such a trough.[61]

As for the second *Cang Jie pian* strip, Aurel Stein appended to its photograph a label reading N.XIV.20. The label itself implies that the strip was recovered from N.XIV, though the labels are at times misleading.[62] According to Stein's field notes from his ill-fated fourth expedition, Stein dispatched Abdul Ghafar, one of his workers, to dig in secret at N.XIV. Ghafar returned with this and other strips, claiming that they were found in refuse adjoining 'wall ii'.[63] This is again second-hand information and depends both on Ghafar's understanding of the area and Stein's understanding of Ghafar. Note also that while Stein clearly labels some of the other strips found at N.XIV.II with the room feature designator (i.e., they end with 'ii'), the *Cang Jie pian* strip lacks it with the label of 'N.XIV.20'.[64] These concerns aside, we must take Ghafar and Stein's report at its word.

In short, ambiguities arise in each case, leaving the exact find spots of N14:1 and N.XIV.20 uncertain. Despite this, it is clear both strips were unearthed from

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1993 survey in SJR (1:21–22), Lin might have been part of the 'logistics team' or 'collection group', constituting twenty-six individuals whose names are not stated. Lin is thanked for providing assistance in SJR, as an affiliate of Beijing dasanxia guanggao youxian gongsi 北京大三峡廣告有限公司 (2:21; see Foster 2017a, 156 n.148). Lin also helped edit and handle the photography for *Menghuan Niya* 夢幻尼雅 (Li 1995), in which he is described as a photographer from Xinjiang who guided the Sino-Japanese survey team to Niya (esp. 14, and also the preface).

60 SJR, 1:101. It is not mentioned in SJBR.

61 In *Serindia*, Stein describes features at both N.XIII and N.XIV that could be candidates for a 'horse trough' though none offers a comfortable match. Stein notes a 'sunk wooden trough' in N.XIII.V (Stein 1921, 1:217; 3: plan 10), and suspects that a circular plank nearby once covered it. He also describes how, in the rubbish heap at N.XIV.III, 'the quantity of straw and loose oats found at the bottom of the [boarded] enclosure seemed to indicate that the latter had originally served to store fodder, etc., for the horses and other animals which … must have been stabled nearby for a long time' (1:218). Yet the boarded enclosure is open to the south, has walls 5.5 ft tall, and, based on the site plan Stein gives (3: plan 9), larger in length and width that Lin's reported trough. As features at the Niya site could have changed in the decades since Stein's last visit, the Sino-Japanese expedition documentation is especially pertinent.

62 See the examples raised in Wang Jiqing 1998a, 275–76 under point 1.

63 S.224, 322 (January 22nd, 1931); Wang Jiqing 1998a, 273, 275.

64 Ghafar however reports clearing feature iii and the wooden enclosure there without further finds.

a relatively localised section of the northwestern part the Niya site, among a cluster of buildings that include N.XIII (93A10) and N.XIV (93A9). Based on the information surveyed above, it appears the SJBR assignment of the first *Cang Jie pian* strip to N.XIII is mistaken, and that both strips were taken from the latter area, N.XIV, potentially to the east of feature ii. Although we cannot confirm the two *Cang Jie pian* strips belonged to the same assemblage, their presumed *in situ* proximity does speak to a greater likelihood of a relationship between them and, by extension, of their once being bound together into a single multi-strip roll.

The archaeological context of N.XIV is especially interesting for a number of other reasons as well. Most scholarly treatments of the Niya site focus on activity from the third to fifth centuries CE, yet other Chinese documents found at N.XIV reveal earlier strata of occupation as well, back to the first century CE and potentially even first century BCE.[65] This fits the expected dating for *Cang Jie pian* manuscript discoveries. According to Fukuda Tetsuyuki's 福田哲之 survey, the vast majority of *Cang Jie pian* strips found in the neighbouring Hexi Corridor derive from caches featuring mid- to late-Western Han period dates, that is, from the first century BCE to the beginning of the first century CE. Fukuda has also found that the *Jijiu pian* 急就篇, an abbreviated primer based on the *Cang Jie pian*, largely replaces the latter in caches dating to the late Western Han and continuing well into the Eastern Han period (i.e., into the second century CE).[66] There are exceptions to this pattern (e.g., DHHJ 1975), but in general we may expect to find *Cang Jie pian* manuscripts in first century BCE to first century CE deposits.[67]

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65 Here I refer primarily to the English-language scholarship cited in n.2. For a succinct overview of evidence for dating the Niya site, see Padwa 2007, 304–8. On dating the Chinese documents from Niya to earlier strata, see Lin 2001, 249–55. Lin takes into account features such as the calligraphical style, writing support types, and content clues, for example strips naming the early first century CE Xin 新 dynasty (Lin's #747, N.XIV.12.8). Lin's discussion focuses largely, though not exclusively, on finds from N.XIV. Only one Kharoṣṭhī document was unearthed at N.XIV, made from a leather hide. Lin asserts that this reflects earlier practices in Central Asian manuscript cultures (Lin 2001, 254). Note that a bag held by the Minfeng Niya Museum 民豐縣尼雅文物館, reportedly looted from N.XIV, is embroidered with the date: 'first year of the Yuanhe reign era' 元和元年 (84 CE). See Minfeng xian wenwu guanlisuo 2007, 3:76.

66 Fukuda 2004, 136–54. *Jijiu pian* manuscript fragments of later dating have been discovered at Turfan and Lop Nor area sites to the northeast of Niya. See the survey in Zhang 2017, pls.8–11, 28–30.

67 DHHJ labels refer to Gansu sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo 1991. Fukuda's study is based of co-appearance of *Cang Jie pian* strips in archaeological assemblages with other manuscripts that bear explicit dates. As he rightfully warns, however, this only offers a rough chronological guide for the manuscripts' deposition, but does not guarantee equivalent dating.

The N.XIV area is also among the most impressive at Niya. Stein's building 'i' constitutes a large hall, 56 by 41 ft in dimension, with massive wooden columns in the middle that still stood to a heigh of 9 ft when he conducted his survey. In a nearby trash heap ('iii'), Stein uncovered a series of gift tags, also written in Chinese, documenting the exchange of rare stones among royalty at the site, bolstering his hypothesis that this was the residence of a local chief.[68] The Sino-Japanese expedition more recently revealed kilns just south of N.XIV capable of producing iron and bronze items, as well as workshops crafting with coral imported from afar.[69] There is also a cemetery just to the northwest of N.XIV.[70] It is clear N.XIV was once a powerful administrative centre at the Niya site, such as a royal court.

4 The Users and Uses of the Cang Jie pian

The *Cang Jie pian*, as a primer employed in the training and testing of scribes (*shi* 史) in the Western Han bureaucracy, occupied a liminal space between literary work, administrative document, and ephemera. Unearthed *Cang Jie pian* manuscripts testify to the diverse roles performed by these artefacts, from serving as grave goods (e.g., in an elite tomb like the FY manuscript) and study aids (e.g., when written on *gu* prisms like JY 9.1), to even constituting the detritus of practicing writing itself, such as scrap copies produced as an afterthought of a study session (e.g., shavings like YT 3382). Previous scholarship on the *Cang Jie pian* has wrestled with this dynamic, classifying *Cang Jie pian* manuscripts into categories such as 'model textbooks' 範本 versus 'practice writing' 習字, a problem most keenly felt for strips collected from surface (or near-surface) caches among the Han military installations in the Hexi Corridor.[71] Separating manuscripts into 'model textbooks' and 'practice writing', however, advances

68 Stein 1921, 1:218–21. The discovery of a seal prominently displaying the character *wang* 王 'king' at N.XIV in 1997 offers further evidence that this was the site of a local royal court or their residences, see SJBR, 23–24.

69 Yoshizaki and Kondō 1999, 2:81–82, 84–86; Tanabe 2007, 3:153–54; Yoshizaki 2007, 3:165; Kitano 2007, 3:213–22.

70 Xinjiang wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo 2007, 3:29–63. Whether or not this cemetery may be the source of the fodder-bucket shaped log identified as a coffin by SJR, and/or bears relevance to the find spot for N14:1, is unclear.

71 See for instance the discussion in Hsing 2009, 429–68.

a potentially false dichotomy and ignores how, over the course of the life of a *Cang Jie pian* manuscript, its users and uses may have varied.[72]

This chapter instead has pursued the broader motivations and influences operative behind the production of the Niya *Cang Jie pian* strips. It has conducted an experiment that extrapolates from observations about the materiality of the two fragmentary pieces the most likely original appearance of the Niya *Cang Jie pian* manuscript(s). Correlations in the placement of text on the Niya writing supports with the placement of the same content on other unearthed *Cang Jie pian* manuscripts, especially the PKU witness to a pre-Village Teachers edition, suggest that the Niya *Cang Jie pian* manuscript(s) adhered to strict formatting conventions. The appearance of the Niya *Cang Jie pian* manuscript(s) mattered to its compiler, a point reinforced by the strips' neat calligraphy and evenly spaced characters. Notably, the formatting conventions follow those on other *Cang Jie pian* manuscripts produced throughout the empire, from the Hexi Corridor to the Han interior. Han manuscript culture exerted an influence on the fashioning of the writing supports as well, with the estimated measurements for the unbroken Niya *Cang Jie pian* strips comparable to physical dimensions of strips utilised in the Han military complex in the Hexi Corridor. Finally, the presumed proximity of the strips *in situ* deposition, localised to the northwestern part of the Niya site at Stein's N.XIV—a powerful early administrative centre—raises the likelihood of a relationship between the two Niya *Cang Jie pian* strips. Usage of the scribal primer at the Niya site appears isolated, potentially even to the presence of a single multi-strip roll. Yet the manuscript(s) did cover a broad section of the *Cang Jie pian*'s content, not just the simple 'opening chapter' often found copied elsewhere.

Uncovering these motivations and influences can help inform us about the users and uses of the Niya *Cang Jie pian* manuscript(s). The observations above confirm that whoever possessed the Niya *Cang Jie pian* manuscript(s) either had intimate knowledge of (and valued) Han scribal institutions and manuscript culture, or at least had access to this knowledge (and value system), conveying this to the Niya site. One hypothesis about the Niya *Cang Jie pian* manuscript(s) that merits further research, as raised in Wang Yue's study of N14:1, is the use of this text to train bilingual Chief Interpreters, *yizhang* 譯長, for Jingjue, an office referenced by the *Book of Han* (Hanshu 漢書).[73]

72 A model textbook may be assiduously copied during study, creating another model off of which other copies are made during study; one of these may in turn be buried as a prestige good and status symbol. The boundaries between the users and uses of these manuscripts can be fluid and shifting.

73 *Hanshu* 96A.3880. Wang Yue 1998, 58.

Wang suggests that the Han court sent language teachers from the Han interior to the oasis states to establish a *lingua sinica* and thereby effectively implement a Han political agenda in the Western Regions.[74] Han scribes (*shi*) were dispatched to the frontier and undoubtedly travelled beyond the boundaries of the Han, whether as part of military campaigns, diplomatic missions, or for other reasons.[75] They brought with them mastery of their scribal volumes such as the *Cang Jie pian*, as attested by the ample discoveries of *Cang Jie pian* manuscripts in the Hexi Corridor and elsewhere along the Han frontier.[76] If study of the *Cang Jie pian* fostered *written* communications between the Han and previously scriptless political entities, then this bears implications for the history of translation in China as well, which often portrays early diplomatic exchanges (i.e., in the period prior to the Buddhist sutra translation projects) as predominantly oral in nature.[77]

It remains an open question, however, who precisely served as Chief Interpreters in the oasis states and facilitated translations between envoys, i.e., whether these were Han scribes working on behalf of the Han empire, or officials of local origins who held complex political loyalties.[78] Writing is commonly elevated as a marker of civilisation, one that, moreover, is connected to

74 In support of this claim, Wang Yue points to the gift tags also unearthed at N.XIV which mention a Servant Cheng De 臣承得—a decidedly 'Han name' for Wang—alongside names of a more local flavor (e.g., Xiuwusongye 休烏宋耶). See also Lin 1996, 55; Hansen 2012, 89–90. That the aides came from the Central Plains is for Wang self-evident due to the quality of the calligraphy, as 'otherwise, it is very difficult to imagine that in the Jingjue state there could be such a deft writer of Han graphs' (Wang Yue 1998, 58).

75 On diplomacy in this period, moving beyond a simplified dichotomy of a *heqin* 和親 system versus tributary system, see Selbitschka 2015, 61–114. Although not necessarily a *shi* 史 scribe, note how strip N.XIV.II.1 from the Niya site requests the dispatch of a Han shi 使 'envoy.'

76 For a recent discovery in the southwestern part of the Han empire, at the Chengba 城壩 site in Quxian 渠縣, see Sichuan sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiuyuan and Quxian lishi bowuguan 2019, 60–76. Another cache with *Cang Jie pian* strips, from the eastern coastal region, is Cao 2022, strips #256, 257, 258 and 259.

77 Ma 2006, 2; Cheung 2014, 4. For a study of early interpreters in China, see Lung 2011, 1–20 and, on terms for translation, Behr 2004, 173–209, esp. 182 on written communication between scriptless peoples and the Han. Research into the relationship between the *Cang Jie pian* and characters used for the transcription of foreign words into Chinese script could shed additional light on the use of this primer for written translation.

78 See Fu 2018 where I concur with Wang's hypothesis, conflating Chief Interpreters with Han scribes. On the use of a Shanshan 鄯善 (alt. 繕善) person in the forwarding of Han dispatches, see Zhang 2021. A similar debate has arisen over the compilers of the Kharoṣṭhī documents at the Niya site, surveyed in Høisæter 2020, 85–89; see also Høisæter 2017b, 80–93.

imperial projects of expansion.[79] Indeed, it was during the Han empire that usage of the Chinese term *wen* 文 first came to wed connotations of civility (patterned deeds) to a novel meaning of writing (patterned words), initially in reference to the textual manifestation of the state's order as law, then extended as culturally-charged literature.[80] Furthermore, with modern interpretations of newly discovered archaeological data, the now silent oral 'other' often finds articulation only vis-à-vis the dominant written historiographic tradition, a trend manifest in the disciplinary development of Chinese archaeology.[81] When studying ancient peoples, we lack direct access to spoken language; writing both mediates but also veils us in part from the underlying language and its speakers.[82] Considering the integral role language plays in the construction of ethnic identity, a danger exists of anachronistically projecting ethnic Han-ness onto ancient Chinese-script manuscripts, with political implications today.[83] All of these associations can bias our perception of written artefacts in the archaeological record.

Sensitive to these concerns, an alternative hypothesis for the Niya *Cang Jie pian* manuscript(s) is that it signals the appropriation of Chinese script by local kingdoms in the Tarim Basin, exploiting the technology to their own ends independent of (or even in conflict with) the Han court's wishes.[84] This interpretation celebrates local agency behind the use of writing at the Niya site, as opposed to subjugating it to the machinations of an encroaching imperial neighbour. The *Cang Jie pian* embodied privileged knowledge which was, by law, restricted to hereditary families of Han scribes.[85] The frequent discoveries of *Cang Jie pian* manuscripts in the Hexi Corridor speak not only to the dispatch of Han scribes to frontier regions, but also to the failings of the Han court

79 For an early claim that civilisation commences with writing, see Morgan 1977, 11–12; and on the relationship between writing and the early Chinese imperial project, see Lewis 1999; Foster 2021b, 175–76.

80 For conceptual histories of *wen* 文 and *wenzhang* 文章, see Bergeton 2019, esp. chapters 2–3, and Kern 2001, 43–91.

81 von Falkenhausen 1993, 839–49; Chin 2012, 128–46.

82 Consider for instance Japanese *kanji*, Korean *hanja* or Vietnamese *chữ nôm*, in what Zev Handel terms the 'Sinographosphere' in Handel 2019.

83 Chin 2012, 146; Hansen 2012, 91.

84 Høisæter 2020, 79–81; see also Lin 1996, 56–57 on Han political presence in the Tarim Basin. For other cases of Chinese primers appropriated, translated, and otherwise transformed by non-Chinese language speaking communities, see for instance Galambos 2015, esp. chapter 4; and on vernacularisation in East Asia more broadly, Kornicki 2018.

85 Barbieri-Low and Yates 2015, 2:1084–91; Foster 2017a, 233–48; Foster 2021b, 176–80.

to exert control over the primer's circulation at the extremities of its empire.[86] Unearthed documents mention Jingjue *shi* 使envoys entering the Han limes, visiting sites such as Xuanquan 懸泉 station where *Cang Jie pian* manuscripts have also been discovered.[87] Through informal education networks in the Han military complex, Jingjue envoys could access knowledge about (and the value system underlying) the *Cang Jie pian* from Han scribes, appropriating this for local use at Niya.[88] We await future discoveries to confirm either hypothesis, yet I hope these brief musings suffice to nuance treatment of the *Cang Jie pian* at Niya as beyond Han boundaries, whether geographic or otherwise.

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86 Interesting comparison may be made to spread of the *Analects* (Lunyu 論語) among the Han frontier beginning around first c. BCE, including a wood strip unearthed at the Tuyin 土垠 site in the Lop Nur 羅布泊 region. With the *Lunyu*, active dissemination as part of 'civilising missions' seems more plausible, but requires further research. For the *Lunyu* strip at Tuyin, see Hou and Yang 1999, 613 (Huang Wenbi 黃文弼 #59). For dissemination of the *Lunyu* and civilising missions, see Kim 2011, 59–88 and Brindley 2021, 1–21, respectively.

87 Lin 2001, 255, esp. #2 and 4, I90DXT0309(3):97 (vol.2) and II90DXT0115(1):114 (brief report on page 40), respectively. The Xuanquan cache is not yet published in full, with three volumes to date. See both Gansu sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo 2000, 40 and Gansu jiandu bowuguan, et al. 2019–2023. In the first two Xuanquan volumes, there are multiple witnesses of the *Cang Jie pian* (all from the opening chapter): I90DXT0109(2):63; I90DXT0109S:40; I90DXT0208S:50; IT0209(3):28AB; IT0210(1):32AB; IIT0111(1):203AB; and possibly IIT0111(1):418.

88 See my case study of the training conducted at the Yumen Huahai 玉門花海 watchtower, Foster 2017a, 233–357; abbreviated and updated in Foster 2021b, 175–201.

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CHAPTER 4

Seals and Sealing Practices in the Kingdom of Kroraina

Tomas L. Høisæter

Abstract

Artefacts that evidence forms of long-distance connectivity tend to garner particular attention, especially those from Silk Roads sites such as the Kingdom of Kroraina (Shanshan 鄯善), which flourished in the third and fourth centuries CE in the southern Tarim Basin. The seals from this kingdom display an astonishing variety of designs drawing from a wide range of sources, including motifs from Classical myth such as Athena and Eros, Hellenistic-style portraits, Buddhist motifs, and seals carrying Chinese characters. Unsurprisingly, these exotic seals have seen the lion's share of scholarly attention, while little has been said of the many more mundane seals from the kingdom. This chapter argues, however, that any attempts to understand the exotic seals of Kroraina must situate them within their local context. The chapter therefore attempts to establish a framework for understanding seals and sealing practices in Kroraina. It does so by exploring sealing systems, seal ownership, and the choice of seal designs, revealing well-developed local sealing practices and highlighting the important role seals played in local administrative and elite culture.

It was with delighted surprise that Sir Aurel Stein (1862–1943) studied the seal of wooden tablet N.XV.24, discovered by his diggers in the rubbish heap of ruin N.5 on February 6th, 1901. The elliptical seal with an intricate border showed a figure facing right, wearing loose garments and a helmet while holding what appeared to be a shield in one hand and raising the other as if to throw something, a figure Stein immediately identified as Pallas Athene. This remarkable find, with a Classical motif impressed upon the clay seal of an Inner Asian document writing Prakrit in the Kharoṣṭhī script, an Indian language and script, is emblematic of the sort of finds that have come to symbolise the Silk Roads and which often feature in discussions of its long-range connections. Stein, for his part, seems to have found it emblematic of his discoveries in the Tarim Basin,

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so much so that he chose a recreation of it by F. H. Andrews for the title page of his archaeological reports.[1]

Stein's discovery was made at the Niya 尼雅 site, located some 86 km north of the modern village of Niya in Minfeng County 民豐縣, Xinjiang. The sprawling site lies deep in the Taklamakan Desert, stretching north-south along a dried-up riverbed. Due to the extreme aridity of the area, Stein discovered not only the remains of over forty farmsteads but also hundreds of more or less intact documents. From these records, and the more limited information available from Chinese historical works, it has been possible to reconstruct much of the daily life at the site in antiquity; some of the site's history; and its connection to wider political structures in the region. The Niya site was called Caḍota in the locally-produced Kharoṣṭhī documents. Caḍota had, in the first centuries BCE, been an independent kingdom which Chinese chronicles record as Jingjue 精絕, likely an attempt at transcribing the same local name that underlies Caḍota.[2] In the first or early second century CE, however, Caḍota was incorporated into the larger kingdom of Kroraina, called Shanshan 鄯善 in Chinese chronicles. At its height in the third century, the kingdom covered the entire southeastern Tarim Basin, from the Niya River in the west to the capital area around Lake Lop Nor in the east. It is primarily from this period, i.e., the late third and early fourth centuries CE, that the surviving materials from the Niya site and other Krorainan sites such as Endere or the Lop sites date.[3]

The kingdom of Kroraina has yielded many spectacular finds showing a wide range of different cultural impulses, from Classical images such as Stein's Athene seal to the high-quality Chinese silks found in many Krorainan graves.[4] Consequently, the kingdom and its sites have often figured in discussions of the early Silk Roads as a prime example of cultural impulses moving from the east to the west.[5] This is also the primary context in which the seals, and to a lesser degree various sealing devices, found at Niya and other Krorainan sites, have been situated. Stein certainly saw them as products of East-West trade, which he believed had brought some of the sealing devices to Kroraina, and he also read the seals as the result of the influence of Western Classical art on the region.[6] They have also been interpreted along similar lines by Marylin M. Rhie in her study of the art remains at the site, though most later works on the

1 Stein 1907, 1:354.

2 Brough 1965, 591–92.

3 For a full introduction to the Niya site and the kingdom of Kroraina, including discussions on problematic issues surrounding dating etc., see Høisæter 2020.

4 For a more detailed discussion of silk in Kroraina, see Selbitschka 2010.

5 For some recent treatments, see Hansen 2012, chapter 1; McLaughlin 2016, 97–100.

6 Stein 1903, 396–97; Stein 1907, 1:357.

seals have focused on the rarer Chinese seals.[7] One seal in particular, found on the documents n.571 (N.XXIV.VIII.74), n.590 (N.XXIV.VIII.93), and n.610 (N.XXXVII.I.2), has attracted much attention.[8] This seal was square, made in a Chinese style, and bore four Chinese characters, variously read as 'Seal of the Shanshan commandery (*junyin*)' 鄯善郡印 alongside later suggestions of both 'Shanshan commander (*junwei*)' 鄯善郡尉 and 'Shanshan general (*duwei*)' 鄯善都尉, with the latter now being the most common reading.[9]

The seal has been widely discussed in connection with dating the Krorainan material and in discussions of the kingdom's relationship with neighbouring Chinese empires, yet as I have shown elsewhere, research into the 'Shanshan *duwei*' seal has suffered due to a lack of local contextualisation.[10] Indeed, with the exception of Stein's initial and very thorough work on the Krorainan seals, no major study has been published on the seals and sealing practices in a local Krorainan context.[11] This is unfortunate, not only because it would provide a firm basis on which to discuss the various 'foreign' seals seen in Kroraina, but also because it has the potential to serve as an important tool in prosopographical work on the Kharoṣṭhī documents.[12]

This chapter therefore aims to situate the Krorainan seals in their local context and provide a basic framework of Krorainan seal use and sealing practices. It will not offer a full overview of all surviving Krorainan seals, but instead will focus on four questions relating to the use of seals in Kroraina. It will start by asking how seals were used in Kroraina, presenting the systems in use for sealing documents and looking at how these served to secure the documents. Secondly, it will ask who used seals by discussing their important role in authenticating documents; the importance of this to Krorainan administrative culture; and the questions this raises about seal ownership. Finally, this chapter will turn to explore what seal designs were in use in Kroraina and why, discussing the variety of motifs in use and the ways in which they might have

7 Rhie 1999, 1:363.

8 The number given here is the document number, while the letters and numbers in brackets represent Stein's reference system for excavated items. The document number follows the numbering given to the documents in Boyer et al. 1929, continued in the database of Baums and Glass, available online at: https://gandhari.org/

9 Stein 1921, 2:230; Enoki 1998, 237–38; Loewe 1969, 260–90; Brough 1970, 40–42; Sims-Williams and Bi 2018, 89–90. See also an English summary of Meng Fanren's 孟凡人 view in Rhie 1999, 1:346–50.

10 Høisæter 2020, 99–102.

11 Stein 1907, 1:344–57.

12 The value of this approach has also been suggested by Richard Salomon in Salomon 1988, n. 14.

served to represent the individual using the seals. Before delving into these questions, I will first present a brief introduction to the Krorainan documents.

1 The Krorainan Documents

Seals in Kroraina, as far as surviving evidence shows, were used to seal written documents. The surviving Kharoṣṭhī corpus from Kroraina includes nearly 900 individual documents, and a large variety of different stationery were in use which differed in terms of material and construction. The materials range from the very simple, such as short texts written on the flat side of a split branch which was probably made on the spot, to eleven more or less intact paper documents, the material for which had almost certainly been imported into the kingdom.[13] The majority of documents were, however, either written on prepared wooden tablets or on leather, with the first being by far the most prevalent in the surviving material. Wooden stationery came in several different types including various simple wooden boards, but the most important was the wedge-shaped double-tablet and the rectangular double-tablet, with an example of each form given in Figures 4.1 and 4.2.

The shape and material of a Krorainan document gives a general indication about its function, and as such most wedge-shaped tablets can be classified as royal commands and administrative documents, while rectangular tablets were primarily used for contracts and legal documents.[14] Both types were also used for writing private letters, especially the rectangular double-tablets. Leather documents, on the other hand, are far rarer with only twenty-five known examples, likely due to the perishability of the material itself. One



FIGURE 4.1 Wedge-shaped double-tablet #N.XV.137, or n.310

13 The Kharoṣṭhī paper documents are documents n.669, n.670, n.694–96, n.698, n.699, n.705, n.753, n.784, and n.868.

14 This topic has been discussed by several authors. For a summary of these discussions and a detailed overview of the typology in use in this chapter, see Høisæter 2020, 106–12.



FIGURE 4.2 Rectangular double-tablet #N.XV.166, or n.331

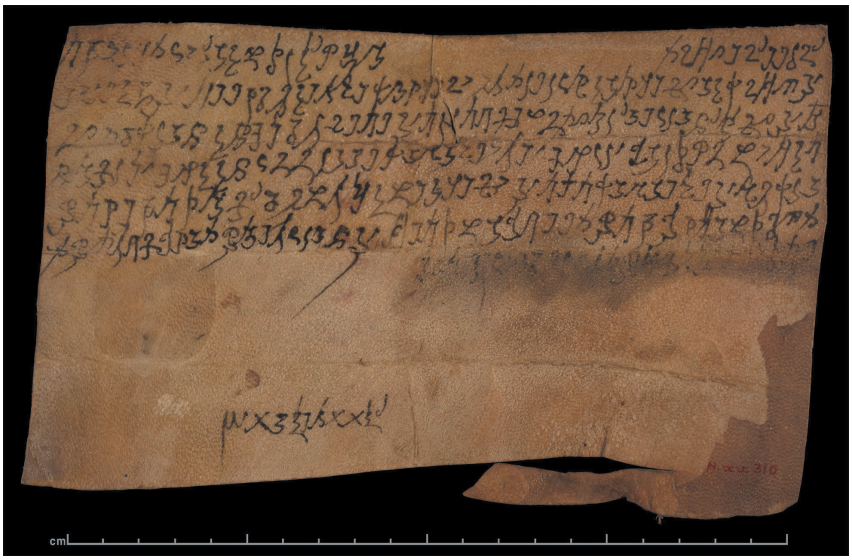


FIGURE 4.3 Unfolded leather document #N.XV.310, or n.362

example is given in Figure 4.3. The leather documents can also be classified on the basis of their materiality, with most being important administrative documents of the 'royal decree' type. As far as our surviving sources show, seals were only used for wooden wedge-tablets, rectangular double-tablets, and leather documents.

2 Sealing Systems

Krorainan seals were set in clay, as shown by all surviving examples. This clay came in a variety of colours, with shades of sandy-brown being the most common, but some are also lighter shades of grey or pink.[15] These variations in colour are likely due to the use of different clay sources rather than discolouration over time, as seal clay used by the same actor over several years remained the same colour.[16] The surviving clay seals are also of varying quality, with some using finer clay while others were coarser, and some clay also included additional substances. The seal N.XV.133.b, for example, which was found separated from any document, was made from a very fine clay mixed with either wax or possibly mucilage, while the clay of N.XV.003, another seal found without its document, was strengthened by adding fibres.[17] For setting these seals, two distinct systems were in use: one for wooden stationery and one for the leather documents.

2.1 *The Wooden Double-Tablets*

For wooden stationery, seals were set into seal cavities. These seal cavities were part of the construction of both the wedge double-tablets and the rectangular double-tablets, with the system in both cases being essentially the same even though the exact method varied slightly and the size varied somewhat from tablet to tablet. The wedge double-tablets were carved from a single piece of wood, as shown by the matching structure of the grain on observe and reverse pairs. The base wooden board was first shaped into a wedge, then a hole was drilled through the board near the pointed tip of the wedge. Next, a seal cavity with three string grooves was cut into the opposite end, before the tablet was sawn in two – as can be seen in Figure 4.1.[18] Rectangular double-tablets were created in a very similar fashion, being shaped from a single plank of wood as seen by the patterns in the wood grain. In the case of the rectangular tablets, however, the ends remained flat and the seal cavity with its string grooves was carved into the middle of the document. This central portion was then cut out, leaving the larger under-tablet with an indented writing surface which the

15 For examples, see the sandy-brown clay on document n.235 (N.XV.24), the grey clay on document n.328 (N.XV.163), and the pink clay on document n.571 (N.XXIV.VIII.74).

16 See documents n.572, n.590, and n.640, all associated with Varpa (n.523) and dating to *c.* the 260s.

17 Stein 1907, 1:356–57.

18 Stein 1907, 1:347–48.

smaller covering tablet would fit snuggly into – as can be seen in Figure 4.2.[19] Both of these methods resulted in two large writing surfaces, the content of which could be hidden by placing the matching tablets flush together.

Thus constructed, a document could be secured against unauthorised viewing and tampering. As elucidated by F. H. Andrews in Figure 4.4, this was done by using a double-hemp string wound through the string grooves and, in the case of the wedge tablets, the hole at one end, which held the document closed.[20] A seal would then be set into the seal cavity, making it impossible to open the document without either cutting the strings or breaking the seal. If it was necessary to open the document later, the string could be cut and the document opened, but it could not be tied close again without first breaking the old seal. The ingenuity and security of this system is important to keep in mind, as it means that any document found closed, with both its seal and all strings still intact, could not have been opened since the time the seal was originally set.

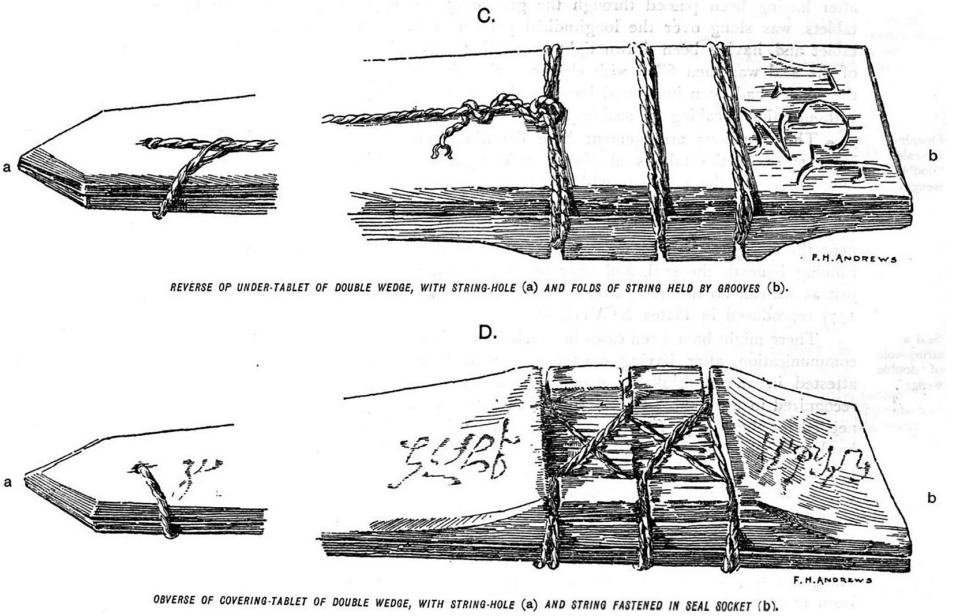


FIGURE 4.4 Illustration of the sealing string system

19 Stein 1907, 1:352.

20 Stein 1907, 1:349–50.

2.2 *The Leather Parchments*

While the system for sealing wooden documents is clear, the same cannot be said for the second type of sealing system, namely that used for leather documents. All twenty-five leather documents were comprised of parchment made from sheep skin that had been prepared and smoothed, and all the larger extant examples were of a rectangular shape, though these leather documents could come in various sizes. The writing was in all cases confined to one side of the document and all the more complete examples carried clear traces of having been folded. In fact, most of the larger examples were found still folded up and, in all cases, they had been folded in such a way as to conceal the writing inside.[21] This already suggests that the content of the leather documents was meant to be kept hidden, much like the wooden double-tablets. However, no leather document has yet been found with an intact seal. This might seem puzzling, but there is strong evidence to suggest that these documents had originally been sealed.

Firstly, the fact that the documents themselves were found without seals does not carry much weight when considering that the leather documents have, without exception, been found in rubbish heaps. This means that they had been purposefully discarded and as such one must assume that they had already been opened, breaking the seal. This is the opposite to the wooden double-tablets which could be opened by cutting the strings, thus leaving the seal intact. Secondly, Stein observed that several of the intact leather documents had matching oval impressions, often discolouring the leather, in the same spot towards the right-hand end of the document, as shown in Figure 4.5. Whatever caused this, he noted, must have been in contact with the document for quite some time when folded, as one would expect with a seal.[22] Such an interpretation may also be suggested by the handful of loose seals, without attached documents or other items, that have been found across Krorainan sites. Some of these, such as N.XV.133b and N.XV.003, have round or oval shapes, which means that they cannot have come from a seal cavity on a wooden document as these are invariably square. Thus, it is possible to interpret these as seals for leather documents, especially examples such as N.XV.003 which was found with a loop of hemp string still attached to it. They may, on the other hand, have been used for resealing wedge tablets in the unorthodox manner of document n.265 (N.XV.71) which carries a circular 'pendant' seal near the wedge hole.[23]

21 Stein 1907, 1:345.

22 Stein 1907, 1:346.

23 For a discussion of this 'pendant' seal, see Stein 1907, 1:350.
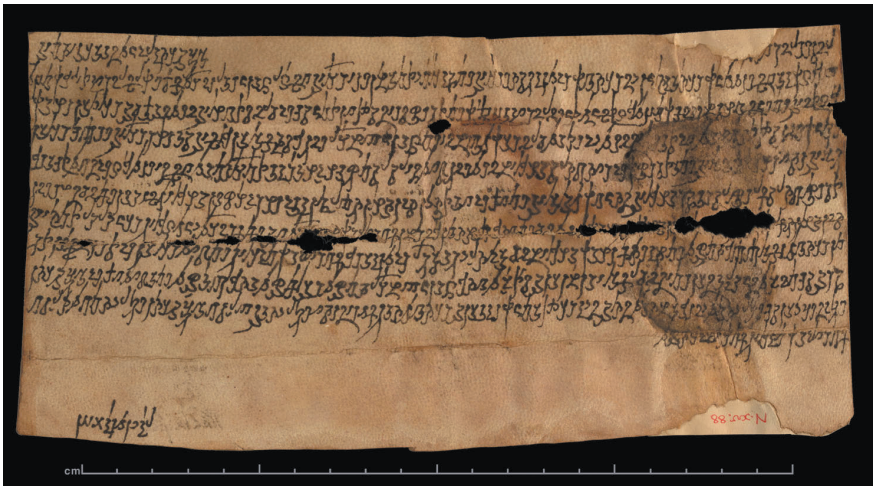


FIGURE 4.5 Example of an oval impression seen on leather document #N.XV.88, or n.272

We are thus on quite uncertain grounds when it comes to the sealing of the leather parchment documents, though on the whole the evidence is suggestive of them having also been sealed. Nonetheless, even if we accept that they did carry seals, the system for such sealing remains an open question. One possibility, favoured by Stein and supported by the presence of the oval impression discussed above, would be that the seal was either applied directly on top of the folded parchment or else applied between the two folds, in both cases holding a cord wrapped around the folded document.[24] Another possibility could be that the leather documents were folded and then secured using a seal case, a technique that Momiyama Akira 籾山明 has shown was in use for Chinese paper documents found at the L.A. site and which was likely also in use at sites near Dunhuang 敦煌.[25] Using this seal-case system, the folded document would be placed under a wooden block with a prepared seal cavity and string groves, identical in design to the seal cavity of the wooden double-tablets, then fastened with hemp strings and finally sealed. Though some of the seal cases found at the L.A. site were used for Chinese documents, there is evidence that seal cases were also used by Krorainan officials and members of the elite. This is indicated by the finds of such seal cases across sites such as the L.B. site, which has not yielded signs of a Chinese presence, and by evidence for their

24 Stein 1907, 1:346.
25 Momiyama 2001.

local manufacture seen at the Niya site.[26] Even clearer is the evidence from the seal case L.A.VI.II.057, which carried a greeting formula in Kharoṣṭhī and the word *viyalida*(*vo*) 'to be opened' on the obverse, likely once attached to a private letter.[27] Finally, these seal cases were also used by Krorainan officials, as shown by the seal case N.XV.133.a which bore an intact seal belonging to either one of the officials kala Karaṃtsa or kitsaitsa Varpa. As such, seal cases were clearly in use in Kroraina and it seems likely that they might have been used for leather documents, as well as for paper documents. Without further evidence, this cannot be conclusively proven.

In sum, seals were, as far as the archaeological evidence goes, used to seal documents. More specifically, seals were used on two classes of documents: wooden double-tablets and, in all likelihood, leather parchments, though this can only be asserted with a degree of uncertainty. Importantly, the sealing was done in such a way as to make it impossible to open a document without either tampering with the seal or the strings, making it possible to determine whether a given document had been opened after it was last sealed.

3 Krorainan Sealing Practices

Thus far, this chapter has focused on the sealing techniques evidenced by archaeological finds. Turning to the content of the Kharoṣṭhī documents, more details can be gleaned about the Krorainan uses and users of seals. It is first worth noting that 'seals' in the Krorainan written sources appear almost exclusively in the context of sealing documents, the only exception being the mention of a shipment of wine to be sent under seal in n.247 (N.XV.42), though it is unclear what exactly was to be sealed in this instance. The following therefore will exclusively discuss seals in the context of documents. Seals on documents commonly served three purposes: the first and most common being a mark of authentication; second, as a mean of securing the document if the seal is so designed; and third as a statement, whether of propaganda, identity, or otherwise. Krorainan seals seem to have served all three of these purposes, though in the following we will focus first on seals as a means of authentication and of securing content.

26 See L.B.IV.II.0010-0012 and L.B.IV.V.0020-0021. N.XXIII.II.002 is an example of an unfinished seal-case in production.

27 Alternatively, it could possibly be the lid of a small gift box, as proposed in Stein 1928, 1:223.

Seals in Kroraina were not in use on all documents, instead they appear only on a limited number of document types. These were official administrative documents, that is royal commands (wedge tablets) and royal decrees (leather parchments); judicial documents, being contracts and legal documents (rectangular tablets); as well on many letters (various stationery).[28] Seal use in Kroraina was, in other words, strongly connected to the kingdom's officialdom, official documents, and to the kingdom's administrative practices, though it does seem to have also featured in elite correspondence.

Administrative documents, represented primarily by the 'royal command' documents, were documents sent within the royal administration, in most cases addressed from the king himself to his local officials. It was the primary form of administrative communication between the king, or more likely his court, and the local administration of the various districts of the kingdom. By means of these documents, the king and his court instructed officials on all manner of topics, from taxation to highly-specific issues pertaining to individual petitions and judicial cases. The 'royal commands' were thus the lifeblood of the royal administration, and this class of documents were all written on either wedge double-tablets or leather parchments, both of which likely carried seals.[29] The importance of seals in administration is amply evidenced by the fact that the wedge-shaped double-tablets themselves were referred to as *kilamudra*, that is 'wedge-and-seal' tablet, or in a few cases as *anatikilamudra*, that is 'wedge-and-seal tablet of command'. [30] Seals were thus integral to the 'royal command' documents.

One of the primary reasons for this was likely to keep the content restricted and secure from tampering, as furthered by the design of the wedge double-tablets themselves. Seals were, however, also important tools of authentication, acting as proof of a document's origin and validity, with officials being distinguishable by their seal. This is exemplified by the aforementioned n.247,

28 Letters appear on a variety of different stationery, as follows: eighty-six rectangular double-tablets; eighteen oblong tablets; eight wedge double-tablets; six paper manuscripts; four leather parchments; two silk slips; two takthi-shaped tablets; and three documents on wooden sticks of varying shapes. Additionally, there are six letters where the shape of the document was not reported.

29 Seven cases exist where what appears to be a 'royal command' is written on rectangular tablets, but as these are all heavily fragmented documents, these may well be incorrect identifications. For the documents in question, see documents n.59, n.138, n.216, n.217, n.389, n.408, and n.625.

30 For just a few examples of wedge double-tablets explicitly labeling themselves as *kilamudra*, see n.3, n.5 and n.6. See documents n.262, n.296, n.309, and n.310 for *anatikilamudra*.

a short and unfortunately somewhat fragmented leather parchment that appears to carry a semi-official letter. In the letter, the sender, whose name is now lost, states: 'It is to be sent under seal, it is to be sealed with this seal which is the seal of the cozbo'.[31] Whether or not this refers to a seal associated with a specific office or a specific individual serving as cozbo is not clear, though the seal was clearly of use for authenticating the shipment.

Thus, seals secured and authenticated 'royal command' documents. This was not only used within the administration itself, however. Many of the 'royal command' documents were, after being handled by local magistrates, sent to those referenced in the command. Once handed over, the documents were kept in private archives until they were needed as proofs, a state in which many of them remained when excavations uncovered them.[32] This is reflected in the common practice of writing a small note, normally naming the final document holder and summarising the content, found on the reverse of the under-tablet in many wedge-tablet pairs.[33] This is also explicitly mentioned as a practice, for example in document n.504 (N.XXIII.II.15):

> *Wedge Under-tablet. Obv.*
>
> His majesty the king writes, he instructs the cozbo Kranaya and ṣoṭhaṃga Lýipeya as follows: For those people formerly a sealed wedge-tablet was made. The monks Pakusena, Mokṣaṣena, and Śrananaprema were excused from the investigation (that took place in) the city (*nagara*). That sealed wedge-tablet was the authority. Even so these people are now to be excused.
>
> *Wedge Under-tablet. Rev.*
>
> Mokṣaṣena[34]

In this document, the king orders his local officials to rule in accordance with an already-existing *kilamudra*, i.e., wedge-and-seal tablet, which the three named monks had invoked. Presumably, they had presented this document physically, in which case the seal and bindings certainly would have been

31 Burrow 1937, 45. The original reads *muṃtritaga prahadavo eda muṃtrena muṃtra kartavo yo cozboaṣa muṃtra*, transcription by Boyer et al. 1929, 1:94.

32 Several examples of this exist, but the most complete archives were Lyipeya's archive in N.1 and Raṃsotsa's archive in N.24. For detailed descriptions of these archives, see Stein 1907, 1:316–18 and Stein 1921, 1:227, respectively.

33 For some examples, see documents n.3 and n.7 from site N.1 (Lyipeya's household), and documents n.530 and n.561 from N.24 (the Raṃsotsa family household).

34 Translated in Burrow 1937, 98. Introductory formula are translated here as based on Boyer et al. 1929, 2:182.

examined. The 'royal command' n.504 was then in turn deposited with one of the plaintiffs, the monk Mokṣaṣena, who is strongly associated with and likely lived at or near ruin N.23 where the document was found.[35]

The second sphere in which seals played an important role were judicial documents, represented by contracts and legal documents. Both document types were written on rectangular double-tablets sealed with strings and a seal.[36] As with the administrative documents, seals on judicial documents served as a security measure and as a form of authentication, functions reflected in the texts themselves. Both forms of judicial documents conformed to a standardised set of formulations and elements, some of which were always included, such as the dating formula, and some which were more unevenly applied.

In the case of the contracts, many included a clause stating who 'cut the strings', referring to the strings that bound the document.[37] This statement usually appeared at the very end of the document, often written a little below the rest of the text, as exemplified by n.592 (N.XXIV.VIII.95) which reads 'The apsu Vaṣḍhaya cut the string' (*sutra cinida apsu vaṣḍhaya*).[38] One could be tempted to think that this referred to the person who cut the strings and opened the document at some point, but this was not the case, as n.592 was found sealed and with all strings intact, being stored in a secret archive.[39] Rather, the 'cut the string' clause refers to the person who cut and prepared the string used to tie the document before sealing, assuring the future reader that this important procedure was correctly carried out. This highlights the importance attached to securing the documents from being opened and tampered with in a judicial context. In a similar fashion, most intact legal documents and many of the intact contracts carried a note below the seal cavity itself, a 'sealing statement' stating who had set their seal on the documents. These too followed a standardised formula giving the sealer's title and name, stating, for example: 'This is the seal of the cozbo Kaṃciya' (*eṣa mutra cozbo kaṃciyaṣa*) in the case of n.592.[40] Notably, the person setting their seal were in most ordinary cases the

35 Padwa 2007, chapter 6.12.

36 Of the sixty-three 'contract'-type documents in the corpus, four were on other tablet types, namely documents n.209, n.500, n.661, and n.680. Of the fifty-two 'legal'-type documents, seven were on other tablet types, namely documents n.90, n.98, n.298, n.461, n.507, n.527, and n.760, some of which should possibly have been categorised as 'royal command'-types.

37 This appears in fourteen documents in total, see documents n.186, n.420, n.422, n.571, n.579, n.580, n.581, n.582, n.586, n.589, n.590, n.592, n.598, and n.655.

38 Burrow 1937, 127.

39 Stein 1921, 1:262.

40 Burrow 1937, 126.

presiding magistrate.[41] Thus, the seal statement would partly aid in securing the document, as an official could check that the seal matched with the sealing statement, but also acted as authorisation, certifying which officials had overseen the legal proceedings.

As these statements testify, correctly sealing documents was an important part of legal proceedings. This is hardly surprising as, much like administrative documents, judicial documents were also stored for later use. Such use is implicit in a number of documents, but is also stated explicitly in both n.582 (N.XXIV.VIII.85) and n.770 (N.R.2). In document n.770, a legal document dealing with the distribution of inheritance following the death of a slave, it is explained:

> *Rectangular Under-tablet. Obv.*
>
> In the sixth year of his majesty, the great king Jiṭugha Vaṣmana, the son of heaven, in the second month, on the twenty-second day, at this date, there is a man called Yakana who died here in Caḍota. This Yakana was the property of Sarvarakṣi. Here Sarvarakṣi has brought a hand-letter (*hastalekha*). Everything that lived in dependence on Yakana, as far as Puṣgari (?), all is written in this letter. This [was to be] taken by Sarvarakṣi. From this (stock of animals, etc.) living in dependence on Yakana he took all [...] to the extent of twelve *ṣamiya*, this Sarvarakṣi received. From now on there shall be no giving or taking with reference to Yakana on the part of the brothers Sarva[rakṣi] and [Yita]geya as against Tsimaya and they are not to take possession (of anything). In future times the brothers Sarvarakṣi and Yitageya, or any of their sons or relations of theirs, have nothing to say to the people who run Tsimaya's farm [...] of Sarvarakṣi [...] there is no giving and taking as against the people who work the farm of [...] the matter has been cleared, they made a decision, and here are the witnesses ...[42]

Here, the slaveowner Sarvarakṣi had a 'hand-written document' (*hastalekha*) that he used as proof of his rights. The term *hastalekha*, or often simply *lekha* (document), is regularly used to describe the rectangular double-tablets, and it is therefore likely that it was a sealed contract or legal document that Sarvarakṣi produced, especially as he clearly had been storing it for future use.

41 Some irregular examples exist, primarily contracts seemingly made without official supervision. See documents n.318 (other officials), n.348 (seller), n.419 (monks), n.425 (seller and monk), n.568 (seller), n.588 (seller and witness), and n.795 (uncertain).

42 Burrow 1937, 118.

This preoccupation with storing documents for later use concerned both administrative documents, i.e., wedge-tablets, as well as judicial documents, i.e., rectangular tablets. In both cases, seals clearly played an important role. For the wedge-shaped tablets, this is illustrated by document n.265 (N.XV.71) in Figure 4.6, a royal command document found in the rubbish heap of ruin N.5. The document was sent from the royal court to the local officials at Caḍota (Niya site) and deals with an obscure problem relating to a 'portion' abandoned by a monk named Saṃgarakṣi, possibly part of an inheritance. As a royal command document, it was written on a wedge-shaped double-tablet with the string still partly fastened around it, though the seal in the seal cavity had been removed before the document was discarded. Additionally, however, the document had also been given a second seal that remained intact, placed at the tip of the wedge and partly covering the hole and strings there. This could, as Stein suggests, be read as a way of binding the two document halves together after the main seal was broken, though such a practice is not seen elsewhere.[43] It seems more likely that the document had originally been opened by cutting only the string near the hole, allowing the under-tablet to be slid free and the document to be read without breaking the seal. The document was then given to Saṃgarakṣi, as the inscription on the reverse of the under-tablet indicates, but in order to secure its validity the local magistrate sealed the document again using a second seal. Then, at some later point, the document was opened by breaking the main seal, was read, and was then discarded into the rubbish pit of N.5.

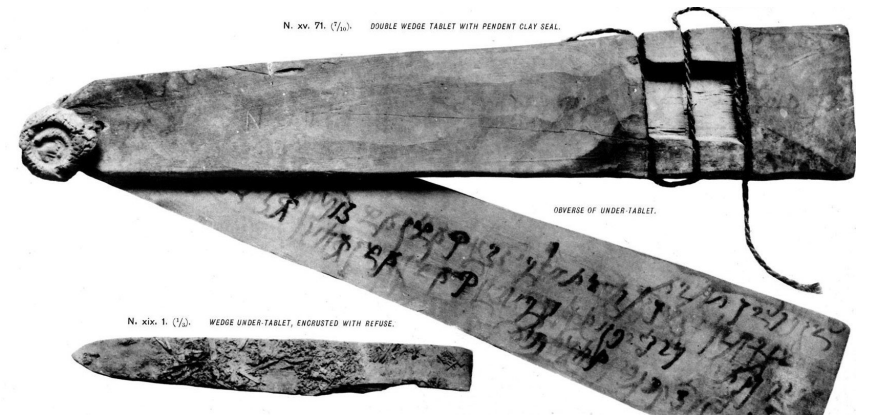


FIGURE 4.6 Document #N.XV.71, or n.265

43 Stein 1907, 1:350.

The use of seals for validating documents is clearly attested to in the case of judicial documents and the practice of resealing documents after their use in court.[44] One example of this is document n.582, a contract concerning a rather large plot of land overseen by the magistrates kitsaitsa V̲arpa and kāla Karaṃtsa. At the end of the document, a postscript was added and written in a different ink:

> (*Postscript written in blacker ink*)
> In the fourth year, second month, twenty-eighth day in the reign of his majesty the great king Jiṭugha Mahiriya, son of heaven, the ogu Jeyabhatra, the caṃkura Cataraga̲, the cuv̲alaina Tiraphara, and the cozbos Soṃjaka and Vanaṃta examined a dispute (on this matter) in Caḍ̲ota. This field was sown by an act of force. Now the v̲asu Vuga̲ica and the scribe Ramaṣtso have brought an action. This written tablet (*ṣulga̲ lihidaga̲*) was the authority. A quarter of the seed is to be taken as his own by Vuga̲ica, the rest of the corn and the land is to be taken by Ramaṣtso.[45]

As shown by the postscript, the document, having been stored by Ramṣotsa (here spelled Ramaṣtso), was used to adjudicate in a judicial case. Most interesting for our purposes, however, is that the document was found sealed correctly with three seals, namely those of ogu Jeyabhatra, the caṃkura Cataraga̲, and the cozbo Soṃjaka, as also stated by the document's seal statement. This is clear proof of the importance of seals in verifying the legality of a Krorainan document since the presiding officials saw it necessary to re-seal the document and add a new sealing statement before it was given back to Ramṣotsa. Ramṣotsa then promptly returned the document to his archive in ruin N.24, where the document was found sealed and intact.

As the above indicates, seals played a crucial role in Krorainan administrative culture, serving as the central mechanism both for securing and authenticating the content of documents. In summarising the evidence for sealing techniques and sealing practices at Kroraina, two points in particular are worth highlighting. The first is to stress that Krorainan seals were generally set in such a way that, in order for the document to be opened, one would have to either break the seal or cut the strings. This means that one could

44 This was done with documents n.570 and n.582, and the still unopened document n.787.
45 Burrow 1940, 121.

be confident that a document found with both seal and strings intact had not been opened, though, as aforementioned document n.582 shows, documents were sometimes re-sealed. Secondly, it must be emphasised that seals in Krorainan administrative and judicial practice were the primary means of authenticating documents. As such, Krorainan seals, their use, and their design, would have mattered to the people who used them. It is with this crucial context in mind that we must consider who used the seals, what seals were used, and why.

4 Seal Ownership in Kroraina

As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, much attention has been paid to the presence of 'foreign' seals in Kroraina and who used them. As will be recalled, there has been a particularly fervent focus on the *Shanshan duwei* seal, with suggestions that it belonged to a Chinese official or that it had later been recovered and used as a status object by local officials.[46] By closely studying the surviving seals together using information gleaned from their attached documents and the broader corpus, we can begin to more carefully consider seal ownership in Kroraina.

Seals appear to have been fairly ubiquitous in Kroraina and used by a surprising proportion of local society. Looking at the seal statements, as summarised in Table 4.1, it is clear that the majority of seals surviving on documents belonged to various officials. Nevertheless, the rather large number of people without titles sealing documents remains noteworthy. Several of these seals were set on semi-formal agreements and documents, made outside of judicial institutions yet mimicking their practices, as seen in documents n.348 (N.XV.196) and n.588 (N.XXIV.VIII.91). The use of seals by non-officials is further supported by widespread finds of sealing devices including signet rings etc., across the Krorainan sites, including in ruins not associated with any officials. Even so, given the bias of surviving sources towards administrative documents, which are more likely to carry the seals of officials, we are better able to discuss seal ownership amongst officials and other members of the Krorainan elite.

46 Stein 1921, 1:230. See also the discussion summarised in Høisæter 2020, 99–102.

TABLE 4.1 Titles in seal statements

Title	Occurrences
Guśura	5
Ogu	12
Kala	3
Kitsaitsa	3
Suɣeṭha	1
Caṃkura	2
Cozbo	29
Ṣoṭhaṃga	2
Kori	1
Toṃgha	1
Yatma	1
Vasu	3
Carapuruṣa	2
Divira (Scribe)	1
Monk	5
No title	8

4.1 *Three Cases of Seal Ownership: Soṃjaka, Yitaka, and Vukto*

Seals in Kroraina were, in all surviving cases, owned by individuals. This is shown by a number of cases where the same seal had been used for different documents by the same individual. The best example is cozbo Soṃjaka, from the aforementioned document n.582, who appears in more documents than any other actor. Cozbo Soṃjaka was active as the governor of the province (*raja*) of Caḍ̣ota (Niya site) for a period of about ten years in the early reign of King Mahiri (here *c.* 288 CE–297 CE), and he was alive as late as the twenty-second year of Mahiri's reign (i.e., *c.* 306 CE). As ruling magistrate, he presided over many judicial documents, both contracts and legal documents, with his seal surviving more or less intact on five documents: documents n.568 (N.XXIV.VIII.71), n.569 (N.XXIV.VIII.72), n.573 (N.XXIV.VIII.76), n.582, and n.584 (N.XXIV.VIII.87). These documents with seals span the entirety of Soṃjaka's known rule and all except document n.573 carried seal statements explicitly stating that the seal belonged to cozbo Soṃjaka. Though some seals are very damaged, such as the seal on document n.584, they all show the same image: namely a circular seal with a cable border bearing an anthropomorphic

figure facing forward, as given in Figure 4.7.[47] This figure wears a wide garment with hands and feet outstretched, and appears to hold something in its hands. Could this seal be that of his office rather than Soṃjaka's personal seal, given that document n.247 stated that a shipment was to be sealed with the 'seal of the cozbo'?[48] This seems unlikely, as both kitsatisa Luṭhu, who served as magistrate in the years prior to Soṃjaka, and cozbo Ṣamasena, who served immediately after him, used different seals.[49] Thus, if Soṃjaka's seal was his seal of office, it was at any rate his personal seal of office. It does seem more likely, however, that the phrase 'seal of the cozbo' refers to the seal of a specific individual cozbo, rather than the office itself.

These seals thus suggest that seals were personal, with an individual using the same design, and possibly the same sealing device. This conclusion can be further nuanced by considering the four surviving seals of the cozbos Yitaka and Vukto, found on documents n.322 (N.XV.155), n.421 (N.XXIII.1), n.576 (N.XXIV.VIII.79), and n.866 (Fogg collection). Documents n.322, n.576, and n.866 were all dated to the twenty-first year of King Mahiri, more specifically to the eleventh day of the second month (n.322), the twenty-third day of the twelfth month (n.576), and the twenty-first day of the seventh month (n.866). Document n.421 survived only as a cover-tablet, lacking both a date and the



FIGURE 4.7 Somjaka's seal as seen on document #N.XXIV.VIII.72, or n.569 with approximate line-drawing

47 The line-drawings throughout this chapter are intended to better convey the various seal designs, however in being based on rather poor extant images, these remain approximate renderings.

48 Burrow 1937, 45.

49 For an overview of the chronology of the magistrates at Caḍota see Høisæter 2020, appendix V. For Luṭhu's seal, see document n.574, and for Ṣamasena's seals, see documents n.577 and n.593.

main content of the document which would have been on the under-tablet. All of the documents, except n.322, carried seal statements that identified their seals as belonging to the two cozbos, while in n.322 the two were the presiding magistrates. Looking at the seals, documents n.576 and n.866 show identical impressions. The left-hand seal was elliptical, showing a bird taking flight on outstretched wings bordered by a raised line and a notched pattern. The right-hand seal was similarly elliptical and was bordered by a dotted line, showing the upper body of a female turned to the left. The female figure has distinct features, long hair, and holds what appears to be a mirror or possibly a flower in her hand, while a line like a balustrade cuts across her lower body. It is bordered by a dotted line. These are both given in Figure 4.8.

The seals of the undated document n.421 complicate matters, however. In Burrow's reading, the document carries a seal statement saying that the seal is that of the cozbos Yitaka and Vukto. As seen in Figure 4.9, the bird seal of documents n.576 and n.866 is still used, though it has moved to the right-hand side and the border is unclear. The seal on the left, however, is lumpy, possibly



FIGURE 4.8 Two seals on document #N.XXIV.VIII.79, or n.576 with approximate line-drawings

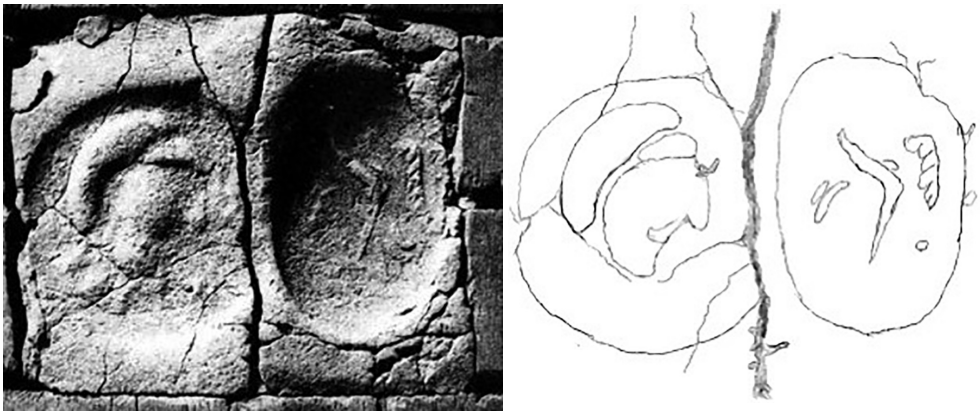


FIGURE 4.9 Two seals on #N.XXIII.1, or n.421 with approximate line-drawings

representing a man's head. There are several ways one could try to explain this discrepancy, though it seems most likely that one of the actors was actually someone else. This is supported by Boyer's reading which gives the second name not as Vukto but as Raṃspo.[50] Given the otherwise consistent use of seals, the latter reading seems more likely.

This is especially true when considering the two seals of Yitaka and Vukto on document n.322. As seen in Figure 4.10, the seals on document n.322 have been badly damaged, though an outstretched wing similar to the bird design can still be discerned on the left-hand seal. Most interesting, however, is the female figure on the right-hand seal. She possesses practically all the characteristics of the female of n.576 and n.866, including the long hair, the mirror-like object, the balustrade, and the dotted border. The device which set the seal was, however, quite clearly a different one, and the female is notably turned right rather than left. Considering the fact that five months and ten days separated n.322 from the next document, n.866, it seems clear that either Yitaka or Vukto had a new sealing device made in this time. Strikingly, the new sealing device for n.576 and n.866 was clearly based on the original seal used on n.322, indicating not only the personal nature of the seal but also the importance attached to the design.

Considering the cases of Soṃjaka and of Yitaka and Vukto, we see that seals were tied to individuals rather than offices and the consistency of the seal designs indicates that the motif mattered. These examples also shed insight into the order in which seals were set on documents. The only seal that appears both by itself and in a group is Soṃjaka's seal. It appears alone in three instances and with three other seals in two instances, i.e., n.582 and n.584. In both cases, it is placed leftmost in a line of three and in both cases Soṃjaka's named is listed last in the list of three names given in the seal statement. This would indicate that seals were set from right to left, which would also follow

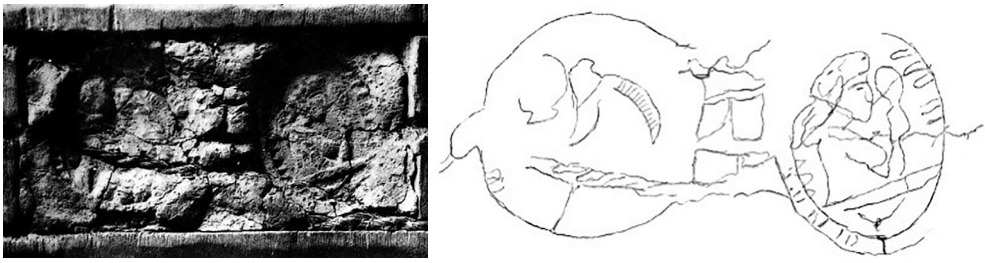


FIGURE 4.10 Two seals on #N.XV.155, or n.322 with approximate line-drawings

50 Boyer et al. 1929, 1:151.

the logic of the Kharoṣṭhī script which was itself written from right to left. This pattern appears to be contradicted, however, by Yitaka and Vukto's document n.421, whether or not one reads the second name as Vukto or Raṃspo. This is because the bird seal, placed to the left in the other three cases of Yitaka and Vukto, here appears on the right, while Yitaka is still named first in the seal statement, as he also is in the three other cases. Document n.421 could of course represent an anomaly, but it could alternatively indicate that there was no set order in which seals were usually placed. Thus, while it seems likely that the setting of seals did often run from right to left, in agreement with the script, this was not always the case and only further evidence can allow us to say something of the frequency of this pattern.

5 Seal Designs and Motifs

Extant seals in Kroraina were thus personal and their designs clearly mattered to those that used them. Here, we return to the third potential role a seal can play on a document, namely as a statement. Given the limits of our sources, both in terms of the numbers of seals and what the available written sources tells us about seals, it is difficult to say with certainty to what extent the designs of seals were meant as statements or expressions of identity, religion, culture, wealth, and so forth. The case of Yitaka and Vukto's seals above, where a design was retained even when a new sealing device was made, might support a view that seals did serve as a statement, though such a choice could equally be based on the seal's role in authentication.

5.1 *Seals and Identity: The Case of Ṣamasena*

A better case, though still plagued by uncertainties, can be made on the basis of the seals of the cozbo Ṣamasena. These seals appeared on documents n.577 (N.XXIV.VIII.80) and n.593 (N.XXIV.VIII.96), dated respectively to the twentieth (*c.* 304 CE) and seventeenth year (*c.* 301 CE) of Mahiri's reign. Ṣamasena's two seals are particularly fascinating as they are the only surviving instance where two different seals can definitively be identified as belonging to the same actor. Document n.577 bears a single circular seal, showing a male bust turned right – as given in Figure 4.11. The head has distinct features, with a hooked nose, beard, large ears with elongated earlobes, and bound up hair given as small circles in concentric rings. The figure holds what appears to be a flower in its raised left hand. The figure's pose, the flower in its hand, the bound hair and the elongated earlobes are suggestive of a Buddhist image, similar to the more obviously Buddhistic image on the seal of the earlier-dated n.332.

The second document, n.593, bore two seals as Ṣamasena acted together with another cozbo called Pugo, as seen in Figure 4.12. On the left-hand side, the document bears a circular seal with a very intricate and highly-stylised bird, while the right-hand seal is elliptical, showing a full human figure facing forward. The figure, most likely male, wears a wide garment reaching the knees that appears to have streamers flowing down behind. He carries a sword suspended from its belt with his head encircled by a nimbus, and in his left hand he holds a sack-like object. The border is formed by a solid line and a thicker notched band. Stein tentatively suggested this figure to be the Indian deity Kubera, as based on its sack, though I have not been able to find any similar representations of Kubera.[51] Whoever it represents, the figure is strongly reminiscent of the style seen on Kushan coinage. The cut of the figure's garment, the pose, and the halo are all very similar in execution to Kushan numismatic images of standing kings.[52] As discussed in the previous section, it is not necessarily possible to identify the owners of seals on documents with multiple seals, though a general trend of seals being set from right to left in accordance with the text seems likely. It is therefore likely, though by no means certain, that Ṣamasena's second seal was the 'Kushan' inspired figure on the right since his name was given first on the seal statement.





FIGURE 4.11 Seal on #n.xxiv.viii.80, or n.577 with approximate line-drawing

51 Stein 1921, 1:262.

52 Though many parallels in style can be drawn, see in particular the gold issues of Vasudeva II. See, for example, n.1893,0506.34 in the British Museum collection.



FIGURE 4.12 Seals on #N.XXIV.VIII.96, or n.593 with approximate line-drawings

Why and under what circumstances Ṣamasena changed his seal is unclear, as he appears to have served in the same official position throughout. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that what was likely his first-known seal and his second-known seal both show clear Indian, and in the case of the second, Buddhist connections. This is interesting because both Ṣamasena and his son Larsu were associated with Buddhism, and Larsu was a patron of the local Buddhist community at Caḍota. Ṣamasena's connections to Buddhism can be ascertained by the poorly-preserved document n.390 (N.XV.355), a letter sent to him by a *tasuca* official whose name is illegible, and which was concerned primarily with taxation. In the opening greeting formula, amongst the many standard epithets given to the recipient, Ṣamasena is entitled *mahāyanasaṃprastita*, that is 'one who has set forth in the great vehicle (Māhāyana)'.[53] This title was not part of the standard repertoire, and as such does not represent a routine greeting but would rather seem to identify Ṣamasena as an adherent of Buddhism. In fact, the only other occurrence of this title is on an inscription found at the Endere site amongst the epithets of a Krorainan king, likely Amgoka.[54] The Krorainan king, as shown especially clearly in document n.489, was heavily involved with Buddhism in the kingdom, laying down regulations for the community and acting as a patron. As such, Ṣamasena may well have been more than a mere adherent, perhaps using his position in the Krorainan elite to serve as a patron for the Buddhist community. This was certainly the case with his son Larsu, who later came to serve as cozbo and who served as a patron for the Buddhist community of Caḍota, as described in documents n.343 (N.XV.185) and n.345 (N.XV.190+10+86).

53 Burrow 1937, 79.
54 Salomon 1999.

As such, it seems reasonable that Ṣamasena's use of at least one seal with a Buddhist motif can be connected to his adherence to Buddhism. The seal would have been explicitly chosen in order to reflect this identity and thus served as a means of displaying it.

6 The Origin of Krorainan Sealing Devices

Having so far examined how seals were used in Kroraina, who owned them and why, we turn to the final question of where the sealing devices used for setting the seals might have come from. As discussed in the introduction, interest in Krorainan seals has largely been catalysed by the variety of 'foreign' designs seen, such as seals that appear to show Athena or the Chinese *Shanshan duwei* seal. Tracing all the various possible inspirations and origins of Krorainan seal designs lies well beyond the bounds of this paper and would require a major study of its own. Some broad types can however be identified, as shown in Table 4.2.

Firstly, seals can be divided into those that appear to have a 'foreign' inspiration and those for which no such links can readily be drawn. Amongst the first group, we find a large number of seals with Classical or Hellenistic motifs, such as the Athena seal; a number of Indian motifs seemingly from the southwest, as exemplified by Ṣamasena's second seal; and finally, a surprisingly small number of Chinese designs. The second group of seals, those with no clear

TABLE 4.2 Seal designs

Type		Occurrences
'Foreign'	Buddhist	3
	Chinese	3
	Classical god/figure	20
	Classical portrait	4
	Indian/Kushan	4
'Local'	Animals	9
	Geometric	1
	Gods/Figures	5
	Portrait	7
	Script	2
	Uncertain	17

'foreign' precedent, is quite varied, with animal and portrait designs being the most common, as exemplified by Yitaka and Vukto's seals. Overall, the large number of Classical seals stands out, though one must exhibit caution as this total does not accurately reflect the number of individual seal designs. This is because several of the Classical seal impressions that survive were made by the same seals. For example, documents n.7 (N.I.9), n.70 (N.II.2), and possibly n.124 (N.IV.80) all show a nude 'Eros'-like male turned right, while documents n.235 (N.XV.24), n.310 (N.XV.137), n.360 (N.XV.307), and possibly also n.331 (N.XV.166), all show the same Athene figure. As such, the real number of unique Classical seals is somewhat lower.

These exotic seals do, however, seem to have been particularly valuable and difficult to acquire, as they are strongly associated with documents from the royal court and actors from the very pinnacle of Kroraina's elites. All the Athene seals, for example, were set on royal commands, with the one exception of n.331 where the seal owner is identified as the kala Puṃñabala, son of the Krorainan king. This tendency is even more interesting when compared with Table 4.3, which shows the designs on various forms of seal-stamps, signets, and other sealing devices found archaeologically at the Krorainan sites. As the table shows, no Classical sealing device has been found. Instead, the most prevalent types are animal and geometric designs, the former of which was also the most common 'local' design seen on the seals themselves. One reason for the discrepancy between the tables likely lies in the value of the device types and designs, with fine intaglio-type signets being less likely to be discarded and thus less likely to be found archaeologically. It does, however, also likely speak to a discrepancy of access, where the privileged members of the kingdom's elite had unique access to the skilled craftsmen who could make such exotic and complex designs as the Athena intaglio. One could even imagine them to have the connections to import such seals, either from neighbouring kingdoms or further afield.

For the vast majority of seal users in Kroraina, however, I would argue that it seems entirely unrealistic to assume that they acquired their seals through some form of long-distance trade or as gifts from foreign political regimes. Seals were personal and, crucially, seals were items to be *used,* which could easily be lost, damaged, or broken entirely. This suggests seals were made locally, either in Kroraina itself or in a neighbouring region such as Khotan. A case in point is the replacement of one of the seals used by Yitaka and Vukto, where the design was retained across two different sealing devices. This replacement was acquired within, at most, a timespan of five months and ten days, though in reality this was likely shorter. How was this done? Clearly, in order to have

TABLE 4.3 Seal device designs

Type	Occurrences
Animal	7
Chinese	3
Floral	4
Geometric	5
Portrait	2
Uncertain	11

a seal made according to a specific design, one of the two cozbos would have had to communicate with the craftsman. Indeed, it seems likely he was provided with the seal impression of the original sealing device as a model, since he ended up making a reversed sealing device, i.e., a new device matching the original seal. This would naturally preclude long-distance exchange, at least beyond Kroraina's immediate neighbours.

7 Krorainan Seals in Context

As this chapter has endeavoured to show, seal use in Kroraina was prolific and played a key role in administrative and judicial culture. In the administrative and judicial sphere, seals served both to secure documents and to authenticate them. Seals were owned by individuals who can be traced by their seals, allowing one to potentially identify actors in fragmented documents based on the seal used alone. Furthermore, there are strong indications that the seal designs mattered, with the designs in most cases remaining stable over time and, in some cases, made to project a specific image of the owner. Finally, it is highly likely that most seals were made locally in the southern Tarim Basin.

These conclusions represent but the framework for understanding Krorainan seals. Much work remains to be done, especially looking more closely at the seal designs and identifying their inspiration, as well as exploring where they could have been made. Nonetheless, any such discussion, and indeed any integration of Krorainan seals in exploring wider topics relating to dating or culture, must take the framework here into account. The Krorainan seals, perhaps unsurprisingly, can only be truly understood within their own context.

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CHAPTER 5

The Social Life of a Tang Silver Dish

Hajni Elias

Abstract

In 2008, a rare Tang 唐 dynasty (618–907) silver dish was sold at Sotheby's in London. The dish was one amongst the many masterpieces of Chinese precious metalwork from the collection of Dr. Johan Carl Kempe (1884–1967). With its simple elegant form and unusual decoration of a rhinoceros-like animal figure chased in gilt, the dish evidences the fine craftsmanship of Tang silversmiths and reflects the advanced metalworking techniques available at the time. This chapter seeks to unravel the possible life story of the Kempe dish, tracing its shifting associations with people and its environment from conception to production and distribution across continents. It attempts to understand the period and culture that affected the dish's early life, and in doing so, explores the contribution made by foreign merchants and craftsmen living in China at the time. Arab and Persian communities in Tang China created a long-distance trading network for the production and distribution of artefacts, made in a hybrid style that catered to both Eastern and Western preferences, which were intended for both the domestic luxury market and for export trade.

On 14th May 2008, a much-anticipated Chinese art auction took place at Sotheby's in London. The auction comprised Chinese precious metalwork and ceramics once in the collection of Dr. Johan Carl Kempe (1884–1967), a highly successful industrialist and renowned Chinese art collector from Uppsala, Sweden (Figure 5.1). The auction was the second in a three-part sale of treasures assembled by Kempe since the early 1930s, a time when interest in Chinese art first reached Sweden.[1] Kempe and Crown Prince Gustaf VI Adolf, who would rule as King from 1950, were Sweden's two greatest collectors of Chinese artefacts at a time when Swedish engineers were closely involved in the development of China's infrastructure, with such excavation works

1 See Gyllesnvärd 1971, 9.

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inadvertently uncovering archaeological riches.[2] Most studies of Chinese gold and silver have generally ignored private collections such as the collection of Carl Kempe, which was, until its dispersal in 2008, amongst the finest in the world for its quality and breadth.

Art historian and critic Souren Melikian in the *New York Times* hailed the Kempe Collection sale as the most astonishing auction of Chinese art that ever took place at Sotheby's, primarily due to its sensational coup of multiplying its estimate by more than thirteen times and raising just over £9 million. Only three out of 126 objects were left unsold. Nearly one hundred pieces of Tang 唐 (618–907) and Song 宋 (960–1279) dynasty silver, together with a small contingent of early gold objects, acquired by Kempe between the two World Wars were offered at the sale. Melikian also noted how 'no collection remotely approaching its scope had ever appeared in the market'.[3]

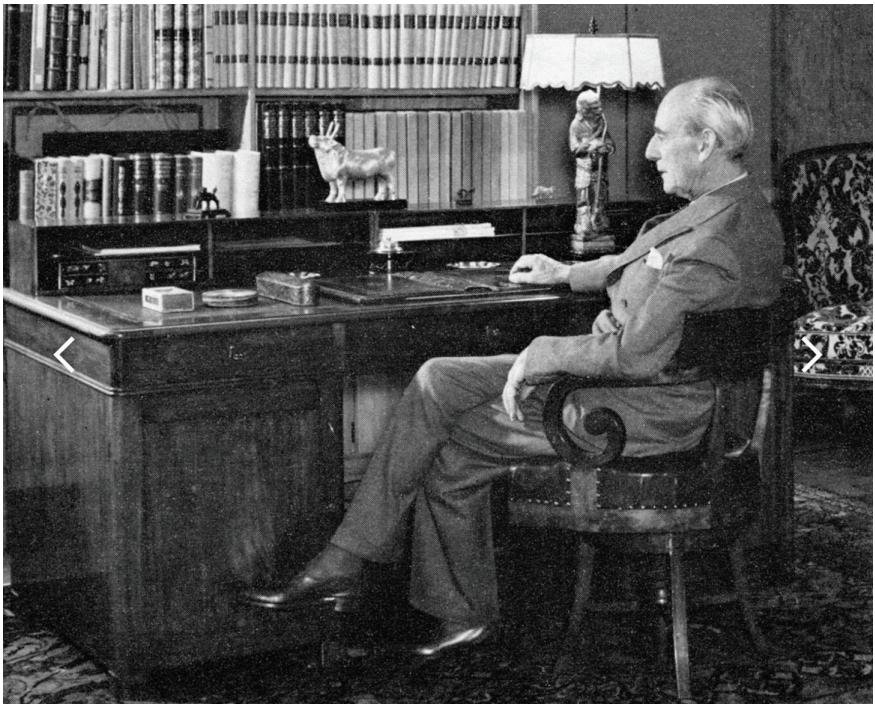


FIGURE 5.1 Photograph of Dr. Johan Carl Kempe in Ekolsund, Sweden

2 Elias 2012, 142–45.
3 Melikian 2008.

Amongst this formidable group of metalware was a silver dish attributed by the auction experts to the eighth or ninth centuries of the Tang dynasty (Figure 5.2). The dish (herein the Kempe dish) is of shallow circular form with the interior decorated in repoussé and parcel-gilt with a single figure of a standing rhinoceros-like beast. Following a heated bidding war, the dish was purchased by the eminent Chinese art dealer Giuseppe Eskenazi for £168,500. This chapter is a study of the trajectory, or 'life story', of this fascinating Tang period vessel: its shifting association with people and its environment from conception to production, and its journey across continents through time and space. This study attempts to understand the period and culture that affected the dish's life and its journey from China to the West, in turn showing how the life story of the Kempe dish reveals the significant contribution made by foreign merchants and craftsmen in China. These foreign communities created a long-distance trade network for the production and distribution of goods that fed both the domestic luxury market, in particular the Tang imperial court and Tang nobility, and the export trade of artefacts produced in a hybrid style that catered to both Eastern and Western preferences.[4]

Overall, this chapter aims to provide additional information concerning gold and silverware production in Tang China. There is a general agreement amongst scholars that Tang gold and silver wares are 'special' and represent a synthesis of Eastern and Western influences, evidenced primarily in shape, decoration, and iconography.[5] They show the outstanding craftsmanship of Tang silversmiths using a wide range of metalworking techniques. It is commonly stated that the majority of gold and silver wares were made for the imperial court, personal use, gifting, and tribute purposes.[6] Although it is known that private workshops coexisted with imperially-sponsored workshops in the capital of Chang'an 長安, it is generally assumed that both catered to orders by the Tang court and for the use of the imperial family.[7] However, there may well

4 The terms 'foreign' and 'Chinese' are difficult in the context of Tang studies due to the cosmopolitan nature of Tang society. Concepts of national identity and foreignness are very complex to define both now and then. Notwithstanding these difficulties, 'foreign' in this chapter denotes peoples who would have been regarded as external to or remote from the Tang empire and its immediate neighbours and dependent entities. The term is unsatisfactory but employed here because there is no better alternative and refers in this context primarily to the Persian and Arab communities either settled in China or trading with the Tang Empire.

5 See Gao 2012; Geng 2019; Katō 1965; Li 2019; Lu 2007; Qi 1991, 1999, 2009, and 2011; Ren 2018; Tan 2004a and 2004b; and Zhao 2006.

6 Katō 1965 summarises the function of gold and silver in Tang society as prestige artefacts made for personal use, gifting, and bribery. They were also kept as wealth stock, tax payment, tribute, and sometimes as a measure with a high monetary value. See also Liu 2015, 47.

7 Qi 1999.



FIGURE 5.2 Tang parcel-gilt silver dish from the Meiyintang Collection

have been a more prominent foreign trade of these precious metal luxury items than sometimes thought. With the absorption, imitation, and fusion of foreign and Chinese elements, Chinese silversmiths in collaboration with their foreign counterparts, in particular Persian and Arab craftsmen and artisans working in southern coastal towns such as Yangzhou 揚州, created highly sought after objects for both the domestic and export markets.[8]

8 Szmoniewski 2016, 235. See also Schottenhammer 2010, where the author notes that, in the Tang dynasty, the major communication road between the Persian Gulf and China came to be the sea route and that it was Muslim merchants who initiated the era of maritime commerce in China.

In methodology, this study takes inspiration from philosophers and cultural anthropologists such as Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff, whose work has alerted us to the potential inherent in adopting an object-centred diachronic approach in interpreting societies. Through an examination of the meaning and identity of objects as they interact dynamically with people, we can approach a more informed understanding of cultural and historical processes.[9] As noted by Kopytoff:

> In doing a biography of a thing, one would ask questions similar to those one asks about people: What, sociologically, are the biographical possibilities inherent in its "status" and in the period and culture, and how are these possibilities realised? Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such a thing? What are the recognised "ages" or periods in the thing's life, and what are the cultural markers for them?[10]

In the case of the Kempe dish, an object-based study allows us to look into a trajectory that is transregional in nature. Objects traded or exchanged between different regions 'interact' in a different manner to those that remain 'locally'. They take on distinctive cultural features and are guided by their life history in ways that are unique.[11] Indeed, the Kempe dish may be seen as a type of object which brings together actors from different cultural systems with only a minimal shared understanding (from a conceptual point of view) about the object in question and who agree *only* about terms of trade.[12]

Starting from most recent events and working our way backwards in time, we will first examine the dish's provenance from the time it entered the collection of Carl Kempe to its current owner. Then, we will attempt to retell its life story in the Tang period through the trajectory of another contemporaneous Tang silverware, a four-lobed bowl decorated with a closely-related rhinoceros-like figure, recovered from the late-Tang dynasty shipwreck, the Belitung. The discovery of the Belitung bowl allows us to propose a likely pathway for the Kempe dish.

9 See Appadurai 2011.
10 Kopytoff 2011, 66–67.
11 Allard, Yan, and Linduff 2018, 13.
12 Appadurai 2011, 15.

1 The Kempe Dish in the West

The Kempe dish is of a simple, shallow form with everted edges and foot rims. It is 15.2 cm in diameter and, in the centre of its interior well, the decoration depicts a standing rhinoceros-like figure carrying a three-flowered lotus *howdah*. Although the animal takes the shape of a cloven-footed rhinoceros with a pair of distinct horns, much like Sumatran or African two-horned rhinoceroses, its body is covered in scales which is highly curious and, as we will see, significant. Details of the decoration are executed in repoussé and parcel-gilt techniques enclosed by a raised gilt ridge and set on a plain silver ground. It is made of silver alloy which was originally plated with a layer of a higher-quality silver that has now been worn away. We will return to the possible meaning and iconography of the decoration when we examine the dish in the context of its creation in the Tang dynasty.

The dish was located in Sweden following its acquisition by Carl Kempe, a successful businessman who transformed the Kempe family lumber business into a lucrative pulp and paper production enterprise. According to his close friend and former Director of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm, Bo Gyllensvärd, Kempe's interest in Chinese art started with ceramics in the 1920s when he joined a group of art connoisseurs who began collecting Chinese art at the time. Subsequently, he also became a member of the Chinese Club in Stockholm, a local branch of the Oriental Ceramic Society in London. The Club met regularly and its members established themselves as the most important Swedish collectors and experts in the field of Chinese art.[13] Kempe's first acquisitions of Chinese pieces were eighteenth-century polychrome porcelains, but following his visit to China with his wife in 1935, he 'discovered' the beauty of Tang and Song dynasty monochrome stoneware and objects in other media. During his trip to China, Kempe purchased some 250 artefacts, which even at that time was considered no small feat.[14] Over the course of the next few decades, Kempe assembled a large collection which fell into three principal categories: gold and silver wares, monochrome ceramics, and glass wares. His collection, including the silver dish, was housed at the beautiful castle of Ekolsund, a former royal palace some forty miles north of Stockholm. However, after his death in 1967, the collection was dispersed following the sale of the property by the family. Many of the ceramics and metalware pieces were loaned to the Museum of Art and Far Eastern Antiquities in the small town of Ulricehamn, where they continued to be displayed for public

13 Gyllensvärd 1971, 9.
14 Christie's 2019.

view. Kempe, who was a long-term benefactor of the museum, gifted his entire glass collection to the museum in his will.[15]

Although the date of Kempe's acquisition of the dish is not recorded (possibly dating to sometime between 1930 and 1950), it was most likely obtained directly from China, perhaps even during his trip in 1935. The dish was part of a matching pair of the same form, size, and decoration. Kempe became interested in Tang metalwork from the 1930s and in the ensuing twenty years he continued (often against the advice of experts, as metal wares were not 'fashionable' items for a collection unlike Chinese porcelain at the time) to accumulate a great variety of precious metal pieces. From the outset, it was his intention to form a representative collection for the study of Chinese gold and silversmith work.[16] Regarding the provenance of the Kempe pieces, we know that some gold and silver items were also obtained through his contact with Orvar Karlbeck, a Swedish engineer who acted on occasion as agent for a syndicate of collectors, dealers, and museums with an interest in Chinese art in the 1930s.[17]

Whether ceramics or gold and silver wares, the *raison d'être* for Kempe's collecting was to create a scholarly anthology whose composition and quality was such that its study would reveal its historical development over the centuries. He acquired artefacts not only for himself but for all those who wished to carry out research in the field. Gyllesnvärd notes how during the years when he was still in good health, he welcomed scholars and students of Chinese art to his beautiful Ekolsund home where his collection was on permanent display. He preferred to show his treasures himself and was always keen to hear the opinions of his guests. He generously allowed the examination of his collection and willingly lent them to exhibitions in both Europe and the United States.[18] The dish's prominence in the collection is evident from its inclusion in a number of major touring exhibitions, such as *The Exhibition of Chinese Gold and Silver in the Carl Kempe Collection* in Washington D.C. between 1954–1955 and at the Asia House Gallery in New York, as well as in nine other American museums in the 1970s.

The dish's seemingly tranquil life as a display object in a museum setting, primarily valued as an item of scholarly research and interest, came to an abrupt end in 2008 when it was offered for sale at Sotheby's by a group of art investors and businessmen based in Singapore, who had no specialist

15 For information on Carl Kempe, see Davids and Jellinek 2011, 268–69.
16 Gyllensvärd 1971, 9.
17 Elias 2012, 144.
18 Gyllensvärd 1971, 10.

knowledge of Chinese art. They purchased the Kempe collection of ceramics and metal wares ten years earlier from an industrialist called Anders Welandson who had acquired the entire collection from Kempe's sisters in 1998, a year after Kempe's death. In 2008, the group of investors realised an almost instant return to their investment.[19] Following the sale, the Kempe dish was briefly housed in the Eskenazi Gallery in Clifford Street, Mayfair, London, before its purchase by the prominent Swiss art collector Gilbert Zuellig as part of his private Meiyintang Collection.

Although no longer on public display, the dish is well-known to connoisseurs and researchers in the field of Chinese art. Throughout its twentieth- and twenty first-century life, it has been a treasured object of public and private appreciation. Its link to China's golden era of the arts, the Tang dynasty, is perhaps its most important and esteemed provenance. However, the dish's sale at auction in 2008 gave it another layer of significance: it became an object of high value exchange in the commercial art world. Art auction sales are more than conventional economic exchanges or commercial operations. Instead, as described by Jean Baudrillard, their ethos goes well beyond economic calculations of individual appropriation and extends to notions of prestige, social standing, and conspicuous consumption amongst the elite and wealthy.[20] In the following section, we will go back in time to trace the life trajectory of the Kempe dish in its original setting, when it was also part of an 'economic' exchange, valued more than anything else as a commodity to be traded.

2 The Kempe Dish in Tang China

Foreign influence on the Kempe dish is evident from its form and decoration, as well as the production technique utilised in the process of its manufacture. Similar round dishes with a single naturalistic decorative element in the central well bring to mind Central Asian dishes, such as the gilt-silver piece decorated with a reclined stag from the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg (Figure 5.3). This dish was likely made by Sogdian craftsmen whose artistic and cultural influence spanned the Silk Roads. Beyond the Sogdians, foreign influence reached the Tang capital of Chang'an via both land and sea trading routes. In his examination of dozens of silver ewers, cups, dishes,

19 Elias 2012, 144.

20 Baudrillard's theory on the art auction and how individuals gain prestige, identity, and standing through the consumption and display of commodities is given in Baudrillard 1981, 117. See also Appadurai 2011, 21.

and bowls, Qi Dongfang 齊東方 has shown that many of the artefacts which were previously assumed to be the products of Tang silversmiths were in fact imported from Central Asia or beyond.[21]

From the sixth century onwards, foreign merchants were key not only in facilitating trade between China and the western regions of Central Asia, but also in the dissemination of technological and artistic innovations.[22] Important foreign influence in the production of luxury goods came from Persia, which was introduced by those settling in the coastal ports of China via the Maritime Silk Roads.[23] Persian influence may be seen in various artefacts, in particular textiles and gold and silver wares, that were produced in the Jiangnan 江南 region, i.e., cities such as Yangzhou, Zhenjiang 鎮江, and Shaoxing 紹興, all of which were heavily-linked to the Maritime Silk Roads.[24] In his study of early foreign communities in China, Wang Lei notes how some of the main cities where foreigners settled were situated on the coast, arriving there via



FIGURE 5.3 Photograph of an eighth- or ninth-century gilt-silver dish from Sogdiana, housed in the Hermitage Museum

21 Qi 1999, 463.
22 See Rong 2004 and 2015.
23 Rong 2004, 27.
24 Louis 2011, 90.

the Maritime Silk Roads which linked the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean through the Malacca Strait.[25] As we will see, the Kempe dish was most probably a product of this community in the south of China.

Life for these foreign communities was not always peaceful, as shown in the biography of Tian Shengong 田神功 given in the *Old Book of Tang* (Jiu Tangshu 舊唐書). This section records a revolt started by an official called Liu Zhan 劉展 in Yangzhou in 760. General Tian Shengong was recruited to suppress the rebellion but:

> 至揚州，大掠百姓商人資產，郡內比屋發掘略遍，商胡波斯被殺者數千人。[26]
>
> [When Tian] reached Yangzhou, he greatly plundered the properties of [local] ordinary people and traders, and every household in the commandery who [refused] were tracked down and forced to submit. The Persian foreign merchants who died were in their thousands.

Subsequently, Tian travelled to Chang'an where he gifted fifty looted gold and silver vessels from Yangzhou to the emperor.[27] This not only confirms the large number of Persians residing in Yangzhou, but also their association with gold and silverware.

Two years earlier in 758, another conflict between the foreign communities living in China's coastal cities and their local Chinese administrators broke out in Guangzhou 廣州. *Old Book of Tang* describes Persian and Arab merchants launching a joint attack on the city, forcing the military prefect Wei Lijian 韋利見 to flee with his army. The foreign mob then raided government warehouses and burnt down various buildings before escaping by sea and returning to their country of origin.[28] Although there is no further information on this incident in any Chinese official documents, in all probability it was caused by foreign discontent with corrupt officials in charge of maritime trade affairs.

Other evidence of the presence of Persians in the south is provided in accounts of an opportunist warlord called Feng Ruofang 馮若芳 who lived on Hainan Island 海南島, just south of Guangzhou. Feng made it his habit to raid foreign ships, enslaving everyone onboard. A large colony of Persians,

25 Wang 2017, 9.
26 *Jiu Tangshu* 74.3533.
27 *Jiu Tangshu* 74.3533.
28 *Jiu Tangshu* 10.253.

originally crew members and passengers of Persian sea vessels, fell into his hands.[29] Accounts by a monk who was stranded on Hainan in 748 confirm the large number of Persian slaves living on the island where, according to the monk, precious sapanwood robbed from ships was piled like a small mountain in the backyard of Feng's lavish home that smelled of the fragrant frankincense, a much-favoured and expensive aromatic resin sourced from Southeast Asia by foreign traders.[30]

The multitude of non-Chinese peoples residing in Guangzhou is also recorded in relation to the 'Massacre of Guangzhou' in 878, when the rebel leader Huang Chao 黃巢 (d. 884) besieged the city and killed 120,000 Muslims, Jews, Christians and Mazdeans.[31] Following the massacre, foreign communities abandoned the port and the merchants moved their operations to Southeast Asia. This reorganisation of trade saw the end of Guangzhou's wealth being reliant on the exotic goods its foreign population brought in and distributed throughout the empire. As noted by John W. Chaffee, the Huang Chao rebellion constituted a great rupture in the imperial fabric from which the Tang never recovered. By the time the rebellion was defeated in 884, the Tang court, exiled in Sichuan, faced the threat of other rebellions, and was forced to rely upon foreign troops to re-establish itself in the capital. Not only did the imperial appetite for exotic luxuries dry up, but in the south the breakup of the empire was under way.[32]

3 Shipwrecks, Scales, and Howdah: Understanding the Kempe Rhinoceros

What is unusual about the Kempe dish is its depiction of a standing rhinoceros-like beast. Only a small number of comparable images from the Tang period are known, including the pair of Kempe dishes, a bowl from the Belitung shipwreck, three covered boxes, a gilt-copper plaque, a bronze mirror, and a mother-of-pearl inlaid mirror from the Shōsō-in repository, Nara (the latter being given in Figure 5.4).[33] A magnificent rhinoceros carved in stone also paved the Spirit Way of Tang Emperor Gaozu's 高祖 (r. 618–626) Xianling 顯陵 mausoleum.[34]

29 See also Chin 2004, 233; Schafer 1951, 407 and 1963, 16.

30 Chin 2004, 230.

31 Schafer 1951, 407.

32 Chaffee 2018, 51.

33 For illustrations of these items, see Gyllensvärd 1971, pl. 59 (Kempe dishes); Chapman 1999, pl. 2 (gilt-copper plaque); Guang 2006, pl. 355 (silver box); and Qi 1999, pls. 38, 1-245, and 3-4 (bronze and mother-of-pearl inlaid mirrors).

34 As an ode to his father, the mausoleum was built, albeit on a smaller scale, in imitation of the tomb of Emperor Gaozu 高祖 (r. 256 BCE–195 BCE) of the Western Han 西漢 dynasty

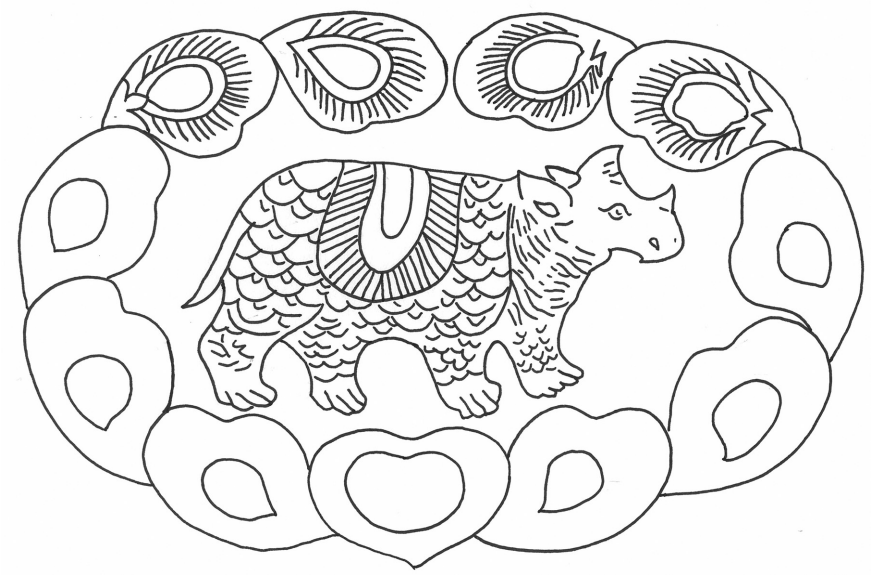


FIGURE 5.4 Line-drawing of the rhinoceros decoration on the Shōsō-in mirror

Rhinoceroses in Tang China were generally perceived as exotic tributes from the southern states and were valued primarily for their horn, with the animal being of secondary importance.[35] Trained rhinoceroses were sent to the Tang court for the emperor's entertainment as tribute from Southeast Asia, and even Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770) laments in his poem 'Since They Put Down' (Ziping 自平) how, following the rebellion of the import official Lü Taiyi 呂太一 in Guangzhou, living rhinoceroses and kingfisher feathers stopped being sent to the court.[36] On their habitat, Mark Elvin notes that by the Tang, rhinoceroses survived only in the far south and western regions of the empire.[37]

(202 BCE–9 CE). A magnificent spirit road of unprecedented size and a vast quantity of stone guardian sculptures led up to the trapezoid heaped burial mound. Although only a few sculptures have survived, according to the number and placement of those remaining there were supposed to be four pairs of stone tigers, one pair of stone rhinoceroses, a pair of ceremonial columns, and a grand stone tablet. The long distance between the ceremonial column and the stone tiger suggests the possibility of other stone sculptures in between, in addition to the stone rhinoceroses. For further information, see Hong and Yan 2012, 48.

35 For a list of various tribute dates and details related to rhinoceroses, see Schafer 1963, 83–84. On the use of rhinoceros horn, see Schafer 1963, 241–42 and Chapman 1999.

36 Owen 2016, 325–27.

37 Elvin 2004, 31–32. On the main habitat of rhinoceroses during the Tang dynasty, see also Heller 2011, 355.

The scarcity of rhinoceros images in Tang art may be explained by it being a relatively peripheral animal in China's visual culture. As observed by Edward Schafer, it was 'rather an emblem of China's antiquity, a kind of classical behemoth surviving among the barbarians. It was the horns and their magic virtue which had a significant role in the history of exoticism'.[38] Traditionally, rhinoceroses had no specific meaning or auspicious connotation in Chinese art, thus the origins behind their depiction is more likely to have come from foreign influence rather than a domestic one. But was this depiction necessarily of a rhinoceros in the first place?

3.1 *The Belitung Shipwreck*

A bowl from the Belitung shipwreck (Figure 5.5) which bears the image of a reclined rhinoceros-like beast is best-situated to shed light into the origins of the Kempe dish's design and dissemination.

This exceptional silver bowl was salvaged from the Belitung shipwreck, a site discovered in 1998 by fishermen diving for sea cucumbers in the shallow waters off the western shore of Belitung Island in the Java Sea. The Belitung shipwreck has provided indisputable evidence of trade conducted on a global



FIGURE 5.5 Four-lobed silver bowl dated to *c.* 825–850 from the Belitung shipwreck

38 Schafer 1963, 84.

scale between China, the Persian Gulf, Southeast Asia, and the Mediterranean world during the Tang dynasty. John Guy reaffirms the importance of the ship's cargo, in that this has:

> ... allowed a radical reappraisal of the Maritime Silk Route to China in the second quarter of the ninth century, when the vessel embarked on its ill-fated journey. The excavated cargo revealed the largest and most comprehensive assemblage of Chinese glazed ceramics from the late Tang dynasty found to date, together with a group of rare gold and silver vessels and silver ingots—one of the most important hoards of artefacts from that era ever discovered at a single site.[39]

The ship's cargo can be dated to around 826, as one of the 55,000 Changsha 長沙 ceramic bowls recovered bears an inscription which records it being made on the sixteenth day of the seventh month in the second year of Baoli 寶曆 reign era (824–826), corresponding to 826. Study of the ship's construction technology and the source of timber used for its building has shown that the Belitung vessel belongs to the Arab-tradition of *dhow* shipbuilding and points to the Arabian Peninsula as its likely origin.[40]

Through the study of the Belitung's cargo, it is clear that the vessel departed from Guangzhou. Indeed, its consignment of gold and silver wares was, according to Qi Dongfang, almost certainly produced in Yangzhou and its surrounds (known as the Zhexi 浙西 region), which was a centre for the manufacture and distribution of gold and silver wares in the south during the Tang dynasty. The discovery of the Belitung treasures clearly demonstrates that gold and silverware production in Yangzhou not only served the imperial family but also produced items for export overseas.[41]

Archaeological evidence has also shown that from the mid-eighth century, mines in southern China dominated the empire's gold and silver production.[42] Tang government policy encouraged private mining and production enterprises in order to stimulate the development of the gold and silver industry and to increase the state's tax revenues. As a result, production of gold and silver during the Tang rose to unprecedented levels.[43] Access to locally-sourced raw material and the availability of craftsmen and workshops in the Zhexi

39 Guy 2011, 19.
40 Guy 2011, 20.
41 Qi 2011, 23.
42 Qi 1999 and 2011.
43 Qi 1999, 461.

area helped the region become the centre of gold and silverware manufacture outside the Office of Arts and Crafts (Wensi Yuan 文思院), the imperial workshop in Chang'an responsible for the production of ceremonial and ornamental items in precious metal for the use of the imperial family.[44] Gold and silver tribute goods sourced from Yangzhou are recorded in historical documents and a silver basin discovered at the Famen Temple 法門寺 even bears an inscription describing it as a tribute product from Zhexi.[45] Trade in cities such as Yangzhou was carried out by Persian and Arab merchants who dominated commerce along the Grand Canal and into the south, setting up workshops with large numbers of employees. They were not only traders but also producers, running small businesses and workshops.[46]

Goods for the Belitung's cargo were sourced from their respective production centres, i.e., ceramics from Hangzhou 杭州 and Ningbo 寧波 and then metal wares from Yangzhou, Zhenjiang, Shaoxing, and their surrounds, and these were transported by land or sea to Guangzhou where they were likely loaded onto the vessel. The ship commenced the first leg of its journey from Guangzhou heading south towards Sumatra, where it procured substitute aromatics such as camphor, sandalwood, benzoin, and other resins for which there was increasing demand in the West.[47] In all probability, it was sailing for a port on Java's north coast to unload a consignment of trade goods and take on eastern Indonesian spices, before proceeding to Sri Lanka and the Arabian Sea.[48] Similarly, using Persian accounts, Edward Schafer traces the likely route of a Persian voyager from Siraf or Oman to the mouth of the Indus and the markets of Ceylon, then via the Nicobars to the prosperous Indies and the spice-laden ports of Malaya, Sumatra, Cambodia, and Champa. The final destination was Guangzhou, with the whole trip from the Persian Gulf to the Chinese coast taking five months in the Tang period.[49]

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44 Qi 1999, 221–22, 461; see also Katō 1965.

45 Shaanxi sheng kaogu yanjiuyuan et al. 2007, col. pl. 87.

46 Szmoniewski 2016, 236.

47 Guy 2011, 23.

48 Guy 2011, 25.

49 Schafer 1951, 404–405. In all likelihood, the Persian language must have been the sailors' *lingua franca* on the sea route. Certainly, by the tenth century, Persian was the most important language in Central Asia and amongst China's Muslim people who were strongly influenced by Iranian culture. See Liu 2010, 88, who also notes how Persian became the common language among the Huihui, an expression designating the Persian and Arab population, and later even the mother tongue of many of their children and grandchildren. There are still many Persian words and phrases in the daily Chinese language used by the Hui people.

Gold and silver wares found on the Belitung thus appear to have been commissioned and acquired for sale in a foreign market. While they exemplify a Tang style, some of the wares carry unusual design elements that suggest non-Chinese artistic preferences and the influence of foreign techniques in their manufacture. For example, the arrangement of the central decoration in the shape of a swastika seen on a pair of gold square-shaped dishes, a motif generally associated with Buddhism, is in fact an ornament fundamental to Byzantine and Persian art.[50] Thus its inclusion on the Belitung dishes should not come as a surprise when we consider their likely manufacture by Persian or Arab artisans.[51]

In the light of above, while we can only speculate over the destination of the Belitung treasures, they represent luxury items that catered to foreign demand and taste. The four-lobed silver bowl decorated with a seated rhinoceros-like beast from the ship's cargo is a perfect example of a piece commissioned for an overseas buyer. The vessel's lobed shape is characteristic of Sassanian and Persian silver work, which in turn became models for their Chinese counterparts.[52] A contemporaneous silver dish of similar lobed form, inscribed with the character *yang* 楊 (Figure 5.6), helps situate its production in Yangzhou where the Belitung bowl was also likely made.[53]

The Kempe dish is closely related in workmanship, style, and decoration to the Belitung bowl and thus likely belongs to a group of wares that were produced in one of the many workshops in South China for the export market.

3.2 *Questions Raised Concerning the Rhinoceros and the Howdah*

The most striking aspect of the Belitung bowl is the rhinoceros-like figure in the centre. Although the beast resembles a rhinoceros with a protruding horn above its snout, its body is covered in scales, unlike contemporary Chinese depictions of elephants. This incongruency may be explained by references

50 Pope and Ackerman 1964, 628. The dishes are held in the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore.

51 See Harper 2006, 52 fig. 26 for Sassanian silver vessel shapes that closely match the forms of gold and silver wares from the Belitung shipwreck. Sassanian art was produced under the Sassanian Empire before the Muslim conquest of Persia was completed around 651.

52 Qi 1999.

53 The dish was included in the 2011 Eskenazi Gallery exhibition titled 'Early Chinese Metalwork in Gold and Silver: Works of Art of the Ming and Qing Dynasties'. The inscription was erroneously understood to be the surname Yang as it appears to be written as *yang* 楊 with a tree radical. The two *yang* characters (揚 and 楊), the former written with a hand radical while the latter with a tree radical, were very similar in handwritten form, thus it is no surprise that they were used interchangeably. See Eskenazi Ltd. 2011, 36.



FIGURE 5.6 Ninth or tenth century parcel-gilt silver dish, with a close-up of the inscription on its foot-ring

to a mythical creature called the karkadann in early Arabic texts.[54] Abu Rayhan al-Biruni (973–1048), an Iranian scholar and polymath, describes the karkadann as follows:

> It is of the build of a buffalo, has a black, scaly skin, a dewlap hanging down under the chin. It has three yellow hooves on each foot, the biggest one forward, the others on both sides. The tail is not long. The eyes lie low, farther down the cheek then in the case with all other animals. On the top of the nose there is a single horn which is bent upward.[55]

Illustrations of karkadanns may have been based on the one-horned Indian rhinoceros; however, in Islamic and Persian art they represent a mythological animal that later came to be associated with the unicorn.[56] Images of the karkadann may be found in the *Ajā'ib al-makhlūqāt wa-gharā'ib al-mawjūdāt* (Marvels of Things Created and Miraculous Aspects of Things Existing) by Zakariya ibn Muhammad al-Qazwini (d. 1283) which show Persian interpretations of the beast (Figure 5.7). Although these texts both post-date the Belitung and the Kempe dishes, mythological animals such as the karkadann would have been known and imagined from earlier times.

54 While historically the karkadann is the name of a mythical creature that roamed the grassy plains of India and Persia, in modern Arabic it is also a word for 'rhinoceros'.

55 Wexler 2017, 104.

56 For illustrations of the karkadann, see Ettinghausen 1950.

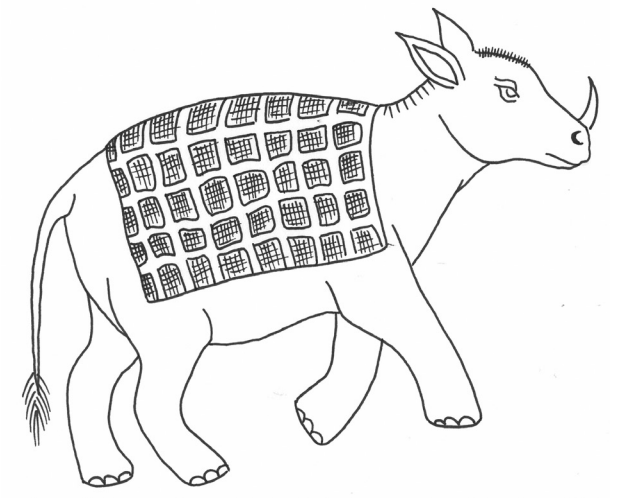


FIGURE 5.7 Line-drawing of a karkadann from *Ajā'ib al-makhlūqāt wa-gharā'ib al-mawjūdāt*

Considering that karkadanns feature prominently in Persian art and literature, it is likely that the decoration on the Belitung bowl represents a karkadann rather than a rhinoceros. Indeed, a further example of a karkadann, rather than a rhinoceros, can be seen on the lid of a silver box (Figure 5.8).[57] It should be noted that depictions of large animals, such as elephants, in Tang art do not show scales – evidencing that artisans were capable of depicting such beasts without scales. All the representations of rhinoceroses in the Tang period cited herein have scales, raising the wider question as to whether *any* of these figures were indeed intended to represent rhinoceroses.

Returning to the Kempe dish, another foreign element is the lotus *howdah* with three large open lotuses on the animal's back. A similar image may be found on a contemporaneous decorative gilt-copper plaque that depicts a standing rhinoceros-like beast next to a foreign groom (Figure 5.9). Jan Chapman comments how, in this instance, 'it is difficult to decide whether the particular beast shown is an anatomically incorrect Sumatran rhinoceros or

57 For the box in question as well as an additional karkadann on the lid of a second silver box, see Qi 1999, col. pl. 38 and line drawing 1-245. Qi does not give any provenance information concerning the boxes.



FIGURE 5.8 Line-drawing of a silver box featuring a karkadann motif on the lid

an early version of the mythical *qilin*'.[58] I suggest that the beast on the plaque may well be a karkadann rather than either a *qilin* or an anatomically-incorrect rhinoceros.

At first glance, the lotus *howdah* may be seen as a distinct Buddhist element on both the Kempe dish and the plaque. The two pieces are contemporaneous and from their decoration, it is likely that they were made for the religious market; perhaps being commissioned to be gifted to a monastery or a religious institution in or outside China. Rong Xinjiang notes how, in medieval China, Buddhist monasteries were both nurseries for spiritual cultivation and repositories of material culture. Because of the protection offered by Buddhist law and the devotion of Buddhist adherents, the store of objects preserved

58 Chapman 1999, 16 and fig. 2.



FIGURE 5.9 Tang gilt-copper plaque

by monasteries far surpassed that kept in other types of buildings or institutions. The sizeable collection of artefacts found at the base of the stupa at the Famen Temple is a prime example of this material wealth.[59] However, vessels decorated with images of rhinoceros-like beasts have not been found in any Chinese monasteries or religious institutions to date, supporting the argument that it was not an important decorative element in Chinese Buddhist art.

Images of *howdah* and lotus flowers are also associated with elephants in Buddhist iconography. One example is the elephant carrying a substantial lotus *howdah* on its back chased on a covered silver box in the Shōsō-in

59 Rong 2004, 15–16.

that appears to have a similar function as the decoration on the Kempe dish. It is intriguing why the artist of the Kempe dish (and the decorative plaque) chose to depict a karkadann and not an elephant in his composition. However, in Persian art elephants and karkadanns were used interchangeably, with the karkadann seen as resembling an elephant and vice versa. Indeed, the karkadann from the *Ajā'ib al-makhlūqāt* by al-Qazwini (in Figure 5.7) resembles a stocky, tamed elephant with saddlecloth.[60] The close link between the karkadann and the elephant is also seen on a drawing in a miniature version of a *Maqāmāt al-Ḥarīrī* manuscript dated to 1337 in the Bodleian Library, Oxford. Interestingly, the karkadann in this later manuscript has two horns, suggesting that it may have been inspired by images of African rhinoceroses. The artist was undoubtedly familiar with the two-horned species, hailing himself from Egypt where they roamed.[61] The iconographic conflation of karkadann and elephant by Persian and Arab artists may then explain the unusual decoration of the Kempe dish.

In comparing the Kempe dish with the Belitung bowl and additional depictions of rhinoceroses and *howdah*, the mystery of the Kempe dish's design can be unveiled. The figure of the rhinoceros-like beast, much like that on the Belitung bowl, bears scales similar to descriptions of the karkadann popular in Persian and Arab art. Furthermore, the inclusion of a lotus *howdah* suggests a confusion between the elephant and the karkadann, suggesting the piece was conceptualised by a Persian or Arab artisan.

4 A Likely Life Story

So what may have been the life story of the Kempe dish? It is here suggested that we are looking at an object produced in Yangzhou, possibly in a similar workshop as the Belitung bowl and under the supervision of or by the hand of one of the many Arab or Persian silversmiths operating in the city. We can safely date it to the late Tang, more specifically to the early ninth century and not before as suggested by the auction house experts. It was made during a period described by Qi Dongfang as the 'phase of popularisation and diversification', when the monopoly of gold and silver production by the central government was fragmented and there was an increased emergence of privately-owned workshops.[62] There was also a change in the use of gold and

60 Ettinghausen 1950, 14–15 fn.11.
61 Ettinghausen 1950, 27.
62 Qi 1999, 460.

silver wares at the time, which were no longer made exclusively for the Tang imperial family and court, but were also objects for tributes and bribery as well as for commercial exchange and trade. As evident from the Belitung finds, gold and silver objects were also commissioned for the export market. Since ships could transport much larger quantities of goods compared to camels using the land route of the northern Silk Road, we may suggest that the maritime trade between China, Southeast Asia, and the western shores of the Arabian Sea, with its final hub of Abbasid Iraq amongst the major markets of the era, was an important trade route transporting large volumes of goods and connecting markets on a truly global scale.

What the Kempe dish also tells us is that Chinese export of luxury items, apart from silk and ceramics, also included gold, silver and, as can also be deduced from the Belitung cargo, bronze wares.[63] Considering the number of foreign vessels mentioned in official records and from travellers' accounts, such as that of Feng Ruofang on Hainan Island, there was evidently a buoyant sea trade between China and other realms sustained by the Maritime Silk Roads which was perhaps more vibrant and active than previously assumed.

The social life of the Kempe dish has been eventful to say the least. From its possible conception by a Persian or Arab silversmith to its production in a workshop in southern China, the dish's early life story is that of a coveted commercial object. Although we lose sight of it for a time, it reappears in the twentieth century in the West as a treasured item of artistic significance. In the custody of Carl Kempe, who acquired it directly or indirectly from China, the dish's new life became one of academic scrutiny and veneration. In more recent years, its tranquil existence in a museum setting has been interrupted no less than four times, three times in private sales and once at a public auction. Being sold for ever higher prices, this dish has become a store of value and financial investment for a private collection.

The Kempe dish's remarkable journey has enriched its biography, providing it with a remarkable identity that is multi-cultural, multi-regional, and multi-purposed. It is a story of shifting classifications imposed by those in contact with it. Seeking to understand the dish's life, I have suggested a number of hypotheses that are difficult to verify and which perhaps raise more questions than answers. We may ask, as Appadurai does, whether there is any benefit in looking at the social life of this dish. Can we concretely state that the value of the dish is defined solely by its role in past exchanges? What is certain is that

63 Other metal goods retrieved from the ship included twenty-nine Chinese bronze mirrors and several hundred Chinese bronze coins. See Louis 2011, 85.

not all parties involved with the Kempe dish shared the same interests, therefore each change of ownership came with a different set of values. The many paths taken by the dish reflect divergent interests and boundaries.

But our story is not only about a commodity, it is also about people. As noted by Kopytoff, we should not separate the universe of people from the universe of objects: the two together are culturally axiomatic.[64] As with people, the drama here lies in the uncertainties of valuation and identity.[65] What happens with the Kempe dish in the next hundreds and thousands of years is anyone's guess. However, what is certain is that its life as an object of study, veneration, and commercial exchange will continue, and its link with the vibrant and successful foreign communities in the Tang tells a fascinating tale of people and trade in southern China.

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64 Kopytoff 2011, 84.

65 Kopytoff 2011, 90.

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CHAPTER 6

A Pensive Prince or a Languid Lady? Tang Ceramics of Women Seated on Hourglass Stools

Kelsey Granger

Abstract

A series of understudied ceramics produced between *c.* 700–750 present fashionable Tang ladies perched on hourglass stools. The stool's use in Buddhist iconography of the pensive bodhisattva and the postural similarities some of the women share with these Buddhist figures perhaps suggests the ceramics were pieces of religious art. This chapter discusses a number of these ceramics to argue, first, that women were involved in commissioning or using these figurines, which were likely intended to be placed in local tombs. Secondly, this chapter unravels the complex relationship between the hourglass stool's production centres in the maritime south of China, its usage in Buddhist and Central Asian imagery from the overland Silk Roads, and the resultant mix of iconography in these ceramics of fashionable elite women. This chapter asserts that the concoction of iconography borrowed and adapted in these decidedly secular ceramics reflects artisans' first attempts to pose fashionable elite women effectively on chairs, rather than being intentional pieces of religious art.

One striking Tang 唐 dynasty (618–907) ceramic of a seated lady, likely produced in China during the eighth century, has been sold in Sotheby's three times: in 1982, 1988, and 2016. During this time, it has passed from esteemed collection to esteemed collection with an ever-increasing price-tag. It was first acquired in the mid-1940s by retired naval officer Captain Sergius N. Ferris Luboshez (1894–1984). During his four years working on behalf of the United States in Shanghai, he spent two or three years waiting for the then-owner of the ceramic to sell the piece to him. When Luboshez's collection came to Sotheby's in November of 1982, the figure was highlighted as possibly the 'finest ceramic offering in the Luboshez collection'.[1] Its new owner was Giuseppe

1 Reif 1982. On the Luboshez collection, see also Griffin 1972, Conroy 1972, and Conroy 1982.

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Eskenazi, one of the most well-known collectors of Chinese art, who bought it for $198,000.[2] Eskenazi then sold the piece to yet another famous Chinese art collector: C. C. Wang (1907–2003). The ceramic did not stay with Wang for long, being sold to Irene and Earl Morse (1908–1988) who extensively collected Chinese paintings. However, on Morse's death, Sotheby's sold three lots of their collection in 1988 including, naturally, the seated lady. This time, it was purchased by the controversial then-owner of Sotheby's, A. Alfred Taubman (1924–2015), for $495,000. On his death, the piece re-entered the Sotheby's auction house for the third time, being sold on 16th March 2016 for $1.33 million and far exceeding its estimate of $700,000–$900,000.[3]

This ceramic, given in Figure 6.1, is not just unusual for having been part of five esteemed art collectors' stores and stories, but also because of what it depicts: a seated woman on a woven hourglass stool. Prior to the Tang period, there are few known depictions of women seated on raised chairs or stools with their legs hanging down. And yet this ceramic is one of well over a dozen similar examples all presenting fashionable ladies perched on hourglass stools.

Despite many changes to daily practice within the domestic spaces of Tang and Song 宋 dynasty (960–1279) China, the most striking was perhaps the move from floor-sitting to chair-sitting. Sitting on the floor and sitting on a chair are vastly different experiences, particularly in the context of eating and socialising. These two ways of sitting mean that the height of accompanying tables must necessarily be altered, as will the ceilings, windows, screens, and view-points in the room. Posture and gestures will differ, as will clothing and hemlines to promote comfort when seated. The move from floor-sitting to chairs has been described as revolutionary by both Donald Holzman and Sarah Handler and, in the words of John Kieschnick, 'entire industries withered and died with the rise of the chair, while other enterprises rose up with it'.[4]

Stunning, too, is how quickly such a change occurred. Chairs had become de rigueur among most households by the end of the eleventh century, despite

2 Eskenazi's purchase is described in Eskenazi 2012, 66–68, though the image shown is not that from the Luboshez collection.

3 Thank you to Henry Howard-Sneyd and Lidia Lee at Sotheby's who provided information about the results of each auction.

4 Kieschnick 2003, 227–28; Holzman 1967, 279; Handler 2001, 9. The stark difference between floor-sitting and chair-sitting is amply detailed in Fitzgerald 1965, 1–4. On earlier mat- and floor-sitting practices in early China, see Shang 1967, 281–85. See also Gu 2023 on the ties between etiquette and seating positions.



FIGURE 6.1 Line-drawing of a ceramic of a seated woman originally acquired by Luboshez

the earliest recognisable depiction of a chair in the setting of a home dating to the mid-eighth century.[5] The most famous example of this rapid and

5 This would be Gao Yuangui's 高元珪 (d. 756) tomb excavated in 1955 wherein one mural depicts a man sat in a chair-like seat, as photographed in He 1959, 33.

all-encompassing adoption of chair-sitting is 'Picture of the Night Revels of Han Xizai' (Han Xizai yeyan tu 韓熙載夜宴圖) attributed to Gu Hongzhong 顧閎中 (*c.* 910–980), in which the sheer variety and ubiquity of chairs speaks to this prolific new mode of sitting.[6] The depiction of men and women using various forms of raised seating options in the aforementioned painting, a section being given in Figure 6.2, further asserts that a new aesthetic understanding of the body was applied to portrayals of people sitting on chairs.[7] Just as there were prior artistic standards for how to depict people sitting on mats, so too were there now artistic standards for chair-sitting.

Nonetheless, the rapid move to chair-seating meant that existing artistic standards and models had to be refined for this new, contemporary mode of sitting. Tang ceramics depicting women seated on hourglass stools represent perhaps the earliest visual examples of women using raised seats with their



FIGURE 6.2 Line-drawing of several seated women from 'Picture of the Night Revels of Han Xizai'

6 The handscroll, now housed the Beijing National Palace Museum, is considered to be a later copy dating to the Southern Song according to Wu 1996, 43–44. The painting, its colophon and textual record, and its materiality are explored more fully on pages 29–71.

7 This line-drawing is intended to highlight artists' familiarity and refinement in posing seated female figures. While seeking to be as accurate as possible, interested readers should consult images of the original painting for finer details.

legs hanging down rather than kneeling. As such, the concoction of iconography borrowed and adapted in these ceramics reflects artisans' first attempts to pose fashionable elite women effectively on chairs. In this chapter, I will first contextualise known Tang ceramics depicting women seated on hourglass stools, evidencing their local usage and intimate ties to contemporary female fashion. By then turning to depictions of hourglass stools more widely, I will show that aspects of these ceramics derived from Indian and Central Asian artistic tropes. Ultimately, however, these pieces were products shaped by local artisans and local tastes – situating these fascinating ceramics at the crossroads of far-flung Silk Road iconography and local interpretations of elite female diversion, furniture, and fashion.

1 Tang Ceramics of Seated Women

While raised seating options did exist prior to the Tang period, sitting with the legs hanging down was not necessarily widely-practiced.[8] One of the only known furniture items to encourage such a seated position would be the *huchuang* 胡床 folding stool – the oft-cited antecedent to the fixed-frame chair in China.[9] Despite prior textual references to this furniture item, the earliest depictions only date to the sixth century, with steles showing users sat with the

8 From the Eastern Han 東漢 period (25–220) onwards, there are references to *ta* 榻, a low-platform that was kneeled upon. See Shang 1967, 285–86 on these textual references and, for archaeological examples, see Chen 1979.

9 Studies on the *huchuang* include Fitzgerald 1965, whose findings are largely countered by both Holzman 1967 and Yishui 1982; Kieschnick 2003; and Wu 1973. The *huchuang* was first referenced in relation to Han Emperor Lingdi 靈帝 (r. 168–189), with *Hou Hanshu* Zhi 志 30.3272 stating: 'Lingdi was fond of foreign apparel, foreign drapes, foreign couches, foreign seats, foreign meals, foreign zitherns, foreign flutes, and foreign dances,' 靈帝好胡服、胡帳、胡牀、胡坐、胡飯、胡空侯、胡笛、胡舞。Its marked foreignness in this textual reference suggests that the *huchuang* was, at this point, a foreign oddity. Indeed, it may not even have referred to a furniture item per se but a manner of sitting more generally. It wasn't until the third and fourth centuries that we see consistent textual references to the *huchuang* as a furniture item. The third-century *Weilüe* 魏略 by Yu Huan 魚豢 (d. u.), quoted in *Yiwen leiju* 50.894 and repeated in 70.1221, refers to 'one *huchuang*' 一胡床 (written as 牀 in the first instance), clarifying that this was an item rather than a manner of sitting.

legs hanging down or with one leg hooked over the other.[10] A similar position was encouraged by the *shengchuang* 繩床 corded chair, though the *shengchuang* and other early fixed-frame chairs could also be sat on cross-legged by monks, much to Yijing's 義淨 (635–713) apparent chagrin.[11] Neither furniture item, however, was strongly associated with women.[12]

Another form of raised seating item, generally overlooked in furniture studies, also encouraged a seated position with the legs hanging down. Moreover, this seat was repeatedly associated with women in the eighth century. In this chapter, a selection of thirteen ceramic figures are taken to be representative of the majority of extant ceramics depicting women on hourglass stools. Despite being far from exhaustive, this selection remains varied enough to vividly present the shared traits and divergences of this particular kind of ceramic. The pieces are summarised in Table 6.1 below, with other relevant examples mentioned throughout.

Several immediate similarities are noticeable on viewing this selection of ceramics: the women frequently wear curled-toe slippers, shawls, and phoenix headdresses; hold similar items like flower stems, mirrors, or birds; and sit with both legs down or else with one foot propped on the other knee. After first establishing the possible function of these ceramics, including when and where they were produced, visual and textual evidence of hourglass stools will be incorporated to evidence the Silk Road connectivity of the motifs and postures adopted across these pieces.

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10 The earliest known sources depicting the *huchuang* include a 543-dated stele of a man sat on a *huchuang*, discussed in Chavannes 1915, 589–90 and shown in Chavannes 1909, fig. 432 pl. CCLXXIV; a 547-dated figurine of a woman carrying one, unearthed from an Eastern Wei 東魏 (534–550) tomb excavated in 1974 from Cixian 磁縣, Hebei, as given in the excavation report Cixian wenhuaguan 1977, 441 fig. 2; and a seated warrior from the late-sixth century Mogao Cave 莫高窟 420, with a line-drawing given in Yishui 1982, 85 fig. 3.

11 Two stele, one from 535–540 in the Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas (37–27) and another from 566, as reproduced in Kieschnick 2003, 243 fig. 18, depict monks in chairs with their legs hanging down. Yijing's response to monks sitting on chairs 'incorrectly' is given in *Nanhai jigui neifa zhuan jiaozhu* 1.206c c.23.

12 One ceramic, as mentioned in n.10, depicts a woman carrying a *huchuang*. A stone engraving from 631 also shows two female attendants carrying *huchuang*, as given in the line-drawing Sun 1996, 35–36 figs. 2–3. However, there was hardly the same vogue with women and *huchuang* as seen with hourglass stools in extant Tang ceramics.

TABLE 6.1 Selected Tang-dated ceramics of seated women

Source	Provenance	Dating
C.1	Excavated from a tomb in Beiyao 北窯, Luoyang 洛陽.	Tang.
C.2	Excavated from a tomb in Xin'an 新安, Luoyang.	Tang.
C.3	Excavated from Tomb 90, Wangjiafen cun 王家墳村, Chang'an 長安.	Tang.
C.4	Excavated from a tomb in Changzhi 長治, Shanxi.	710.
C.5	Held in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (2010.120).	Eighth century.
C.6	Held in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (65.2265).	Eighth century.
C.7	Held in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (50.1807).	Eighth century.
C.8	Held in the Art Institute of Chicago (1970.1075), from the collection of Pauline Palmer Wood.	Early eighth century.
C.9	Held in the Art Institute of Chicago (1971.871), from the collection of Pauline Palmer Wood.	Early eighth century.
C.10	Held in the Smithsonian, National Museum of Asian Art, Washington D.C. (F2001.8a–d).	Early eighth century.
C.11	Held in the Rietberg Museum, Zurich (MYT 1214).	Eighth century.
C.12	Sold by Sotheby's three times, originally acquired by Luboshez.	Tang, likely eighth century.
C.13	Sold by Christie's (Lot 2916, November 29th, 2017).	Tang.

2 The Function(s) of Tang Ceramics of Seated Women

Chinese furniture specialist Sarah Handler suggests that the ceramics of seated Tang women may have been placed before images of the Buddha to accrue

merit or blessings, meaning that the staging and function of the ceramics were both decidedly Buddhist.[13] This conclusion, however, is based entirely on the hourglass stool itself which was prominent in Chinese Buddhist art. The find-spots of excavated seated ceramics, on the other hand, suggest the ceramics were intended for quite different purposes.

All of the above ceramics were *sancai* 三彩 glazed, though none bear engravings pointing to particular kilns. Excavations have uncovered a relatively small number of major kilns, including those in Gongyi 鞏義 (formerly Gongxian 鞏縣), Henan that were producers of fine *sancai* wares for imperial funerary goods.[14] While archaeological investigations have revealed extensive Tang dynasty kilns and *sancai* vessel fragments here, there have been relatively few findings of Tang-period *sancai* ceramic figurines at Gongyi.[15] Findings from the Belitung shipwreck suggest that the Gongyi kilns not only produced ceramic vessels for the imperial court but also for export to the Islamic world in the ninth century.[16] As a prevalent kiln producing *sancai* vessels, Gongyi, or an as yet undiscovered kiln nearby, may have been a potential site for the production of the seated figures, even if archaeological excavations have yet to fully verify this assertion.[17]

The discovery of a misfired *sancai* ceramic of a seated lady provides far more substantial evidence of where such figures were produced in China. This misfired ceramic of a plump lady seated on a woven hourglass stool was unearthed at the Liquanfang 醴泉坊 kiln in Chang'an 長安, suggesting that the production of other similar ceramics may have been based in the capital regions.[18] While the possibility has been raised that Liquanfang also produced exportware, I would argue that these *sancai* ceramic seated ladies were intended for local usage.[19] This is supported by the fact that a very similar

13 Handler 2001, 85.

14 This is shown by the provenance report of *sancai* vessels from elite and imperial tombs in Lei et al. 2007.

15 A detailed report on the Huangye 黃冶 kiln at Gongyi is given in Henan sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiuyuan et al. 2016 in two volumes. While there are some scattered remains of *sancai* figures at this site, the proportion remains low compared to extant vessels.

16 George 2015, 585. The assertion that Gongyi was a major producer of exportware is further supported by the chemical analysis of extant ceramic fragments in Rawson et al. 1987–1988.

17 Lei et al. 2007 suggests that an undiscovered Gongyi kiln or another centre close to Luoyang may have produced the *sancai* figures discovered in various elite tombs.

18 The excavation of the site as a whole is detailed in Shaanxi sheng kaogu yanjiuyuan 2008, while this particular ceramic is photographed as pl. 34 and labelled T3H1:4.

19 On Liquanfang as a possible producer of exportware, see Cui et al. 2010.

piece, C.1, was unearthed from a tomb near the Northern Kiln (Beiyao 北窯) of Luoyang.[20] This find immediately attests to the local production and local usage of such ceramics as funerary goods.

Indeed, the only ceramics with known findspots were all unearthed in tombs rather than residential or commercial hoards and shipwrecks, as we would perhaps expect from exportware. This includes the aforementioned Luoyang example C.1 as well as the intricate ceramics C.2 from Xin'an, Luoyang and C.3 from Tomb 90 in Wangjiafen cun, Chang'an.[21] Further to this is ceramic C.4 which was unearthed in Changzhi, Shanxi from the 710-dated tomb of Li Du 李度 and his wife, as given in Figure 6.9.[22] This *sancai* ceramic depicts a woman holding a large duck-shaped wine vessel with one leg propped on the other knee. The stool is short and without a clear waistband but still bears an hourglass shape and a potentially woven inlaid design. Li Du's tomb in particular illustrates that people beyond the immediate retinue of the imperial court and who lived outside Chang'an and Luoyang had access to such figures.[23] These ceramics were therefore likely to have been produced locally, perhaps at the Liquanfang kiln or other kiln sites near the capitals, and were clearly used as tomb figurines.

Of further interest is the intriguing inscription seen on one of the ceramics. C.13, sold by Christie's in 2017 and given in Figure 6.3, potentially depicts a younger girl or a female attendant judging by her hairstyle. On the base, painted characters read: *Qiangjia zhi nüzi* 羌家之女子, 'daughter of the Qiang family'.[24] This inscription suggests that the ceramic was, in some way, connected to the specified woman's identity.

There are several kinds of identifying inscriptions seen on Tang ceramics: those identifying the kiln or production date; those identifying the

20 C.1 was excavated in 1965 from the Northern Kiln site, Luoyang and is now housed in the Luoyang Museum 洛陽博物館, being photographed in Li 2007. The two ceramics are vastly different sizes, however, with the Liquanfang example being only 7.4 cm high as opposed to the Luoyang example C.1 which is 26 cm high.

21 C.2 was excavated in 1993 from Xin'an, Luoyang and is now housed in the Xin'an County Museum 新安縣博物館, being photographed in Xiao 2018. The excavation report and a photograph of ceramic C.3 are given in Shaanxi sheng wenwu guanli weiyuanhui 1956.

22 The excavation report and photographs of figure C.4 are given in Changzhi shi bowuguan 1989.

23 His tomb inscription, given in Changzhi shi bowuguan 1989, states he came from Zhaojun 趙郡, Hebei, further distancing him from the capitals.

24 Christie's auction notes read this as *Guangjia zhi nüzi* 光家之女子, 'daughter of the Guang family', however I interpret the first character as Qiang rather than Guang.



FIGURE 6.3 Ceramic C.13, sold by Christie's in 2017

piece's destination or purpose; and other miscellaneous inscriptions.[25] If the inscribed Christie's ceramic was intended to be deposited in a tomb, as was the case for many of the extant seated ceramics, it was likely produced at a kiln manufacturing multiple figures at a time. It therefore seems probable that the inscription served to identify the piece by either naming the intended tomb-occupant or the patron of the ceramic. While the woman depicted may not have been a rendering of Miss Qiang herself, it may well have been included in Miss Qiang's tomb, if indeed this was the name of the deceased. This not only supports a local usage of such ceramics, suggesting that the pieces were not created primarily for export, but also that they could be commissioned or 'used' by women. While it is not clear whether *all* ceramics of seated women were intended to be buried in elite tombs, known provenances certainly allude to this being a possible function for seated ceramics of unknown provenance.

25 On inscriptions referring to kilns and dates, see ceramics from the Belitung shipwreck, as photographed throughout the exhibition catalogue produced by Shanghai bowuguan 2020. On inscriptions delineating the ceramic's destination, consider the inscribed late-Tang ceramics intended for imperial treasuries that were marked with *ying* 盈, as discussed in Lu 1987.

Finally, many if not all of the seated ceramics are situated in a tight timeframe of only fifty or so years, i.e., 700–750. As such, repeated elements in the women's styling connect the ceramic women to living fashions. Indeed, there are clear links between contemporary fashion and these ceramic representations of women: the patterned skirt of ceramic C.3, for instance, was clearly related to an actual skirt discovered in Tomb 187, Astana in Turfan dated to the Tianbao 天寶 reign era (742–756).[26] Curled-toe slippers, phoenix headdresses, and long striped skirts were also contemporary trends in the early eighth century. There are also fewer examples of plump women in looser garments, a trend in depicting women that took hold during the mid–late eighth century, further reinforcing the limited production timeframe of these ceramics. The clear connections to contemporary clothing and styling trends, as well as changing standards for depicting the female physique, reveals that it *mattered* for the ceramic women to be as aware of and as shaped by fashion as living women. Thus far, there is little evidence to support the religious usage of these ceramics. However, a consideration of the hourglass stool is essential to understand why these ceramics have been casually and causatively connected with Buddhist contexts.

3 Records of Hourglass Stools in China

No material remains of actual hourglass stools have been unearthed from Tang sites, leaving us with these ceramics to discern their possible materiality and design. Unfortunately, many of these ceramics are only photographed from the front as it is the woman, not the seat, that is of interest to contemporary viewers. Despite few ceramics being photographed from the back, the ceramics which have available photographs of the stool itself present a rich array of designs. Some were clearly woven, as in the Luboshez ceramic C.12 seen in Figure 6.1, with the slanted and overlapping etchings mirroring interwoven plant material. Others have a woven waistband, again marked by etching, but little detailing to the rest of the stool, as in C.10. Others still have additional detailing to the body of the stool, such as an oval design (C.5) or applique motifs (C.3). These different designs are shown in Figure 6.4.[27]

26 Both are photographed in Chen 2019, 91 figs. 3–10 and 3–11.

27 Ceramic C.3. is much more detailed than this linework focusing on the stool reflects. A detailed line-drawing of this ceramic, including the rosette-patterned skirt, is given in Shen 2006, 312 fig. 127.

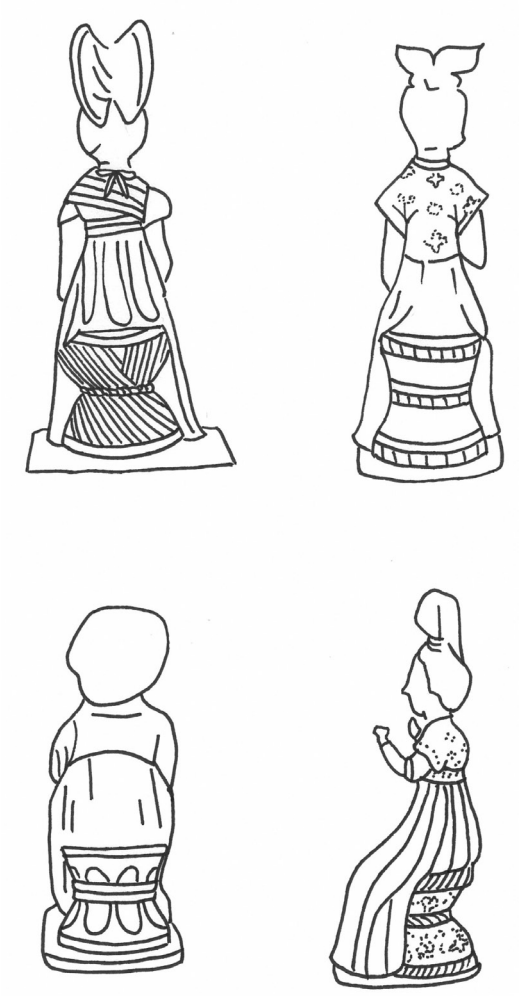


FIGURE 6.4 Line-drawing of different stool designs (C.12, C.10, C.5, and C.3)

The oval pattern on C.5 is suggestive of weaving creating oval-shaped negative spaces in the body of the stool. This design, when rendered in solid ceramic pieces, could perhaps be misunderstood or misinterpreted, as may be the case with the curled parentheses-style etchings on C.13, given in Figure 6.3. Was this intended to depict the same kind of stool or is this a different, even imagined, design? Without surviving examples of the stools themselves, we cannot be sure. The stools may even have been made of solid material like stone, wood, or ceramic according to the applique motifs of ceramic C.3. It is unclear, then,

whether the stools were replicas of real furniture items or were derived, even imagined, on the basis of other ceramic pieces / sketched models in circulation. This uncertainty is not aided by the fact there are so few photographs of the stools themselves.

Chinese texts refer to a furniture item called *quanti* 筌蹄, elsewhere signifying a rabbit- or fish-trap made of bamboo, which could also be written as *quantai* 筌臺. It is clear that *quanti* was a type of seat since the *Book of Liang* (Liangshu 梁書) states:

> … 輦上置筌蹄、垂腳坐。 … 床上常設胡床及筌蹄，著靴垂腳坐。[28]
>
> [In the second year of the Dabao 大寶 reign era (i.e., 551), Hou Jing 侯景 (503–552)] installed a *quanti* on the palanquin and sat on it with the legs hanging down. […] on the couch he always had a *huchuang* and a *quanti*, and sat on both with the legs hanging down in his high boots.

Both terms, *quanti* and *quantai*, were equated with each other as linguistic errors in the Tang-dynasty *Record of Northern Mountains* (Beihu lu 北戶錄) – potentially highlighting an attempt to transliterate a foreign sound.[29] It is highly likely that these shared terms either referred to the hourglass stool directly or to woven seats more generally, as will be returned to.

Record of Northern Mountains also states that Xinzhou 新州 in the south produced exquisite multicoloured rattan *quanti*, providing us with a concrete reference to the materiality and production location of these furniture items. This is followed by a quote from a Liang 梁 dynasty (502–557) text by Liu Xiaoyi 劉孝儀 (484–550) entitled 'In Gratitude to the Prince for a Five-coloured Rattan *Quanti*' (Xie Taizi wuse teng quanti yimei 謝太子五色藤筌蹄一枚), reinforcing that *quanti* could be made of rattan, produced in the south (here using rattan from Yanzhou 炎州), and additionally that they could be decorated with colour.[30] *Compendium of Institutions* (Tongdian 通典), compiled in 801, also mentions

28 *Liangshu* 50.859 and 862.

29 *Beihu lu* 3.41. The interchangeability of *ti* and *tai* are considered to be phonetic errors in Xiong and Liu 2017, 88. Their medieval Chinese pronunciations are given as *tai* (MC doj) and *ti* (MC dej) in Kroll 2017, 440 and 448 respectively. A further term, *quanti* 筌提, is raised in the same passage. Sun 1996, 39 theorises that these interchangeable characters may reflect attempts to transliterate a foreign sound.

30 Liu Xiaoyi's text is also quoted in *Quan Liangwen* 61.678 but does not include the statement about *quanti* and *quantai* being interchangeable terms, suggesting that this comment instead dates to the compilation of *Record of the Northern Mountains*.

quantai being given as tribute from Haifeng 海豐 in Xunzhou 循州 in the south.[31] This is repeated in the later *New Book of Tang* (Xin Tangshu 新唐書), which further notes that Yande jun 延德郡 (Zhenzhou 振州) produced multi-coloured rattan dishes while Lingfang jun 嶺方郡 (Binzhou 賓州); Xiangjun 象郡 (Xiangzhou 象州); and Chenghua jun 承化郡 (Fengzhou 峰州) all produced rattanware.[32] These locations all lie along the south coast of China and even into modern-day Vietnam.

Textual references to rattan and, more specifically, rattanware dishes, mats, boxes, and *quanti* seats are all located in southern China and Vietnam.[33] Rattan grows in Southeast Asia, in particular India, Sri Lanka, Laos, and Thailand, now also being found in Hainan Island 海南島 and south China more generally, meaning the use of rattan alludes to trade or botanical contact with South and Southeast Asia. Not all *quanti* were necessarily made from rattan, with visual depictions of woven examples perhaps also being made from bamboo. Nevertheless, the only known production centres of *quanti* seats were located in the south, made from rattan, and were potentially dependent on techniques, materials, and/or craftsmen from further afield.

It seems highly likely that the term *quanti* specifically referred to, or at least included, the hourglass stool due to the term's connection with the pensive bodhisattva. Quoting from a collection of sutras on the Buddha's life (the *Fo benxing jijing* 佛本行集經), *Record of the Northern Mountains* provides an abbreviated version of the episode in which a dragon-woman named Nilianchaye 尼連茶耶 meets with the Prince. When offering him a seat upon which he should sit and eat chyle from a golden dish, the dragon-woman specifically places a *quanti* (here written 筌提).[34] This text suggests that *quanti*, elsewhere only remarked upon as being a seat made from rattan, could be the seat of bodhisattvas. As we will see, this is largely the only context in which we see hourglass stools in earlier Chinese art.

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31 *Tongdian* 6.38a.

32 *Xin Tangshu* 43A.1096–7 on Haifeng, here written 荃臺; 1101 on Yande jun; 1102 on Lingfang jun; 1104 on Xiangjun; and 1112 on Chenghua jun. Indeed, *Tongdian* 6.37b mentions Nanhai jun 南海郡 giving a woven rattan mat while 6.38a states that Yande jun gave a rattan dish. *Beihu lu* 3.41–42 equally describes five-coloured rattan boxes of inimitable craftsmanship from Qiongzhou 瓊州 (Hainan) alongside Haifeng's tribute of a five-coloured rattan mirror-case and a rattan *quanti* seat.

33 In Chinese sources, rattan is referred to as *teng* 藤 which itself simply means vine, in some cases referring to certain incenses like heartwood. It is only clear that *teng* references rattan specifically in the context of furniture and vessels, i.e., rattanware.

34 *Fo benxing jijing* 25.772a c.27.

Visual evidence points to the overland Silk Roads to the northwest as the main channel for imagery and iconography involving hourglass stools. Earlier Chinese depictions of hourglass stools were overwhelmingly situated in Buddhist contexts. The earliest examples of hourglass stools in China can be seen in Buddhist sites like the Bingling Temple 炳靈寺. On the lower register of the west wall of Cave 169 and dated to *c.* 400, a contemplative bodhisattva can be seen sat on a woven hourglass stool.[35] A further depiction from the north wall dated to *c.* 428–430 may show a similar stool.[36] Marylin M. Rhie has identified a further cross-ankled Maitreya in Cave 169 of Maijishan 麥積山 as being sat on a no-longer extant ribbed stool with a clear waistband.[37] Fifth- and sixth-century ceramics from the north of China also show woven hourglass stools in the context of Buddhist art, most often as a seat for the contemplative Maitreya or a pensive bodhisattva more generally.[38] Hourglass stools in Chinese religious art can thus be traced back to *c.* 400 in China with clear connections to Indian Buddhism, specifically the iconography of pensive bodhisattvas.

These were not the only type of stool or seats used in depictions of pensive bodhisattvas. Lotus flowers, cloth-covered stools, or square platforms were also frequently used. However, the hourglass stool was seemingly not depicted in any other setting than in the iconography of the pensive bodhisattva in Chinese Buddhist art, while the other seats were used in conjunction with other Buddhist figures.

It is not clear whether woven hourglass stools were inherited from Indian depictions or whether this was a local adaptation to the iconography of the pensive bodhisattva. An example from Gandhāra, given below in Figure 6.5, instead shows a boxy, woven stool with a cloth-covered seat. As the ceramics

35 A monochrome image is given in Rhie 2010, fig. 4.40 and discussed on page 111.

36 A monochrome image is given in Rhie 2010, 7.56a and discussed on page 340.

37 A monochrome image is given in Rhie 2010, fig. 9.27a and discussed on page 540.

38 This includes, among many others: the Smithsonian stele (F1913.27) with the Buddhas of the Past, Present, and Future, here likely Maitreya, excavated from Quyang xian 曲陽縣, Hebei and dated to 565; an Eastern Wei engraving of a pensive bodhisattva sat on a woven, waisted rattan stool with a horse leaning down to touch his feet, part of the Chung Tai World Museum collection with images being provided on their website as fig. 7. The engraving is explored at https://www.ctwm.org.tw/cn/art_1_arti.html?id=32 as written by Buddhist Master Jianxun 見迅 (upload date unclear); a bronze meditative bodhisattva dated to 489 housed in Hebei Provincial Museum 河北省博物館, as photographed in Handler 2001, 83 fig. 7.2; and a cross-ankled Maitreya on the 428 miniature stupa housed in Gansu Provincial Museum 甘肅博物館, as photographed in Juliano and Lerner 2001, 153. See also Chien 2019 on the transmission of pensive bodhisattva imagery and seats across China and Korea.

of seated women date centuries after both the Gandhāran figure and the aforementioned northern Chinese examples, it doesn't particularly matter *how* the hourglass stool became one of the possible seats used to stage pensive bodhisattvas. What matters is that it was almost exclusively used in this religious context in Chinese art. It also had a lasting legacy, with later visual evidence from Dunhuang 敦煌 attesting to a continuing association between hourglass stools and Buddhism in the Tang period.[39]

The prevalence of hourglass stools in a Buddhist context has meant that these seats have been intimately and unwaveringly connected with the pensive bodhisattva in scholarship – lending any image containing such a seat a 'Buddhist' perspective. However, as I aim to show in the following analysis, the relationship between the Buddhist iconography of pensive bodhisattvas seated on hourglass stools and the later ceramics of seated Tang women is more complex than it first appears.

4 A Pensive Lady or a Lady at Leisure?

The *quanti* was not the only seat associated with Buddhism since the fixed-frame *shengchuang* corded chair was used as a Buddhist meditative tool. This is outlined in *Shi song lü* 十誦律, the translation of the Indian *Sarvāstivāda vinaya*, wherein it is suggested that this raised seat kept the practitioner out of the reach of snakes and other dangers while meditating.[40] These woven fixed-frame chairs are repeatedly referenced in biographies of monks and other

39 This includes part of an early Tang-dynasty Cave 331 mural featuring four *tianwang* 天王 (Heavenly Kings) on hourglass stools, here being decorated with alternating coloured segments; a photograph of this mural is given in Dunhuang wenwu yanjiusuo 1987, pl. 74. Dunhuang manuscript P.4513 may specifically depict the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara seated with both knees pointing outward on a cross-hatched woven hourglass stool. Finally, a sketch on the verso of P.2598, explored in Granger 2021, shows an armoured man sat on an hourglass stool atop a fringed rug. I tentatively identified this figure as Vaiśravaṇa due to the figure's exaggerated breastplate, sheathed sword, and overall positioning. This sketch was likely a practice sketch according to Sarah Fraser's analysis of doodles and sketches across the Dunhuang corpus, meaning the exact detailing of the stool in a finished product is unclear; Fraser 2000, 190 and 221. See also references made throughout Xiong and Liu 2017 on Tang-period Buddhist depictions of hourglass stools.

40 *Shi song lü* 39.280b c.12.

meditation texts, reinforcing their strong links with India, Buddhism, and the act of meditation.[41]

While we lack textual clarification, was the *quanti* perhaps also considered to be a meditative seat given its strong link with pensive bodhisattvas? If so, the seated women may have been depicted in the act of mediation. Several elements seen across the selection do allude to potential Buddhist inspiration. A number of the ceramics show the women holding flower stems, being either upright short sprigs or large, sweeping blooms. Ceramic C.2, excavated from Luoyang, depicts a large flower on a long stem lying diagonally across the body, while the Boston example C.7 and the Luboshez ceramic C.12 show stylised, almost feather-like, blossoms. The inscribed C.13 depicts a short, straight stem with a small flower. These flowers could possibly be interpreted as lotus flowers, tying the iconography to Buddhist meditative practices and processions.

However, there was also a strict bodily iconography associated with 'pensiveness'. Pensive bodhisattvas tend to be depicted sitting with the elbow leaning on one knee with the legs either crossed at the ankles with the knees akimbo or else with one leg folded over the other knee. The raised foot is usually bare, with the discarded slipper positioned on the ground. A prime example would be the aforementioned pensive bodhisattva from Gandhāra wherein the bodhisattva holds a lotus stem in his left hand, as given in Figure 6.5.[42]

Not all of the ceramics of women holding flowers adhere to this postural iconography. Nonetheless, several ceramics do depict a seated woman with one leg propped on the other knee but, while the raised foot is bare, the second shoe is often missing. Clearly, the artisans knew part of this iconography but either missed the detail of the second shoe or imagined it to be hidden by the draping of the woman's dress. The most visually similar ceramics to the model of the pensive bodhisattva would be ceramics C.5, now held in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and C.9, now held in the Art Institute of Chicago. The first shows a plump Tang beauty sat on an hourglass stool with one leg crossed over the other, a small lapdog barking next to her discarded slipper. Her posture is languid with the shoulders rounding forward in a relaxed position, as seen in Figure 6.6. This relaxed posture is particularly

41 Sitting on *shengchuang* is mentioned in the following *Gaoseng zhuan* biographies: Shi Zhiyan 釋智嚴 3.339a c.29 (in which three monks sit on these chairs), Guṇavarman 求那跋摩 3.340a c.15, Lan Fotudeng 竺佛圖澄 9.383b c.16, Lan Fahui 竺法慧 10.389a c.17, Shi Sengzhou 釋僧周 11.398b c.13, and Shi Daofa 釋道法 11.399b c.6. Other examples of monks using these chairs for meditation are explored in Kieschnick 2003, 240–43.

42 A similar schist figure from Gandhāra is housed in the Matsuoka Museum of Art in Tokyo.



FIGURE 6.5 Schist statue of a pensive bodhisattva from Gandhāra, dated to the second–third centuries CE, and housed in the British Museum, London

striking since most known ceramics of seated women depict the women with a stiff upright posture.

The second ceramic depicts what may be a younger woman judging by her hairstyle sat in the same pensive posture. Here, she holds a mirror while



FIGURE 6.6 Eighth-century ceramic C.5, housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

her other hand reaches up to apply makeup to her brows, as given in Figure 6.7. Neither hold a lotus flower. Despite the superficial postural similarities to the pensive bodhisattva, are these 'pensive ladies'? In which case, why



FIGURE 6.7 Eighth-century ceramic C.9, housed in the Art Institute of Chicago

does the latter woman raise a mirror as she applies makeup to her brows? And why does the Metropolitan Museum ceramic show a little lapdog by the woman's side?

Aside from flower stems, the additional objects held or positioned with the women given in Table 6.2 (namely mirrors, shawls, birds, and lapdogs) are all interconnected in other media as symbols of female adornment. This means the seated ceramics are far more strongly connected with general representations of women than they are with specifically Buddhist art.

TABLE 6.2 Additional items depicted among the selected Tang-dated ceramics of seated women

Ceramic	Held or associated item
C.1	NA
C.2	Flower
C.3	Presumed to have once held a mirror
C.4	Duck-shaped wine vessel
C.5	Lapdog next to discarded slipper
C.6	Bird
C.7	Flower
C.8	Mirror
C.9	Mirror
C.10	Bird
C.11	Shawl
C.12	Flower
C.13	Flower

Women's toilette, the subject of great fascination for male image-makers and writers due to it being performed away from the male view, was often the subject of poems and paintings. Indeed, C.9 appears to capture a woman or adolescent girl in the act of applying her makeup. Mirrors, hair ornaments, and fashion accoutrements were essential elements in such scenes, but parrots and birds were also common. Indeed, parrots and songbirds were frequent companions of elite women in poems, murals, ceramics, and, in all likelihood, daily life.[43] Parrots could also be decorative ornaments for women, as evidenced by

43 Examples of women and parrots or songbirds in murals include a black and white songbird held by a woman in the tomb of Li Yong 李邕 (d. 727) excavated from Beilücun 北吕村, Shaanxi, as photographed in Xu 2012, 7:344. On ceramics, see a Tang-dated *sancai*-glazed figure of a seated woman with a bird on her finger in the National Museum, Tokyo (TG-2896); and a Tang-dated Shaanxi figure of a woman wearing *hufu* and headgear with a bird on her finger in the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco (B65P52). Poems in *Quan Tangshi* describing women and parrots include 'Lyrics on the Junior Wife' (Shaofu

the small ivory parrot from Princess Jinxiang's 金鄉 (711–736) tomb that was likely part of her headdress.[44] Lapdogs were also often present in scenes of female leisure, including several ceramics dating to the eighth century.[45] Both animals were frequently paired with women in art and literature of the eighth century, becoming motifs for elite female luxury and leisure. They signified the sumptuous surroundings of female boudoirs and, by proxy, the intimate spaces in which women dressed and undressed. Therefore, the various accessories seen across these ceramics indicate that their meaning was decidedly secular and feminised, perhaps even erotic given their references to private female acts of (un)dressing.

Three of the ceramics, that is C.13 (Figure 6.3), C.9 (Figure 6.7), and C.11, seem to depict younger women. C.13 and C.9 share the same hairstyle, as do two further visually-similar examples, one sold by Sotheby's and the other held in the Osaka City Museum of Fine Arts 大阪市立美術館.[46] Their girlish appearance is indicative of being either younger in age or perhaps lower in status, i.e., female attendants. Young girls are often described as emulating the activities of older women, so the mix of possible ages across the seated ceramics is not surprising.[47] Adolescent girls certainly performed some kind of toilette, as described in lyrics to 'Song of Upturned Cups' (Qingbei yue 傾杯樂) on Dunhuang manuscript P.2838:

> 憶昔笄年，未省離閤(合)，生長深閨苑。
> 閑凭着繡床，時拈金針，擬貌舞鳳飛鸞。
> 對粧臺重[整]嬌姿面，知身[貌]筭料，[豈]交人見。

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ci 少婦詞) by Dou Gong 竇鞏 (*c.* 762–821), 271.3049, both 'Lyrics on Spring' (Chun ci 春詞) and 'In the Dead of Night' (Ren ding 人定) by Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846), 448.5051 and 448.5052, and 'The Beauty Combs Her Hair' (Meiren shutou 美人梳頭) by Zhang Bi 張碧 (d. u.), 469.5339.

44 Photographed in Filip 2014, 65 fig. 16.

45 This includes an early-eighth century woman in *hufu* holding a lapdog in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (815–1936); an early-eighth century woman holding a lapdog in the British Museum, London (1947,0712.8); an eighth-century woman holding a lapdog and a parrot in the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas (39–27); and an eighth-century woman holding a lapdog in the National Museum, Kyoto (GK 260). See Granger 2022 on lapdogs and parrots in boudoir scenes from the Tang dynasty.

46 Sold by Sotheby's (Lot 741, September 11th, 2019), from the collection of Pauline Palmer Wood. The glazing is of a different colour to the other 'youthful' examples mentioned, being green and yellow rather than blue and amber.

47 A poem by Bai Juyi about his daughter testifies that girls above the age of seven would also emulate their mother's adornment, 'My Chick' (Wu chu 吾雛) in *Quan Tangshi* 431.4760–61, as translated in Sun 2014, 100–101.

> I recall the year I received the hairpin when I was unaware of separation and reunion; I was born and raised deep in the chambers and gardens.
>
> Idly leaning on the embroidered bed, at times I take up my golden needle and mimick the appearance of dancing phoenixes and flying *luan* [in my embroidery].
>
> Facing the vanity table I arrange my charming looks once more; knowing my figure and looks will be judged, how can I show myself before other's eyes?

Thus, it would seem that lesser age or status at most shifted the reading of these ceramics to an act of emulation, with the activity itself unchanged.

When we then situate these seated ceramics within the wider context of ceramics, poems, and paintings of women in the eighth century, we see that these ceramics were far from religious. There was a clear expansion in the range of funerary ceramics produced featuring women in the seventh and eighth centuries. These pieces depicted women engaged in a multitude of activities, from riding horses and playing music to more 'everyday' elite occurrences like dressing and playing with exotic animals. These secular activities, markers of elite fashion, luxury, and leisure, could be carried out while standing, kneeling on a mat, mounted on a horse or, now, seated on an hourglass stool.[48] It is therefore plausible that many of the ceramics were intended to portray women's toilette through the shorthand symbols of mirrors, shawls, parrots, and lapdogs, and even perhaps flowers.

The hourglass stool was, in all likelihood, an actual furniture item used in women's boudoirs, though there is as yet no material evidence to verify this assumption. In any case, artisans drew on familiar raised seating options and seating positions known to them through Buddhist iconography to stage, not pensive ladies, but ladies of leisure. Not only were the figurines secular, rather than religious, but the usage of Buddhist iconography for seated figures attests to the artists' unfamiliarity with depicting seated women in the eighth century.

These ceramics thus show perhaps the earliest depictions of seated women. The languid and natural posture of the Metropolitan Museum example C.5 perhaps reflects a later stage in this development process. Similarly, sketches on the verso of P.2002 show plump women sat on imagined stools, as given in Figure 6.9. The recto contains a copy of the Daoist text *Mysterious Canon of*

48 See ns. 43 and 45 on additional representations of women with parrots and lapdogs. Standing figurines of women holding their shawl include the following housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: 1997.1.3; 1997.1.4; and 2015.500.7.4 and the following group of eight figurines dated 700–750 housed in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London: C.66–1961 among others in both collections. A further example of a seated woman holding a mirror is now housed in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London: C.71–1935.

the Supreme, Mysterious, and Most Wondrous Way and Virtue (Wushang jinxuan shangmiao daode xuanjing 無上金玄上妙道德玄經), although the scorch marks to the top edge have been interpreted by Sarah Fraser as reflecting the manuscript no longer retaining a Daoist function.[49] The manuscript was thus repurposed by an artist to practise different elements on the verso. As a practice sketch, it is not clear how the stools would have been depicted in the final product. The date for the recto text or the verso sketches remains unclear.

While a roughly-written date is given by the hand of Yu Qingqian 余慶(?)千 upside-down on the verso, reading: 'The eve of the sixth day of the fifth month of a *xinsi* year' 辛巳年五月六夕, this may refer to the years 741, 801, 861, or 921. Taking into consideration the quality of the paper, Jean-Pierre Drège has dated the manuscript to the first half of the eighth century, perhaps narrowing down the intended date to 741, concurrent with many of the seated ceramics.[50] Nevertheless, the sketches were likely drawn after the manuscript's initial use and the date itself may have been copied from an earlier text anachronistically. All we can safely conclude is that the manuscript was initially used in the early eighth century and repurposed sometime thereafter.

The women are drawn in languid, relaxed poses, holding their shawl or else objects like mirrors. While Buddhist sketches make up much of the subject matter for the artistic renditions on P.2002, the sketches depict the women in a moment



FIGURE 6.8 Sketches from the verso of P.2002

49 Fraser 2000, 190, 221.
50 Drège 1981, 358 Table 2.

of leisure or even vanity as opposed to the rich religious iconography of pensive meditation. We see here evidence of artists engaging with, adapting, and altering models for seated women. These sketches do not pose the women akin to pensive bodhisattvas, perhaps indicating an evolving familiarity with depicting seated women that would eventually develop into the fluid poses seen in later centuries.

5 Wine Vessels and Possible Iranian Influences

One ceramic remains difficult to place: ceramic C.4 excavated from the tomb of Li Du which presents a woman holding a duck-shaped wine vessel, as shown in Figure 6.9. This depiction clearly draws from tropes surrounding Central Asian, particularly Iranian, wine merchants rather than Buddhist or toilette imagery. One eighth-century example, given in Figure 6.10, shows a West Asian man holding a leopard-skin wine vessel kneeling on the ground. While C.4 appears to depict a Han-Chinese woman sat on a stool, her clothing, boots, and particularly the way she holds the wine vessel across her body would

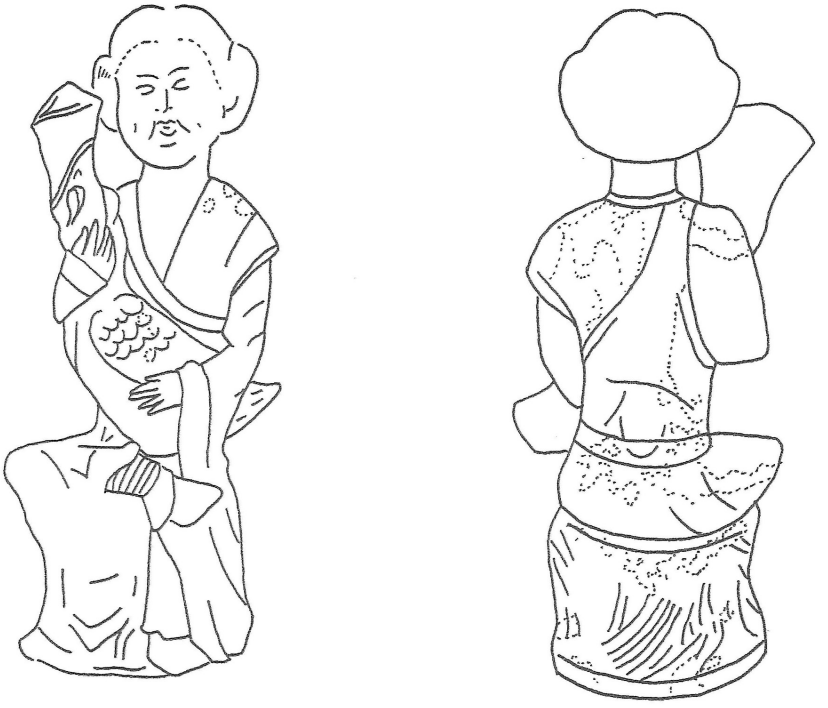


FIGURE 6.9 Line-drawing of unearthed ceramic C.4 from Li Du's tomb



FIGURE 6.10 Eighth-century ceramic of a West Asian man holding a leopard-skin wine vessel, housed in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

have immediately created a visual connection with Iranian wine merchants, wine shops, and wine vessels. Even though Iranian merchants were engaged in other trades and professions, the stereotype of male wine merchants and the so-called *huji* 胡姬 (foreign charmers) – good-looking Iranian women that

managed wineshops in the capital – clearly held lasting relevance in funerary *sancai*.[51] This imagery was then adopted in a decidedly Chinese production to be buried in Li Du's tomb in Shanxi. But why incorporate a mix of West Asian and Chinese shorthand in one ceramic?

As with many of the seated ceramics, we can situate this piece in the early eighth century when *sancai* flourished before the calamitous An Lushan 安祿山 Rebellion of 755 onwards. As Jessica Rawson argues, Tang *sancai* ceramics in the seventh and eighth centuries responded to foreign vessel shapes and techniques but were not faithful reproductions of contemporary imported metalware.[52] Rather than perfectly replicating contemporary silverware in ceramic form, 'exotic-looking' *sancai* vessels instead represent a concoction of influences and adaptations catered primarily to a local market and, later, to an export market. Rawson's assessment of 'inside out' exoticism in eighth-century Chinese *sancai* clearly shaped this particular seated ceramic. Eighth-century *sancai* wares, mostly intended for funerary deposits if extant findings are to be believed, were exotic in flavour even though they were locally-produced. This involved the borrowing of different elements alongside markedly Chinese motifs to create something that was both striking and representative of access to exotic luxury goods. The hourglass stool had precedents in both Buddhist and Central Asian art, providing plentiful elements to use, alter, and discard – here incorporating West Asian or Iranian grape wine consumption into a locally-produced 'exotic' funerary *sancai*.

6 Posing the Tang Beauty

In this analysis of a selection of seated ceramics of Tang women, I have shown that these ceramics were mostly produced for funerary deposits according to known findspots. As the inscribed C.13 suggests, it is likely that women patronised or 'used' some of these pieces. Furthermore, the ceramic women were dressed in contemporary clothes and were thus shaped by changing trends in

51 For examples of *huji*, see Xiang 1933, 36–37; Tang and Fu 1994, 82. The translation of *huji* follows that suggested by Bossler 2012, alternatively translated as 'young Sogdian woman' in Moriyasu 2007. See also the related rhyton wine cup, as explored in Louis 2007. Three similar ceramics of kneeling West Asian men holding a wine vessel across the body, though more basic in form than Fig. 6.10, were excavated from the tomb of Wang Yuanzhong 王元忠 and his wife (d. post-723), as given in Zhengzhou daxue lishi xueyuan and Xi'anshi wenwu baohu kaogu yanjiuyuan 2022, line-drawing fig. 103 nos. 4–6.

52 Rawson 2012.

fashion and in depicting the female form. These pieces clearly held local relevance and local functions.

As BuYun Chen points out, 'whereas male guards, attendants, and musicians were depicted in near homogeneous forms, Tang dynasty painters and artisans approached the clothed female figure as a surface to be *fashioned*'.[53] We can almost imagine the 'Tang beauty' as an archetype to be dressed and positioned much like a modern-day Barbie doll – fashioned here as a doctor, there as an astronaut, but always remaining 'Barbie' underneath a layer of visual cues. The Tang beauty could become a musician by holding an instrument or a dancer by flicking her sleeves, she could gaze in her mirror as she dressed or turn to toy with her parrot. This logic thus explains the range of trappings and accoutrements seen across the ceramics. Repeated elements like curled-toe slippers and phoenix headdresses clearly tied the pieces to the prevailing fashion at the time of their production. The shorthand symbols – pensive or serene lotus stems, mirrors, shawls, etc. – created a guise or narrative for the ceramic woman. As these elements can be seen in other media depicting or describing women from the same time period, we can contextualise the seated ceramics as belonging to this wider category of art centred on the Tang beauty.

However, one crucial difference remains: the women here are *seated*. Whether these furniture items proliferated for a time in elite households remains to be seen, but it seems likely that the sudden inclusion of hourglass stools in secular ceramics reflected a vogue for purchasing or, at the very least, picturing this seat. Artisans borrowed tropes related to seated figures in a largely Buddhist context, positioning the women akin to pensive bodhisattvas. Indeed, Buddhist art had plentiful artistic models for seated figures, unusual in China where floor-sitting and kneeling was the norm. But this use of Buddhist iconography was ultimately superficial, instead reflecting artisans' first attempts to depict fashionable seated women.

The toilette ceramics in particular highlight how women's lives could be eroticised and reduced to a handful of shorthand symbols. The mirror represented her dressing or undressing and an awareness of her looks, while the parrot and lapdog situated her in a sumptuous private boudoir with access to exotic imports. The rapidly expanding range of activities women engaged in during this period, the apparent consumer demand for depictions of such activities, and the addition of raised seating options meant that artisans had to quickly found new aesthetic models. Borrowing and re-applying antecedent

53 Chen 2019, 83.

standards for seated bodies, they forwarded an aesthetic understanding of the seated female form that remained rooted in the context of their own tight timeframe. The seated ceramics may have borrowed and derived from Buddhist and Central Asian tropes, but they were ultimately shaped by the fabricated exoticism and female fashion of the early eighth century.

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CHAPTER 7

Dali Daggers: Buddhist Material Culture on the Southern Silk Road

Megan Bryson

Abstract

The ritual daggers or stakes known as *kīla* in Sanskrit and *phur pa* or *phur bu* in Tibetan are most commonly found in Himalayan Buddhism. However, several such daggers dating to the Dali 大理 kingdom (937–1253) have been recovered from pagodas in the Dali capital. The Dali kingdom ruled a large swath of territory in what is now southwest China, centred in present-day Yunnan Province. Dali's daggers display considerable continuities with their Himalayan counterparts, but they differ in one key way: all the Dali daggers are attached to rings, meaning that they could be slipped on a finger or looped on a cord. In addition, most Dali daggers feature the top half of a deity above and a blade below, which is less common in early Himalayan *phur pa*. This chapter uses Dali-kingdom daggers to demonstrate that the Dali kingdom participated in transmission routes that linked them to northeastern India, especially Bihar and Bengal, and to Java. Dali-kingdom examples also constitute an important but unstudied subtype of ritual dagger that circulated between the tenth and thirteenth centuries.

In 1925, an earthquake struck the Dali 大理 region of southwest China's Yunnan Province, shaking loose the spire atop the Thousand-League Pagoda 千尋塔 and sending a few of the pagoda's Buddhist figures tumbling to the ground. Over fifty years later, in 1978, a team of archaeologists began to excavate the pagoda, whereupon they discovered a cache of treasures inside. Based on a few inscriptions, as well as epigraphical evidence from the Yuan 元 dynasty (1271–1368), it is safe to conclude that the Thousand-League Pagoda was sealed shortly after the fall of the Dali kingdom (937–1253), and that the pagoda therefore housed the treasures of the Dali court.[1] Several small daggers number

1 *Da Chongsheng si beiming bing xu* 大崇聖寺碑銘並序 (1325), in Yang 2007, 10:19 and Lutz 1991, 140. Lutz notes that the three inscriptions are dated to 1000, 1141, and 1154.

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among the hundreds of items recovered from the pagoda (see Fig. 7.7). The few scholars who have written about the daggers recognise them as variations on the pegs or daggers known as *kīla* in Sanskrit and *phur pa* (or *phur bu*) in Tibetan.[2] *Phur pa* have many functions, but they are best known as ritual objects in Himalayan Buddhism that practitioners use to symbolically destroy obstacles. Most surviving *phur pa* hail from Tibetan and Nepalese regions and date to the thirteenth or fourteenth century at the earliest.[3] This would make the Dali daggers the oldest extant examples of these ritual objects.

The Dali daggers show many similarities with their Himalayan counterparts: they are bifurcated into a bottom half that consists of a three-faceted blade, and a top half that displays the torso and head of a deity as well as lotus and vajra decorations.[4] They use similar, if not identical, materials: most Dali daggers are made of gilt bronze or copper, but there is at least one example made of iron; most Himalayan *phur pa* are made of iron or wood, but there are also examples made of bronze, copper, steel, or other metal alloys.

However, the Dali daggers differ in several ways, too. First, they lack several features of Himalayan *phur pa*, including the handle (usually with eight facets) separating the blade from the deity above; the two endless knots that often bookend the handle; the *makara* (sea creature) head from whose mouth the blade extends; and the *nāgas* (serpents) snaking down the sides of the blade – as seen in Figure 7.1. Second, the Dali daggers have a feature that Himalayan *phur pa* lack, namely, they all have a ring affixed to the back. Third, the Dali daggers show greater consistency. Whereas Himalayan *phur pa* can range in size from small, hand-held objects to large, fixed objects of worship; can appear with or without deity heads; and can include different combinations of vajras, lotus blossoms, and knots, there is essentially only one kind of *phur pa*-style dagger in Dali: a single triangular blade below with the top half of a deity

2 I refer to the Dali objects as 'daggers' rather than as *kīla* or *phur pa* to avoid confusing terms and objects from different regions.

3 Nicole and Patrick Grimaud cite the authority of N. Gompo (aka Gonpo) Ronge in dating two *phur pa* in the Museum der Kulturen, Basel, to the tenth century. However, beyond noting that this dating relies on stylistic features, there is no substantive explanation for the tenth-century date and no reference to a publication in which such an explanation would be found; Grimaud and Grimaud 2017, 31, 70–71 figs. 3.10, 3.13.

4 See, for example, photographs of two daggers from the Thousand-League Pagoda in Lutz 1991, 220.



FIGURE 7.1 Late fourteenth–early fifteenth century ritual dagger and stand from Tibet

above; a lotus-blossom ferrule that joins the blade to the deity's torso; and a five-pronged vajra atop the deity's head.[5]

This chapter examines the Dali daggers to determine their routes of transmission and to better understand the Southern Silk Road that connected Dali to its neighbors. The Dali kingdom bordered Song China, Đại Việt, Bagan, and Khams, with Pāla territory just beyond Bagan, so different forms of Buddhism could have entered Dali from different directions. Bin Yang has shown that

5 Another style of dagger that survives from the Dali kingdom bears more similarities to the single-pronged vajras that survive from medieval Japan than to Himalayan *phur pa*. I intend to explore these connections further in a separate study.

key commodities such as cowries, horses, silver, and tea traveled to and from Yunnan along these routes. One such route connected Chengdu 成都 to Dali, and then to Bagan, Pāla India, and Peshawar, where it joined the Northern Silk Road from Central Asia. Another route—often called the 'Old Tea and Horse Route'—linked Dali north to Lijiang 麗江, rGyal thang, bDe chen rdzong, and Lhasa, and south to Đại Việt and the Khmer empire, as shown in Figure 7.2.[6] Considering Dali-kingdom daggers alongside Himalayan *phur pa*, and in relation to texts from South Asia, Tibet, and the Dali kingdom itself, will demonstrate how Dali court Buddhists encountered and used these distinctive daggers. In addition, the Dali daggers show the critical importance of material culture in understanding Buddhist transmission. Dali-kingdom Buddhist texts, which are mainly written in Sinitic script, strongly suggest transmission from Tang 唐 (618–907) and Song 宋 (960–1279) territory, but surviving objects and images from the Dali kingdom point to other kinds of encounters.

Unsurprisingly, most scholarship on daggers focuses on Tibetan texts and objects, which constitute the vast majority of extant material related to this subject. *Phur pa* ritual remains an important part of Tibetan Buddhism, and textual scholars and art historians alike have weighed in on the development of Tibetan *phur pa* traditions. One of the key debates about *phur pa* concerns their origin, with some scholars arguing that *phur pa* texts and objects were uniquely Tibetan creations with Indic inspirations, and others arguing that the Himalayan *phur pa* materials were based on Indic models and sources.[7] The former argument relies on the absence of surviving *kīla* ritual texts and objects from South Asia, but, as Robert Mayer argues, *phur pa* texts and objects from Tibet show remarkable continuity with Sanskrit materials on *kīla*, and earlier East Asian translations of Indic texts describe *kīla* in similar ways.[8] This suggests that the daggers shared South Asian roots that then branched off at different times in different regions. The earlier material spread to East Asia, where (as Mayer notes) it mainly lived on as the single-pronged vajra, and the later material ended up in the Himalayas and Dunhuang 敦煌. The transmission of Buddhism to Dali lies between these two branches both temporally and geographically, so the Dali daggers may constitute a missing link.

6 Yang 2004, 292 map 2. See also Lu 1997.

7 Some scholars have identified similar wooden stakes in other regions as *kīla* or the ancestors of *kīla*, but I do not find these similar enough to prove influence. See Hummel 1997, 25–26, and Boord 1993, 3.

8 Mayer 1990, 4, 22.

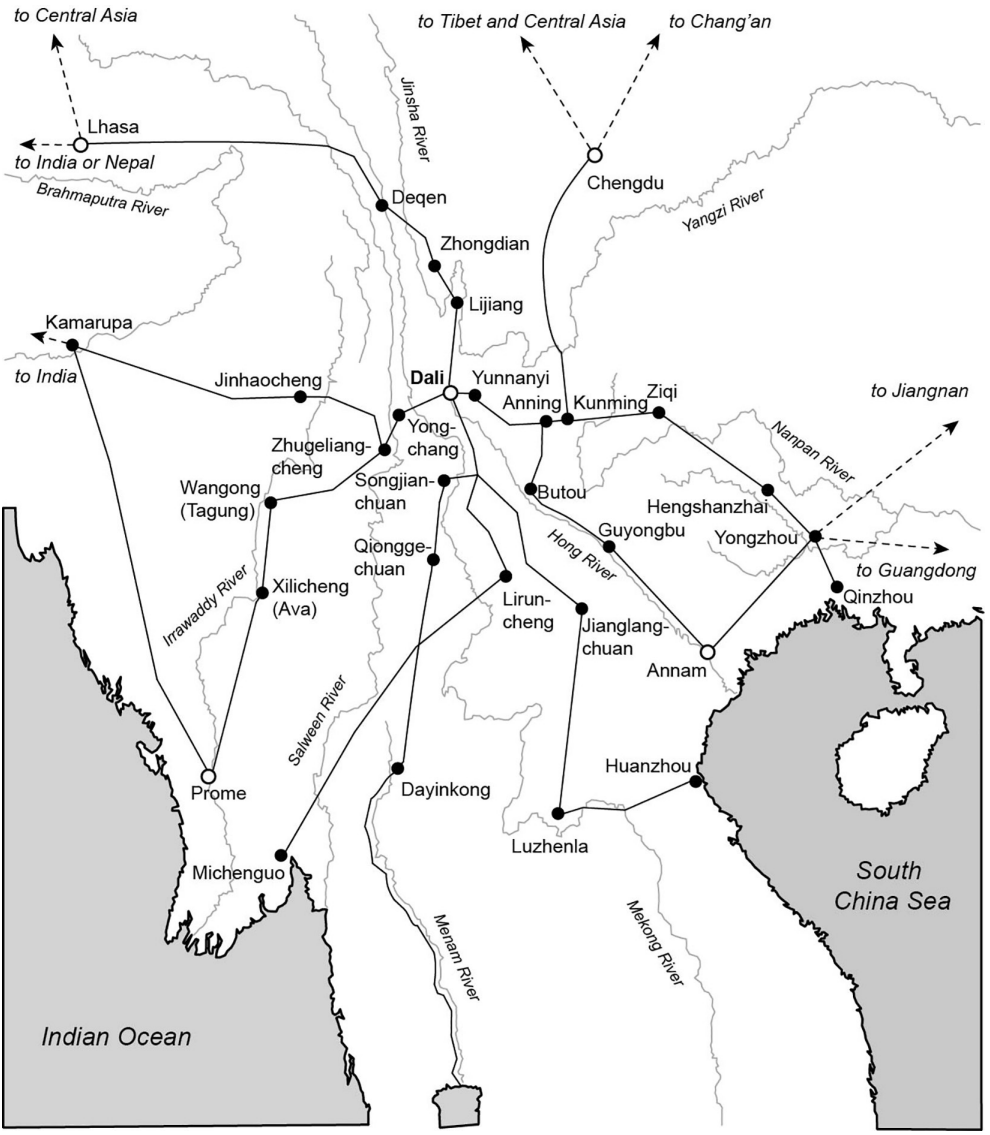


FIGURE 7.2 Map of Dali kingdom trade and transportation networks

1 Kīla, Indrakīla, Yūpa: Cosmic Pegs in South Asia

South Asian writings on the *kīla* and *indrakīla* can be traced back to Puraṇic tales that draw on Vedic themes. Puraṇic literature refers to the primordial mountain as 'Indra's peg', i.e., *indrakīla*, and identifies it as Mount Mandara, which in the *Mahābhārata* is the mountain the gods use to churn the ocean

and extract *amṛta* (the ambrosia of immortality), with the help of the serpent Vāsuki as the churning rope.[9] South Asian Buddhists identified their axial mountain, Meru, with the *indrakīla* instead of Mount Mandara.[10] In both religions, the *kīla* or *indrakīla* symbolises the *axis mundi* mountain that stabilises the world and connects its different aquatic, terrestrial, and celestial realms.

This symbolism relates to the architectural function of the *kīla* as a stabilising vertical axis, which is described in treatises on iconography and architecture known as śilpaśāstra. The *indrakīla* was a peg or bolt around which artists carved images of deities; it became identified with deities and served as an object of worship itself.[11] In addition, before construction commenced, a *khadira*-wood *kīla* stabilised the *nāga* of the site to prevent disturbances.[12] As construction ended, another peg or nail known as the *stūpi-kīla* was installed at the top of the structure, directly above the stabilising *kīla*. A seventh-century architectural treatise calls for the *stūpi-kīla* to be made of wood (preferably *khadira*) or iron, with a triangular body, square base, octagonal middle, and circular top.[13] These two *kīla* form an axis within the structure that mirrors the cosmic *axis mundi*. In addition to serving as cosmic axes, *kīla* demarcated and protected designated spaces, including the funeral pyre, *maṇḍala*, or field.[14] Lily de Silva and Mayer further relate these *kīla* to the Vedic sacrificial post, *yūpa*, which also served as a vertical axis, and which relates to the later symbolic sacrifices associated with the *phur pa*. Knotted ropes tied sacrificial animals to the octagonal *yūpa*; these features appear as the octagonal shaft and endless knot motifs of the later *phur pa*.[15]

Many features of these *kīla* and *yūpa* appear in Himalayan *phur pa*, including the symbolic connections to *nāgas* and water; the octagonal shape and ties to knots; and the roles of demarcating and protecting ritual spaces. Hindu tantras call for practitioners to pierce *liṅga* or body parts with *kīla* to immobilise potentially harmful forces, which shows continuities with Buddhist tantric *phur pa* ritual.[16] For example, the *Vīṇāśikhatantra*, which dates to no later than the eleventh century, instructs practitioners to pierce an effigy with a peg of

9 De Silva 1978, 241.
10 De Silva 1978, 243.
11 De Silva 1978, 241–43.
12 Mayer also notes that iron can offer similar stabilising functions, referring specifically to the well-known iron pillar of Delhi, whose disturbance reportedly triggered earthquakes; Mayer 1990, 7–8.
13 Mayer 1990, 9 and Acharya 1933, 205–6.
14 Mayer 1990, 16.
15 De Silva 1978, 244–48 and Mayer 1990, 10–11.
16 Mayer 1990, 14–15 and Goudriaan 1978, 374–75.

human bone to cause impotence.[17] These Hindu texts indicate that *kīla* ritual developed in South Asian tantrism—both Hindu and Buddhist—around the same time.

In addition to ritual *kīla*, the deity Vajrakīla likely arose in South Asian Buddhism before being incorporated into Himalayan Buddhism. Vajrakīla embodies the *kīla*'s power, and later Himalayan tradition presents the god as the dagger's animating presence. Cathy Cantwell and Mayer point to Vajrakīla statues in Bengal and Java as evidence for the god's cult outside the Himalayas, but they note that Vajrakīla remained a subsidiary figure in South Asian Buddhism.[18] Other deities associated with the *kīla* or *phur pa* share this trajectory: Vajrakumāra, Amṛtakuṇḍalin, Hayagrīva, and Mahākāla all started out as relatively minor figures that had been converted to Buddhism from Hinduism, but around the late tenth century Buddhist texts and images begin to depict them as central deities.[19] Vajrakīla and other *kīla* deities were becoming more important in South Asian tantric Buddhism as Himalayan Buddhists were translating these texts into Tibetan.

The many references to *kīla* in South Asian texts indicate that these pegs or daggers played critical and widespread roles in religious ritual, from demarcating protected space to stabilising architectural structures to pinning down potentially harmful forces. Despite this apparent ubiquity, no examples of such *kīla* have survived. Instead, we only find evidence of these objects in the Himalayas.

2 Phur pa, Phur bu: Ritual Daggers in the Himalayas

By the seventh and eighth centuries, *kīla* (as *indrakīla* or *stūpi-kīla*) were well attested in Sanskrit (and Pāli) texts of South Asia even though none have been discovered in the material record. A similar dynamic continues as Buddhists from the Himalayas translated texts related to these *kīla*, known as *phur pa* or *phur bu* in Tibetan. Though these texts date to early periods of Himalayan Buddhism—possibly even the initial transmission of the eighth and ninth

17 The earliest dated reference to the *Vīṇāśikhatantra* comes from a 1052 Cambodian inscription that claims the text was taught during the reign of Jayavarman II, after 802; Goudriaan 1985, 24, 125–126.

18 Cantwell and Mayer 2008, 17. The stone statue of Vajrakīla from Bengal hails from Hugli specifically and dates to the eighth century; the statue from Java is from Yogyakarta and depicts a Vajrakīla Heruka.

19 Rob Linrothe makes this argument about wrathful protector figures in general and uses Hayagrīva as one of the main case studies that illustrates this gradual transformation; Linrothe 1999, 12–14.

centuries—the oldest extant daggers from these regions only date to the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries.[20] An overview of early Tibetan *phur pa* ritual texts and of the older *phur pa* objects will raise various possibilities for making sense of the relationship between *phur pa* texts and objects.

Cantwell and Mayer have pioneered the study of early Tibetan *phur pa* texts in their investigations of Dunhuang manuscripts as well as received texts in the Nyingma (Tib. *rnying-ma*) canon, including the *Guhyasamāja tantra*.[21] They date the Dunhuang manuscripts to the late tenth to early eleventh centuries, just before the 'new transmission' of Buddhism to Tibet after the period of political fragmentation that began with the fall of the Tibetan empire in the mid-ninth century.[22] Given the post-1300 dates of most *phur pa* texts and objects, these pre-1300 sources are particularly valuable for showing how Tibetan *phur pa* practices took shape. As Cantwell and Mayer demonstrate, early *phur pa* texts bridge the textual references from South Asian sources, the physical *phur pa* from the Himalayas, and representations of deities related to the *phur pa*, especially Vajrakīla (Tib. rDo rje phur pa).

Nyingma tradition classifies *phur pa* texts in the Mahāyoga category, which puts them closer to such texts as the *Mahāvairocanābhisaṃbodhi sūtra* (MVS) and *Sarvatathāgata-tattvasaṃgraha* (STTS) than to the more transgressive tantras of Anuttara yoga.[23] Cantwell and Mayer connect the rise of Mahāyoga texts in eighth-century Tibet to the myth of taming Rudra, which justified tantric violence. In this myth, the violent god Rudra (an emanation of *Śiva*) cannot be tamed peacefully, so the Buddhist deity Heruka kills him and then brings him back to life as a protector of the dharma.[24] Two early texts from the Nyingma *Old Tantric Canon* (Tib. *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum*) structure the *phur pa* rite around this narrative, such that the *phur pa* becomes the instrument of 'liberative killing' (Skt. *mokṣa*; Tib. *sgrol-ba*). Liberative killing justifies violence by framing it as an ultimately compassionate act that transforms ignorance into awakening. In the *phur pa* rite, the effigy is Rudra, and the *phur pa* itself is Heruka (aka Vajrakīla, or a double such as Vajrakumāra).[25] By using the Heruka *phur pa* to kill Rudra, the practitioner effects Rudra's liberation.

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20 Heller 2008, 158.

21 Cantwell and Mayer 2008, 147; see also Stein 1978, 427–28.

22 Cantwell and Mayer 2008, 12.

23 Cantwell and Mayer 2007, 20.

24 Cantwell and Mayer 2007, 20–21. Ronald Davidson discusses the development of this myth (following versions that identify the troublesome Śaiva deity as Maheśvara instead of Rudra) from the STTS to the *Cakrasaṃvara tantra*. See Davidson 1991.

25 Cantwell and Mayer 2007, 20–21; for a more detailed discussion of these two texts, see pages 22–36.

These early Nyingma texts overlap with some of the *phur pa* texts found at Dunhuang. The earliest text on *phur pa* is the late tenth-century Dunhuang manuscript Pelliot tibétain 44 (hereafter PT.44). This short text recounts how Padmasambhava and his disciples journeyed from Nepal to Nālandā to retrieve the *Hundred Thousand* [*Verses*] *on Phur pa* (Tib. *Phur bu'i 'bum sde*). When they returned to Nepal with the text, Padmasambhava practiced everything in the collection, then returned the collection to Nālandā and made his way home again. He and his disciples continued to practice *phur pa* rites, eventually seeing a vision of the god Vajrakumāra, and performed various miracles, such as drawing water from stone and sparking fire. They also subjugated and converted four goddesses who had been killing people on the group's initial journey to India. The text includes subjugation among the *phur pa* ritual's effects, to which it adds secret *bodhicitta* Atiyoga and the *phur pa sādhana* of Mahāyoga.[26] These latter two practices are meant to effect awareness that the mind and its objects are nondual, which is achieved specifically through rolling the *phur pa* between one's palms and performing the following visualisation:[27]

> Holding the Mount Meru *kīlaya* [with] planed edges in the right hand, [one] holds a *cakra* in the left hand. In the center of the right palm, from 'a' [arises] a moon *maṇḍala*, [while] in the centre of the left palm, from 'ma' [arises] a sun *maṇḍala*. The natural expression of the *phur bu* is meditated on [as] the *heruka*[s] of the five families [appearing] above the upper knot. At the spokes, [one] meditates on the eight [females,] Ke 'u ri, Tse 'u ri [etc.]. On the head of the knot, the wrathful ones are displayed; meditate on the ten clearly manifesting. At the point [of the *phur bu*], meditate on *yakṣa*[s] and *rākṣasa*[s]. Also here, meditate on a single clearly manifesting deep blue syllable *huṃ* at the tip. In its center, meditate on a single great one clearly manifesting within white light.[28]

As Cantwell and Mayer observe, PT.44 connects with later *phur pa* texts and objects in several ways: it presents Vajrakumāra as the main deity associated

26 *Bodhicitta* means the mental state or intention (*citta*) that seeks awakening (*bodhi*); in tantric contexts it can also refer to seminal fluid. In this text, *bodhicitta* Atiyoga involves the seminal products of deities' unions dissolving into and empowering the *phur pa*. Atiyoga and Mahāyoga are different stages of yoga as articulated in the Himalayan Nyingma school. Atiyoga, 'surpassing yoga', is the supreme stage. Mahāyoga, 'great yoga', is a slightly less advanced stage that involves *sādhana* rituals in which practitioners imagine themselves as the deity in question. Here, *phur pa* Mahāyoga involves the practitioner identifying with the *phur pa* deity.

27 Cantwell and Mayer 2008, 57–65.

28 Translation (with minor stylistic changes) from Cantwell and Mayer 2008, 66–67.

with *phur pa*, and further associates the *phur pa* with the class of *heruka* deities; identifies the *phur pa* with Mount Meru; describes the practice of rolling the *phur pa* in one's palms; and hints at several features of Himalayan *phur pa* objects such as the two knots and eight spokes.

Additional Dunhuang *phur pa* manuscripts expand on these themes, especially in describing the ritual of using *phur pa* for liberative killing. For example, the text titled *The Supreme Pacification, the Concise Enlightened Activity of Transference* (hereafter, *The Supreme Pacification*; Tib. *Zhi ba'i mchog 'pho ba'i 'phrin las bsdus pa*; IOL Tib J 331.III) prescribes *phur pa* rites to pacify those who cannot be subjugated through nonviolent methods. The text prescribes that the *phur pa* object should be made of iron, five other kinds of metal, sandalwood, or thorny wood; it should be eight or twelve inches in length; it should have two one-inch knots; the upper part should have eight facets; the lower part should have a three-sided blade; and the *phur pa* should be imposing like Mount Meru.[29] In performing the *sambhogakāya* (enjoyment body) consecration, the practitioner visualises the *phur pa*'s knot as the 'immeasurable palace' (Tib. *gzhal yas khang*, i.e., Mount Meru) inhabited by the following deities in the five directions, each emanating from the syllable *hūṃ*: Heruka in the centre, Trailokyavijaya in the east, Yamāntaka in the south, Hayagrīva in the west, and Mahābala in the north.[30] The subsequent *nirmāṇakāya* (emanation body) consecration describes the *phur pa* deity: above the waist his hair stands on end, his three eyes glare, and he bares his fangs; skulls and snakes adorn him, and cremation fire engulfs him. His four arms hold an axe (upper right), *khaṭvāṅga* (upper left), vajra (lower right), and *phur pa* (lower left). Below the waist his body is a dark blue, three-sided iron *phur pa*.[31] The practitioner then uses ten *phur pa* to demarcate the ritual boundary, creates a triangular *maṇḍala*, and creates an effigy into which the ritual target is summoned. The practitioner rolls the *phur pa* between their palms and then immobilises and neutralises the target by piercing the effigy's heart, shoulders, thighs, and navel while reciting the Vajra Claw mantra.[32]

The continued proliferation of *phur pa* texts in Tibetan Buddhism runs parallel to, but slightly earlier than, the proliferation of *phur pa* ritual objects.

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29 Cantwell and Mayer 2008, 92–93.

30 Cantwell and Mayer 2008, 94–96. The *sambhogakāya* or 'enjoyment body' (*baoshen* 報身) refers to one of three kinds of buddha bodies, along with the *dharmakāya* (*fashen* 法身), 'dharma body', and *nirmāṇakāya* (*huashen* 化身), 'emanation body'. *Sambhogakāya* refers specifically to the enjoyment of the dharma for the buddha himself and for those who encounter his body. *Dharmakāya* is the universal body of the dharma itself, and *nirmāṇakāya* is the flesh-and-blood human body of buddhas such as Śākyamuni.

31 Cantwell and Mayer 2008, 96–99.

32 Cantwell and Mayer 2008, 108–21.

Though some scholars previously identified these daggers as Bön creations indigenous to Tibet, the wealth of textual evidence uncovered by Cantwell and Mayer alongside the Dali-kingdom examples suggest Indic precedents. The study of *phur pa* as material objects involves a different approach than the study of *phur pa* texts. John Huntington's 1975 study that catalogued different types of *phur pa* from different regions remains a valuable starting point for considering the relationship between these objects and the texts that describe them. Most of the examples Huntington discusses are much later than the period under consideration here, but there are hints of temporal and regional variations that may shed light on the distinctive daggers of the Dali kingdom.[33]

The Dali daggers specifically conform to the style in which the top half of the *phur pa* is the upper body of a deity. The first example Huntington gives of this style also happens to be the earliest example of which he was aware: a sandalwood dagger 22.2 cm long, probably dating to the fourteenth century or earlier, with an image of the deity Phur pa in the Kashmiri-Tibetan style of that period, as given in Figure 7.3. Huntington deduces that the *phur pa* came from the Ngari (Tib. mNga-ris) region of western Tibet, near Ladakh. The deity has three faces and originally had six arms, though they have broken off; he has serpent adornments and his head is topped with an endless knot.[34] This *phur pa* is especially noteworthy for its rounded, blunt blade (versus the Y-shaped or three-faceted blade(s) common to *phur pa*) and the lack of a *makara* or any other decorated ferrule separating the blade from the deity's torso. These features also appear in some Dali-kingdom daggers, suggesting a shared earlier style. Huntington observes that a line on this *phur pa*'s blade indicates that the tip of the blade rested in a holder, which protected it from the incense smoke that colored the rest of the object over time.[35] This particular *phur pa* diverges from most textual prescriptions for creating these objects, but it does recall the description of the deity Phur pa in *The Supreme Pacification*, which is bifurcated into the dagger-shaped lower body and the wrathful deity upper body.

Nepalese *phur pa* also tend to feature deities above the blade, namely, the god Viśvarūpasaṃvara and/or his consort Pāpagāndevī, as seen in Figure 7.4.[36] According to Huntington, Nepalese art preserved the iconographic conventions of eighth- to ninth-century Magadha, so this form with a deity torso or body above the blade likely represents an early Indian style. As Amy Heller and Thomas Marcotty have noted, *phur pa* in this style cannot be used for most *phur pa* ritual because their shape and decorations inhibit rolling between the

33 See Huntington 1975, especially 16–24, and VIII–XIV, figs. 11–27.

34 Huntington, 1975, 20–21.

35 Huntington 1975, 21. Unfortunately, this line is not visible in the image of this *phur pa*.

36 Huntington 1975, 49–51, 55.

palms; instead, these deity *phur pa* would have been objects of worship that usually stood in a base or socket (as with the fourteenth-century sandalwood example). In addition, these kinds of devotional *phur pa* are usually made of bronze, rather than iron.[37]



FIGURE 7.3 Carved sandalwood *phur pa* from Western Tibet, dated to the fourteenth century or earlier

37 Heller and Marcotty 1987, 72–73.



FIGURE 7.4 Copper *phur pa* from the Kathmandu Valley, dated to the nineteenth century

Huntington also considers distinctive elements of Bön *phur pa*, which tend to have the same features as Buddhist *phur pa* but rendered more abstractly, and a solitary example from eighteenth to twentieth-century China, which is based on Tibetan models but with some stylistic differences.[38] The diverse kinds of *phur pa* from different regions and religions indicate that while many *phur pa* objects were made according to the specifications of Tibetan Buddhist texts, there were also many *phur pa* that diverged from those textual descriptions. A similar kind of regional *phur pa* tradition may have developed in Dali, which would have been farther removed from the textual bonds linking India, Tibet, and Nepal.

3 Dali-Kingdom Daggers

3.1 Buddhism in the Nanzhao and Dali Kingdoms

The Dali kingdom ruled a large swath of land that encompassed all of modern-day Yunnan Province, parts of Sichuan and Guizhou provinces, and parts of Myanmar and Laos. Understanding the Dali kingdom, including its distinctive form of Buddhism and its routes of transmission, requires first understanding the history and religion of the preceding Nanzhao 南詔 kingdom (649–903).[39] Nanzhao rulers proved particularly adept at expanding their territory by alternating allegiances to the larger empires on their border, i.e., Tang China and Tibet.[40] After allying with Tang China to help curb Tibet's southwestern expansion, Nanzhao broke with the Tang to ally with Tibet in 752, becoming the 'junior emperor' (Tib. *btsan-po chung*). Then in 794, tired of Tibet's demands, Nanzhao reinstated its alliance with Tang China. However, this alliance remained fragile, as the ninth century saw frequent Nanzhao raids on Tang cities in Sichuan and attacks on Tang interests in Annam (modern-day Vietnam).

Nanzhao's expansion in the ninth century coincided with its rulers' adoption of Buddhism. Among the large-scale Buddhist projects of ninth-century Nanzhao were the grotto carvings at Stone Treasure Mountain 石寶山, to the northwest of the Dali plain; the Temple for Revering the Holy One 崇聖寺 in the Nanzhao capital; and the 899 *Illustrated History of Nanzhao* (Nanzhao

38 Huntington 1975, 57–59.

39 It should be noted that Nanzhao did not become a major force in the Dali region until the mid-eighth century, when it began conquering its rivals in the Dali plain; prior to that time it was one of six small polities, each known as *zhao* 詔, that ruled different parts of the area around the Dali plain.

40 Charles Backus recounts this history in the only English-language book on Nanzhao; Backus 1981. More recently, Wang Zhenping addressed Nanzhao-Tang political and military relations in Wang 2013.

tuzhuan 南詔圖傳) that recounts in text and images how Buddhism was introduced to the region. Nanzhao Buddhism established patterns that continued into the Dali kingdom, such as the combination of Sinitic textual traditions with Indian and Southeast Asian iconography, and the adoption of esoteric or tantric Buddhism.[41]

Despite Nanzhao's decades-long alliance with Tibet, there are few Tibetan records about Nanzhao (Tib. 'Jang or Ljang), and no Tibetan language materials have been found from either the Nanzhao or Dali kingdoms.[42] Many Tang records about Nanzhao survive, but there are few records from Nanzhao itself. Conversely, many materials survive from the Dali kingdom (most of which are Buddhist), but there are few records about Dali. This makes Buddhism the best documented facet of Dali-kingdom culture. The textual corpus of Dali-kingdom Buddhism was recovered from the capital's Buddha Pagoda 佛圖塔 as well as Dharma Treasury Temple 法藏寺, the family temple of the Dong 董 clan who served as national preceptors under Dali kingdom's Duan 段 rulers.[43] Most Dali-kingdom texts are Tang-dynasty Sinitic translations of popular Buddhist scriptures such as the *Lotus sūtra*, *Flower Garland sūtra*, and *Diamond sūtra*.[44] Dali-kingdom Buddhists, like their counterparts elsewhere in East Asia, used Sanskrit for *dhāraṇī* and mantras, but not much else.[45] What sets Dali-kingdom Buddhist texts apart are the six ritual texts and one subcommentary from the Dharma Treasury Temple cache that have not been found elsewhere.

Of the six ritual texts, two focus on food distribution; two offer esoteric rituals for inviting various deities; one is a *sādhana* text devoted to the god Mahākāla; and one is an extended *homa* (sacrificial fire) consecration ritual text that centers on Vajrasattva.[46] Of these six, five can be described as esoteric

41 These patterns are most apparent in the *Illustrated History of Nanzhao*, which quotes from the Chinese classics while depicting the central figure, Ajaya (Invincible) Avalokiteśvara 阿嵯耶觀音, as an Indian monk. Art historians agree that the distinctive form of Ajaya Avalokiteśvara entered Dali from Southeast Asia, probably Campā. The entire *Illustrated History of Nanzhao* has been reproduced in Li 1982, 128–150. For discussions of Ajaya Avalokiteśvara's provenance, see Howard 1996, Cūṭivoṅgs 2002, 323–324, and Guy 1995, 76–80. This is also discussed in Bryson 2018, 94 n. 32.

42 The *Old Tibetan Chronicle* explicitly identifies the Nanzhao rulers as a part of 'Jang, but 'Jang seems to encompass a broader region than just the Nanzhao polity (which in the early eighth century would have been restricted to the area south of the Dali plain). Brandon Dotson cites Stein's hypothesis that Ljang can refer to certain Qiang peoples rather than always indicating Nanzhao; Dotson 2009, 43 n.59 and Stein 1983, 216.

43 This temple is located in Beitangtian 北湯天, Fengyi 鳳儀, to the southeast of Lake Erhai.

44 For a fairly comprehensive list of these materials, see Yang 2008, 1:1–5.

45 There were a few Sanskrit texts in the Dharma Treasury Temple cache, including a Nāgarī syllabary that is mislabeled as a Tibetan text in Yang, Zhao, and Guo 2008.

46 The food distribution texts and Mahākāla text lack titles, so I follow Hou Chong's 侯冲 reconstructions. Reproductions of these manuscripts appear in Yang, Zhao, and Guo

(one of the food distribution texts lacks an esoteric framework). The remaining text unique to Dali is a sub-commentary on Amoghavajra's *Prajñāpāramitā Scripture for Humane Kings to Protect Their Countries* (Renwang huguo bore boluomiduo jing 仁王護國般若波羅蜜多經).[47] Though more research is needed on these texts—especially the *homa* consecration ritual—it is apparent that most of them draw from genres and texts from Tang and Song China, such as Water and Land 水陸 food distribution rituals and many translations by Amoghavajra. However, they also contain references to deities or forms of deities that were not part of Tang or Song Buddhism, or which only played peripheral roles therein. These deities include Mahākāla, who appears in seven forms in the *Ritual of the Bodhimaṇḍa of the Great Black God* (Dahei tianshen daochang yi 大黑天神道場儀), as well as various figures in the 1136 *Ritual Procedures for Inviting Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Vajra Beings, Etc.* (Zhufo pusa jingang deng qiqing yigui 諸佛菩薩金剛等啓請儀軌), a long compendium of mantras, *mudrās*, and *sādhanas* for a variety of powerful beings.

Fortunately, many of the deities that appear prominently in Dali-kingdom Buddhist texts also appear in Dali-kingdom Buddhist art. This art encompasses three main media: stone carvings at sites such as Stone Treasure Mountain and Boshenwahei 博什瓦黑 (in modern-day Liangzhou, Sichuan); small statues made mainly of metal from the pagoda caches; and the 1170s *Painting of Buddhist Images* (Fanxiang juan 梵像卷), sponsored by the Dali ruler Duan Zhixing 段智興 (r. 1172–1199), which includes a wide range of Buddhist figures along with images of Nanzhao and Dali rulers. These images include both figures that usually appear in esoteric or tantric contexts (e.g., *vidyārājas*) and figures that often appear in exoteric contexts (e.g., Śākyamuni). The distinctive deities from Dali-kingdom texts that also appear in Dali-kingdom visual art tend to fall into the former category, and these are the deities that relate most closely to the Dali-kingdom daggers.

3.2 *Daggers and Deities in Dali-Kingdom Texts and Art*

Kīla are mentioned in two Dali-kingdom ritual texts, the aforementioned *Ritual Procedures for Inviting Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Vajra Beings, Etc.* (hereafter, *Inviting Buddhas*) and the Ming copy of *Great Vajra Consecration Bodhimaṇḍa Rituals* (*Jingang da guanding daochang yi 金剛大灌頂道場儀). Like their Tang and Song counterparts, Dali texts translate *kīla* as 'stake' (*jue* 橛) or 'vajra stake'

2008, though the quality is often poor. For a description of each of these texts, see Hou 2006.

47 The subcommentary, *Compass for Protecting the Country* (Huguo sinan chao 護國司南抄), is based on Liangbi's 良賁 (717–777) commentary; see Hou 2016 and Bryson 2019. Though Amoghavajra's version of this scripture does place it in an esoteric framework, the subcommentary avoids any discussions of this content.

(*jingang jue* 金剛橛). However, Dali texts use different characters to transliterate *kīla* or *kīli* in mantras. Instead of the *kīli kīli* 枳里枳里 frequently used in Tang translations, *Inviting Buddhas* renders *kīli kīli* with the characters [扌+ 成] 嘌 [扌+ 成] 嘌.[48] Dali-kingdom manuscripts also use alternate translations of 'single-pronged vajra'. This suggests that even though Dali texts are written in Sinitic script—and draw directly from several Tang texts—they did not always rely on existing Sinitic translations and may have also incorporated textual sources from other regions, or even in other languages.[49]

Though the terminology differs slightly, references to *kīla* in Dali-kingdom ritual texts align with references to *kīla* in other Sinitic works. *Great Vajra Consecration Bodhimaṇḍa Rituals* prescribes the use of 25 *khadira*-wood stakes (Ch. *xiutuoluo mu jue* 休陁羅木橛) in its inventory. This is similar to the instruction to use 28 stakes in the MVS tradition.[50] *Inviting Buddhas* gives three versions of the following mantra in Sinitic transcription and/or Nāgarī script: *oṃ kīli kīli vajra bhūr bandha bandha hūṃ phaṭ*. This is virtually identical to the *kīla* mantra in Tang translations, but it uses the different characters noted above.[51] One of the sections that includes the *kīla* mantra is dedicated to the White Vajra (Bai jingang 白金剛), whose *maṇḍala* also includes the deity Hūṃkara Stake (Hourujialuo jue 吽入迦羅橛).[52]

The appearance of the term 'stake' in a name associated with this *maṇḍala* is significant for several reasons. First, this *maṇḍala* ties *Inviting Buddhas* to the *Painting of Buddhist Images*. Second, this *maṇḍala* is a triangular altar that is both described and illustrated in the ritual text, as given in Figure 7.5. Third, this *maṇḍala* relates to deities such as Heruka and Amṛtakuṇḍalin that are connected to the *phur pa* in Tibetan texts. Triangular altars are commonly used in Tibetan *phur pa* rites, which describe them as prisons for the harmful forces

48 For example, the Tang translation of the *Susiddhikara sūtra* transliterates *kīli kīli* as 枳里枳里. See *Suxidi jieluo jing*, T. v18n893p616b6–10. For the same mantra in *Inviting Buddhas*, see *Zhufo pusa jingang deng qiqing yigui* 94, 192, 241.

49 For discussions of borrowings from Tang esoteric works in the *Invitation Ritual Procedures for General Use*, see Huang 2017 and Bryson 2020, 39–53. For possible influence from the Sanskrit *Māyājāla tantras* on *Inviting Buddhas*, see Kawasaki 2008, 95, 98.

50 See *Dapiluzhena chengfo jing shu*, T. v39n1796p644c4–14.

51 In studying *Inviting Buddhas* I mainly work from the digital color images that Hou Chong generously shared with me, and from the transcription of the text that Huang Huang 黃璜 and Hou Chong shared with me. The abbreviated version of this mantra is rendered with the following characters: 唵[扌+ 成]嘌[扌+ 成]嘌婆[口 + 嵯] 毗咽云云. The mantra only appears in its full form once, in the section on Vajrayakṣa (aka Mahākāla), and only in Nāgarī script; its third and final appearance is in the section on the 'White Vajra' 白金剛, where it is highly abbreviated. See *Zhufo pusa jingang deng qiqing yigui* 94, 192, 241.

52 The Nāgarī rendering of this figure's name appear to be Vajra-ucaṃ, but this may be a corruption.

targeted in the ritual. The Dali-kingdom ritual text does not explicitly state this, but it does call for the practitioner to manifest greed, anger, and ignorance in identifying as the three vajra beings Heruka, Hūṃkara, and Kuṇḍalin, and then to transform those three poisons into awareness of true emptiness.[53] As such, it aligns with some of the themes in Tibetan *phur pa* ritual.

An identical triangular altar appears in the *Painting of Buddhist Images*, where it forms the foundation upon which stands a wrathful deity with nine faces, eighteen arms, and three legs, as well as black wing feathers and tailfeathers peeking out behind his many limbs and implements, as seen in Figure 7.6.[54] This is a deity that Dali texts call 'Great King Raven Sage' 烏賢大王. Though several of his features overlap with known figures, he appears to

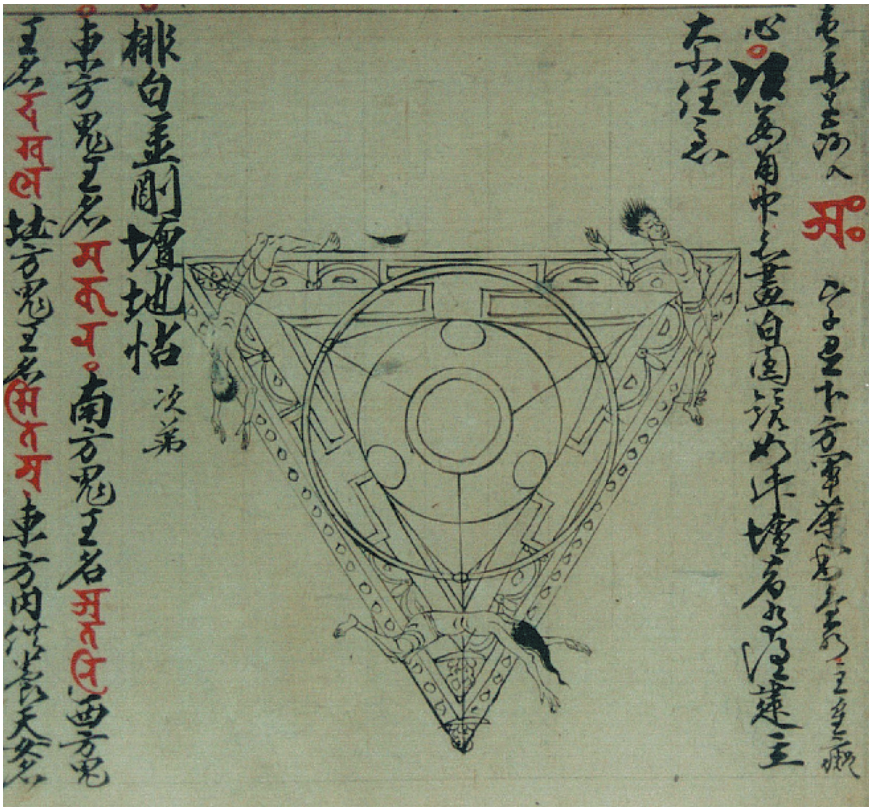


FIGURE 7.5 Detail of the altar illustration from *Inviting Buddhas* (1136)

53 *Zhufo pusa jingang deng qiqing yigui* 213–14.

54 Béla Kelényi has identified five metal statues of a similar deity from the Dali kingdom, but none of these have wings, Kelényi 2015.



FIGURE 7.6 Depiction of winged Heruka or Vajrakīla from *Painting of Buddhist Images* (1170s)

be a distinctive member of the Dali Buddhist pantheon.[55] Dali-kingdom texts present the Great King Raven Sage as the synthesis of the Three Vajra Beings Hūṃkara (aka Trailokyavijaya), Kuṇḍalin, and Heruka (aka Yamāntaka).[56] In the *Painting of Buddhist Images*, this figure appears as a *heruka* deity with *garuḍa* features.[57] Winged *heruka* deities with *garuḍa* connections appear in the Nyingma school, and *heruka* deities are closely associated with *phur pa* practices in that school as well. While these deities usually have three heads, six arms, and four legs, there are some *garuḍa* deities with nine heads and eighteen arms (though they still have four legs).[58] The *garuḍa* and *heruka* characteristics of this figure also connect Dali-kingdom texts and art to the primary focus of this investigation: the Dali daggers.

3.3 *Dali Daggers*

Daggers from Dali occasionally pop up in catalogues of auctions or museum exhibits, but few scholars have paid much attention to them. Albert Lutz gave an overview of these objects in which he remarked on their potential to change understandings of the *phur pa*'s origins. Lutz suggested that Dali *phur pa* support the theory that these objects originated in India, and then spread north and east.[59] Lutz was correct in assessing the Dali daggers' significance for understanding the *phur pa*, and he was probably also correct in identifying India as their source.

It is difficult to determine the total number of daggers from the Thousand-League Pagoda because they are included in the excavation report's 'vajra pestle' category, which contained 213 objects. Of these 213 vajra pestles, most were multi-pronged, double-headed vajra pestles attached to a ring in the center, and some were single-pronged vajras (also attached to rings).[60] I know of eight Dali-kingdom *phur pa*-style daggers, but there are undoubtedly more examples in private collections and museums outside Yunnan.[61] They range

55 Scholars had previously ventured various identifications of this figure, including Mahākāla, Trailokyavijaya, and the Garuḍa king, but Huang Huang (drawing on the work of Yan Xue and Liu Guowei) has shown that this is another deity. See Huang 2022, Yan 2012, Liu 2014.

56 In addition to *Inviting Buddhas*, both *Great Vajra Consecration Bodhimaṇḍa Rituals* and the esoteric food-distribution text *Bodhimaṇḍa Rituals for Offering Widely without Restriction* (Guangshi wuzhe daochang yi 廣施無遮道場儀) describe Great King Raven Sage this way.

57 Heruka deities constitute a class of wrathful gods considered to be forms of Śiva and associated with cremation grounds.

58 Cantwell and Mayer 2015, 159–60.

59 Lutz 1991, 221.

60 Yunnan sheng wenwu gongzuodui 1981, 258–59.

61 There also appear to be some Dali daggers of dubious provenance, so I treat as legitimate only those daggers in museum collections and sold through reputable auction houses. Questionable daggers include those that resemble newer copies of known Dali-kingdom

in length from 11 cm to 19.1 cm, and are made of copper, bronze, gilt bronze, and iron.

The rings attached to all Dali-kingdom daggers, single-pronged vajras, and most multi-pronged vajras, are these objects' most consistent feature. Though some metal statues of wrathful figures like Vajrapāṇi show the deities wielding hand-held daggers, no images indicate how people wore or used these rings in the Dali kingdom.[62] Similarities between the multi-pronged vajra rings and a smaller gold ring from eighth–tenth-century Java with a double five-pronged vajra bezel suggest a common practice of wearing vajras, probably for protection.[63] Tenth-century Java is also the source of a bronze bell (*ghaṇṭā*) with a five-pronged vajra finial separated from the bell by a finger ring.[64] Similar objects from later periods have been found in the Himalayas, and Jeff Watt notes that the rings are meant to aid ritual masters in carrying out complex sequences.[65] The size of some of the Dali-kingdom daggers would make them cumbersome to wear on the fingers for a passive apotropaic function, so it seems more likely that they were either worn on the finger during ritual activity or strung on a piece of cloth (e.g., a belt) for protective purposes. In fact, Nicole Grimaud and Patrick Grimaud hypothesize that the Dali-kingdom dagger-rings are a type of amulet known as *thokcha* (T. *thog lcags*) in Tibetan.[66] One conclusion that can be drawn from the rings is that these daggers could not be easily rolled between the palms in the manner of Himalayan *phur pa* ritual, which suggests that Dali daggers, like the early sandalwood and Nepalese *phur pa* with deity handles, functioned more as devotional objects than ritual objects. In addition to the rings, another distinctive feature of Dali-kingdom daggers is the *mudrā* that almost all the deities make.[67] None of the Himalayan *phur pa* that I have seen include this kind of *mudrā*; usually the deities on the top half of the dagger are depicted in union with their consort and have many sets of arms, with the main pair of hands holding a *phur pa*.

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objects and those that appear to randomly combine elements from known Dali-kingdom objects.

62 See for example the gilt bronze statues identified as Vidyārājas in Lutz 1991, 199 (Cat. 65) and 201 (Cat. 66). These statues are 15 and 10.5 cm tall, respectively, and belong to the collection of the Yunnan Province Museum.

63 This ring is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art: 1998.544.289. It is 2.5 cm high, 3.5 cm wide, and 1.3 cm deep.

64 The bell is highly ornamented, and between the bell and the ring are four faces; each of these design elements, including the ring and the vajra finial, is joined by a double-lotus motif. This object is in the collection of the British Museum: 1859,1228.116.

65 Watt 2021.

66 Grimaud and Grimaud 2017, 428–31.

67 Two of the deities make the *bodhyagrī* (or 'wisdom fist' 智拳) *mudrā*, two make the *abhiṣeka mudrā*, and one makes the *vajrahūṃkara mudrā*.

An overview of three Dali-kingdom daggers will further illustrate how they compare to their Himalayan counterparts. The example that most closely resembles a Himalayan *phur pa* is the only Dali-kingdom *phur pa*-style dagger to just display the deity's head.[68] This bronze dagger is 16.3 cm long, with a three-faceted blade below a ring of beads topped with a lotus blossom. The wrathful, three-faced deity sits above the lotus blossom and a serpent ring extends from between the two faces on the sides. Its faces each have three eyes, and the main face bares upturned fangs. Just like the *phur pa* that John Huntington discusses, the deity's three faces make slightly different—but always wrathful—expressions. Above the deity's head is another lotus blossom that supports the five-pronged vajra finial. Unlike other Dali-kingdom examples, this vajra is larger than the deity's head. Its main face is also larger than the two side faces, which is necessary to accommodate the ring. Albert Lutz identified this figure as a *vidyārāja* (*mingwang* 明王), and its face indeed shares a family resemblance to the eight *vidyāraja* statues in Cave 6 of Stone Treasure Mountain, even if no further identification is possible.[69] Though I do not know of any Himalayan *phur pa* that correspond perfectly to this dagger, Huntington's category of vajra-topped *phur pa* comes the closest, particularly the subtype with double lotus handles.[70]

A more representative example of Dali-kingdom daggers is the 12.7 cm long bronze dagger with a benign deity making the *bodhyagrī mudrā*, a five-pronged vajra atop the deity's crown, and a serpentine ring attached to the back.[71] As in the previous example, a lotus blossom ferrule separates the deity above from the blade below. Unlike wrathful dagger deities, this figure wears jewelry rather than skulls and snakes. Two ribbons flutter up from each side of the tall crown, which resembles several crowns depicted in the *Painting of Buddhist Images* (and other contemporaneous bodhisattva images).[72] The *bodhyagrī mudrā* led Lutz to identify this figure as Vairocana.[73] Given that the STTS describes Vairocana making the *bodhyagrī mudrā* and wearing a jeweled crown, Lutz's identification appears to be correct.[74]

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68 This dagger is held in the Yunnan Province Museum and reproduced in black and white in Lutz 1991, 220 (Cat. 80). It also no. 7969 in the Himalayan Art Resources database; see https://www.himalayanart.org/items/7969 (accessed 14 July, 2022).

69 For images of these figures, see Li 1999, 78–89.

70 Huntington 1975, 34–37.

71 This dagger is held in the Yunnan Province Museum and reproduced in black and white in Lutz 1991, 220 (Cat. 79).

72 See Li 1982, 100 frame 97 (Avalokiteśvara of Mt. Potalaka); 114 frames 109 (Vasudhārā) and 111 (Vajragarbha).

73 Lutz 1991, 221.

74 *Jingangding yuqie zhong luechu niansong jing* T. v18n866p242b6–11. Heller 2010, 60.

Another Dali-kingdom dagger features a wrathful deity who resembles Dali-kingdom images of Mahākāla, as given in Figure 7.7. This is the only iron dagger I know of from the Dali kingdom; it is 15.6 cm long and has apertures along each of the three blades. The deity's torso rises from the lotus blossom atop the blade. He wears a sash and necklace of skulls, and his hands appear to make the *abhiṣeka mudrā* in which the thumb and index fingers are pressed together, pointing up, while the remaining fingers interlace. His expression is



FIGURE 7.7 Dali-kingdom dagger made of iron

a grimace, and he appears to wear a tall crown instead of a five-pronged vajra. Like other Dali-kingdom daggers, a ring is affixed to the back, but it does not appear to be a serpent. This dagger's details are cruder than some of the other Dali-kingdom daggers, and the face has such shallow features it looks flat from the side. Considering how few iron statues survive from the Dali kingdom, perhaps artists were not as skilled with this medium (compared to bronze).

The deity's resemblance to Dali-kingdom Mahākāla images lies in its oval-shaped, bearded face and skull adornments. Several forms of Mahākāla appear in the *Painting of Buddhist Images*, and they all share these features, as do the statues of the god at Stone Treasure Mountain and elsewhere.[75] This connection also makes sense given the important role Mahākāla played in Dali-kingdom Buddhism: he enjoyed his own ritual text, and he features prominently in *Inviting Buddhas.* Scholars of Himalayan *phur pa* have debated Mahākāla's role in that region's iconography: earlier scholars such as Siegbert Hummel and Georgette Meredith identified Mahākāla as a *phur pa* deity, but Huntington challenged this identification.[76] Dali-kingdom examples suggest that even if Mahākāla was not a prominent figure in early Himalayan *phur pa* objects, he may have played an important role in the Dali-kingdom dagger tradition.

Each of the additional daggers purportedly from the Dali kingdom has its own distinguishing features, such as a benign expression, *garuḍa* form, or rounded blade. As a group, they most closely resemble the early sandalwood dagger and the Nepalese *phur pa*. The same iconographic conventions from eighth- to ninth-century Magadha that inspired Nepalese art may also have been known to people in Dali, given that the Southern Silk Road connected these sites. The similarities between the Dali-kingdom daggers and these other examples supports the theory that early daggers did not resemble the *phur pa* style that became dominant in Tibetan Buddhism.

4 Daggers on the Southern Silk Road

Dali-kingdom daggers demonstrate the importance of material culture in the transmission of Buddhism along the various Silk Roads. Textual evidence, while helpful, cannot by itself answer questions about how people adapted the *kīla* to different contexts. Some scholarship on Dali-kingdom Buddhism posits a sole transmission from Tang or Song China based on the preponderance of Sinitic texts in Dali, but this argument does not address the visual and material dimensions of Buddhism in the Dali kingdom, nor does it adequately address texts

75 See especially Li 1982, 119 frame 124.

76 Meredith 1967, 244–45, Hummel 1997, 23, and Huntington 1975, 32.

from Dali that do not appear in Tang or Song Buddhism. The visual and material culture of the Dali kingdom may lack written genealogies, but they embody another kind of record. Dali-kingdom daggers attest to their own routes of transmission when considered alongside similar objects and textual evidence.

Given the dearth of people in the Dali region who could read Sanskrit or Tibetan, it is unlikely that texts related to *kīla* / *phur pa* had an impact on the Dali-kingdom daggers. Instead, it seems that people in Dali encountered the physical object and made sense of it in relation to their own oral, textual, and material traditions. There are a few different possible routes through which Dali-kingdom Buddhists encountered the physical objects: first, the Southern Silk Road connecting Dali to Pāla India (i.e., Magadha); second, the 'Old Tea and Horse Road' connecting Dali to Khams.[77] Each of these theories has strengths and weaknesses. The India theory is supported by the influence of Pāla Indian iconography in Dali-kingdom art, such as Mahākāla images that resemble statues of the god from Bihar.[78] However, the absence of extant *phur pa* and winged Heruka images from India raise doubts about this possibility. Conversely, the Tibet theory is supported by the presence of both *phur pa* objects and winged Heruka images in Tibet, as well as the prevalence of Tibetan Buddhism and Bön (including *phur pa* ritual) among the Naxi people who live just north of the Dali region.[79] However, this theory is challenged by the many differences between Tibetan *phur pa* and Dali daggers, the absence of clear Tibetan influence on other aspects of Dali-kingdom Buddhism, and the lack of evidence to show that the Naxi people (or earlier groups) were using *phur pa* at this time.

Fortunately, discoveries of two *phur pa*-style bronze daggers in Java suggest an answer. Though these daggers' dates and precise sites of discovery are unknown, they resemble the Dali-kingdom daggers more closely than any other extant examples.[80] F. D. K. Bosch published a photograph and brief analysis of one such dagger in the 1930s, as seen in Figure 7.8. He identified the deity that forms the dagger's top half as Hayagrīva, though he does not explain the reason for this identification.[81] This 17 cm long dagger is somewhat distinctive in having a quadrangular instead of a triangular blade and in featuring a deity with

77 An additional theory is that the daggers developed in Dali-kingdom Buddhism and then spread elsewhere, but this is not particularly convincing due to the lack of dagger-related texts from the region compared to India and Tibet.

78 Bryson 2017, 423.

79 Meredith included Naxi (as Na-khi) examples in her study of *phur pa*, but these examples are too late to consider in relation to the Dali-kingdom materials, Meredith 1967, 248–49.

80 Bautze-Picron 2014, 115 n.43.

81 Bosch 1934, 118–19.



FIGURE 7.8 Javanese dagger made of bronze

only one face instead of three, but these variations appear in Himalayan and Dali examples as well. In fact, this dagger strongly resembles the 12.7 cm long bronze dagger with a benign deity making the *bodhyagrī mudrā* from the Dali kingdom.[82]

82 See Lutz 1991, 220 (Cat. 79).

Itō Naoko and Michel Gauvain have studied a very similar bronze dagger from eighth- to tenth-century central Java that is now housed in the Karasan Historical Antiquities Museum. Itō and Gauvain identify the figure as Trailokyavijaya from the god's distinctive *mudrā*. This dagger is 10.6 cm tall and features the deity's upper body with a dagger lower body. A row of beads separates the object's two halves. The deity sports a high hairstyle topped with a skull crown, and wears earrings, necklaces, armlets, and bracelets. Its wrathful expression, with glaring eyes and bared fangs, fits the mien of most dagger deities. Trailokyavijaya's *mudrā* is formed by the deity crossing its wrists, with the little fingers hooked together and the index fingers extended, the left hand in front of the right. As in the other example, the syllable *hūṃ* is also inscribed on this dagger, but in the front instead of the back.[83]

The Javanese daggers' length places them within the size range of Dali-kingdom daggers, though the former do not include a ring attachment. When we consider Huntington's earliest known Himalayan dagger alongside the *phur pa*-style Dali-kingdom daggers and Javanese daggers we see a fairly strong resemblance. Bosch cited the first Javanese dagger as proof that *phur pa* originated in India, not Tibet. Indeed, the Javanese daggers provide further support for the esoteric Buddhist transmission network between northeastern India and Java, as well documented by scholars such as Claudine Bautze-Picron and Andrea Acri.

Northeastern India, specifically the Pāla territory that is now Bengal and Bihar, was a node on routes connected to both Dali and Java. Based on the form of the earliest Himalayan daggers, Dali daggers, and the two examples from Java, it seems most likely that travelers brought similar objects from northeastern India to Java and to Dali. These daggers featuring deity torsos above the blade seem to be the earliest examples of the *kīla* or *phur pa*. They conform to early Tibetan prescriptions for depicting Vajrakīla, and thus suggest two possibilities: first, the earliest *kīla* or *phur pa* made of metal (vs. wood) may have been deity daggers, perhaps out of reverence for the deities depicted therein; second, people in Dali and Java might have found the deity daggers more legible than more abstract forms based on Sanskrit and Tibetan texts.

Most studies of the Southern Silk Road have focused on the circulation of commodities such as horses, silver, cowries, and tea. Dali-kingdom daggers show that Buddhist material and visual culture also circulated along these understudied routes, which introduces new possibilities for understanding

83 Gauvain 2022, 122 and Itō 2002, 26 fig. 14, 27.

Buddhist transmission in the middle period of *c.* 800–1400. The Northern Silk Road and Maritime Silk Roads remain critical channels for this transmission, but further studies of the Southern Silk Road may yield still more discoveries of Buddhist texts, images, and objects.

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CHAPTER 8

Reconsidering Stein Painting 14 of the Jinshan Kingdom in Tenth-Century Dunhuang

Luk Yu-ping

Abstract

Stein painting 14 (Ch.liv.006) stands out among paintings that survive from the so-called 'Library Cave' of Dunhuang 敦煌 due to the multiple inscriptions on its front and back, as well as the depiction of two figures next to Avalokiteśvara that are described as posthumous portraits in the inscriptions. The painting is also notable for being dating to the tenth year of the Tianfu 天復 reign era (910), which is a Tang 唐 dynasty (618–907) reign title. In the past, this has been interpreted as an indication of the isolation of Dunhuang from China proper in that it was unaware of the news of the collapse of the Tang dynasty in 907. This chapter reconsiders both the painting's composition and its inscriptions to further understand the connection between the figures as well as the memorial function of the painting. It challenges the interpretation that the painting represents the isolation of Dunhuang and instead reconsiders the image as an expression of regional identity in the context of the short-lived Jinshan 金山 kingdom in tenth-century Dunhuang.

The discovery of a cache of manuscripts, paintings, textiles, prints, and other objects from the Library Cave at the Mogao Caves 莫高窟, Dunhuang 敦煌 in 1900 is one of the most significant archaeological finds in China. This material, now kept in different collections, offers us a window into the world of the oasis city of Dunhuang and its neighbours prior to the early eleventh century when Cave 17 was sealed. The British Museum has over 400 complete and fragmented pieces of silk and paper paintings from the site that were brought to London by M. Aurel Stein (1862–1943). Through the efforts of many scholars, we now have a relatively good idea of the formats, stylistic features, subject matter, and overall development of these paintings, which largely date from the eighth to the late tenth centuries.[1] Studies have also offered insights into their production

1 For a detailed overview of the collection at the British Museum, see Whitfield 1982–1985.

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methods, as well as their religious and broader social significance. However, there is still more work to be done to further understand individual paintings in detail and in relation to the wider regional context. Recognition of the Guiyijun 歸義軍 (Return to Allegiance Circuit, 851–*c.* mid-eleventh century) as a culturally distinct period in Dunhuang offers new perspectives on the many works from Cave 17 that date to this period.[2] One of these is a painting with the museum number 1919,0101,0.14 (Ch.liv.006), referred to throughout as Stein painting 14, which will be focus of this chapter (Figure 8.1).

Measuring 77 cm by 48.90 cm, Stein painting 14 depicts the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (Guanyin 觀音) in the centre facing forward and flanked by two figures – a nun on the left and a young man on the right. There are three inscribed cartouches on the front of the painting.[3] The inscription in the green



FIGURE 8.1 Stein painting 14 'Avalokiteśvara with Yanhui and Zhang Youcheng' from Dunhuang and dated to 910

2 On this view of the Guiyijun, see Galambos 2020.

3 For transcriptions and translations of the inscriptions, see Waley 1931, 27 and Adamek 2005, 156–62. This is also available in the British Museum's online collection: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_1919-0101-0-14

cartouche on the top right records several wishes, including the salvation of individuals, for which the painting was made in offering to Avalokiteśvara. The short inscription in the white cartouche directly below it gives the name of the male youth, while the longer inscription on the left above the nun records a prayer to the bodhisattva written in verse and provides the date for when the painting was completed (Figure 8.2). Notably, the inscriptions on the left and right of the painting are written in two different directions, moving out from the centre. The painting also carries two additional inscriptions written on paper that have been pasted on the back of the painting (Figure 8.3). These inscriptions will be discussed further below. The painting is damaged along its edges, but otherwise it is preserved in remarkably good condition.[4] It has been mounted onto a framed panel since entering the British Museum collection.

Stein painting 14 is one of very few paintings from Cave 17 that has written text clearly identifying the figures depicted in it as portraits (*maozhen* 貌真, 'depicting the true likeness'). Yet, is there any noticeable difference between the way these figures are portrayed compared to generic donor figures shown venerating buddhas and bodhisattvas in Dunhuang portable paintings? What implications

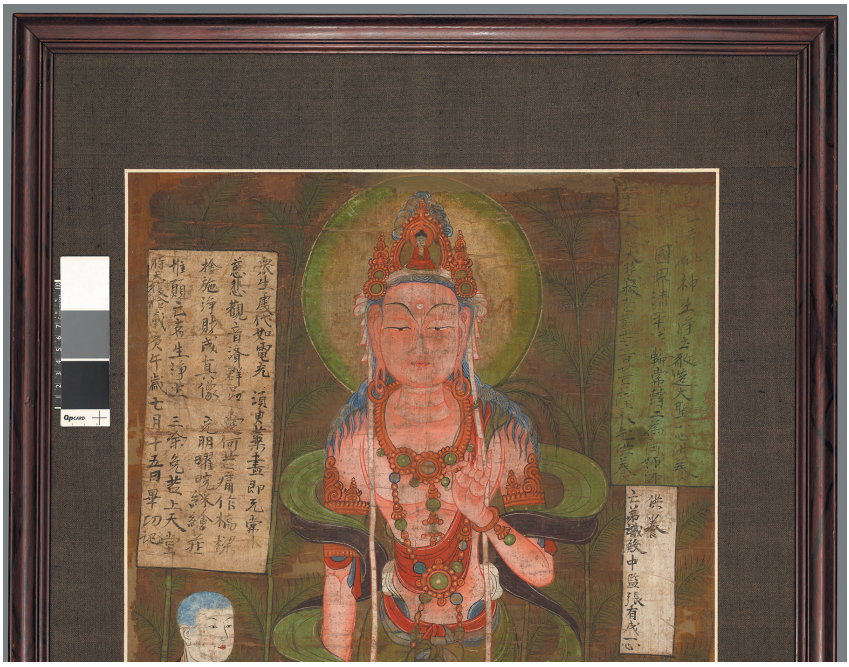


FIGURE 8.2 Detail of Stein painting 14 showing inscriptions on the front

4 This can be clearly seen in the monochrome image reproduced in Stein 1921, pl. LXIX.

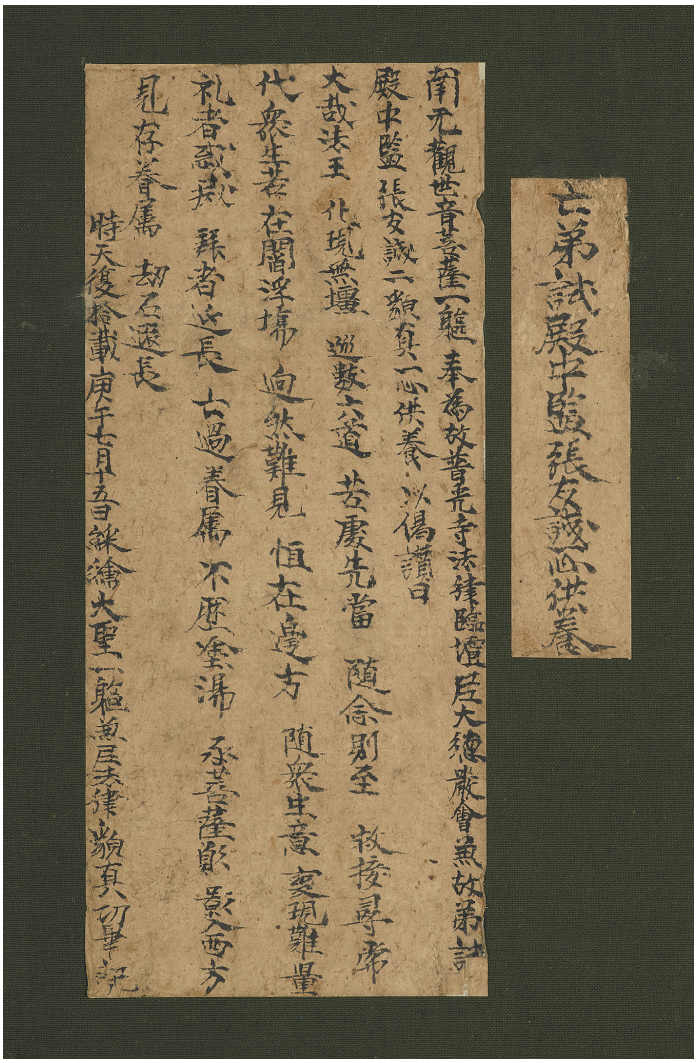


FIGURE 8.3 Detail of Stein painting 14 showing inscriptions on the back

do the identification of these figures as 'portraits' have for understanding the function of this painting? Related to this question is whom the painting served and the relationships that it embodied. Although the inscriptions on the painting provide the names and occupations of the nun and the young man depicted, their connection to each other and to the unnamed patron(s) who commissioned the work remains unclear. A closer reading of the inscriptions can provide further information that clarifies this network of relationships.

Another important feature of Stein painting 14 is its date. The painting uses the Tianfu 天復 reign era (901–904) of the Tang 唐 dynasty (618–907) some years after the reign had ended and the whole dynasty had fallen. Previous scholarship has interpreted this as evidence of Dunhuang's isolation from China proper, so much so that the ruling Guiyijun was unaware of the news for some time.[5] However, more recent studies have shown that people in Dunhuang were not ignorant of the fall of the Tang dynasty. Moreover, the dating of Stein painting 14 locates it within the period, or at least the imminent establishment, of the short-lived 'Golden Mountain Kingdom of Western Han' (Xihan Jinshan guo 西漢金山國, *c.* 909/910–911/914), that emerged under the Guiyijun. Rather than a work that reflects cultural isolation, this paper argues that Stein painting 14 captures Dunhuang's growing sense of regional identity which was made evident in the attempt to establish the Kingdom of Jinshan.

1 'Depicting the True Likeness'

In the centre of Stein painting 14 is the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, recognisable by his headdress with a small image of the Buddha Amitābha, as well as the willow branch and water vessel that he carries. Beside him are two smaller pious figures who are turned towards him in three-quarter view — the nun on the left holds an incense burner and the young man on the right carries a dish with a lotus flower. The inscriptions on the painting identify the nun as Yanhui 嚴會 and the young man as Zhang Youcheng 張有成, also written as 張友誠. They are referred to as *gu* 故 and *wang* 亡 in the inscriptions, indicating that they were both deceased at the time the painting was produced.

The appearance of Yanhui and Zhang Youcheng are comparable to donor figures (*gongyangren* 供養人) that may be depicted seated or standing in veneration of the main deity in Dunhuang portable paintings.[6] Typically, they are shown below the deity in a separate band or in small scale at the feet of the deity. Donor figures tend to be generic in their appearance. Similarly, Yanhui and Zhang Youcheng do not appear to have individualised facial features. Yet, the inscriptions on the back of Stein painting 14 specifically describes the images of Yanhui and Zhang Youcheng as *maozhen*. *Mao* 貌 means 'appearance', while *zhen* 真 means 'true'. Here *mao* is used as a verb in the sense of

5 Whitfield 1982–1985, 2:301.

6 On donor figures in Dunhuang portable paintings, see Zhang 2007 and other references throughout this chapter.

'depicting the true likeness'.[7] This term, also written as *miaozhen* 邈真, can be found in Dunhuang manuscripts, namely in ninety-some 'eulogies on depicting the true likeness' (*miaozhen zan* 邈真讚), which refer to portraits that accompanied eulogies of the deceased.[8] In other words, the images of Yanhui and Zhang Youcheng are identified as portraits.

Judging by Stein painting 14, the difference between *miaozhen* and donor figures is subtle. One difference may be the greater care and attention that the painter paid to the details of the figures, such as their costumes.[9] Another is the unusually large size of Yanhui and Zhang Youcheng and their proximity to the central bodhisattva. They share the same body of water that is represented by repeated swirling lines. In other portable paintings from Cave 17, a clear gap or barrier is kept between the donor figures and the central bodhisattva, even if the donor figures are large and close to the deity. For instance, in MG 17665, Avalokiteśvara is flanked by a relatively large kneeling nun and a man in official clothing, but they are depicted on land while the bodhisattva is standing on a lotus emerging from water. Wendi Adamek has observed that Yanhui and Zhang Youcheng's relative size and positioning make them appear like attendants to the bodhisattva, giving 'the impression that the deceased have immediate access to the bodhisattva, which in turn serves to bring the viewer closer to Avalokiteśvara…'[10] This suggests that the figures function as mediators in the afterlife between the bodhisattva and living family members, which Adamek argues '[reflects] something of the older, pre-Buddhist belief in deceased ancestors as mediators for living family'.[11] The wish to extend the benefit generated by the painting to the living is expressed at the end of the inscription located on the back of the work, which prays for the longevity of living relatives.

Adamek's discussion can be related to the status of the Yanhui's and Zhang Youcheng's images as *miaozhen* or portraits of the deceased. *Miaozhen* has religious connotations that distinguishes it from other contemporary terms for portraiture, such as *xiezhen* 寫真 ('to make a true likeness'). It is a term that can refer to images of buddhas and bodhisattvas in addition to portraits of human individuals.[12] Several inscribed paintings from Cave 17 refer to the image of the central bodhisattva as *miaozhen*, such as MG 17659 in the Musée Guimet, Paris,

7 Jiang 1962, 55–56.

8 For transcriptions and notes on these eulogies, see Zheng and Zheng 2019. For the translation of *zhen* in relation to portraiture, I have followed Ching 2016.

9 Whitfield 1982–1985, 2:301; Adamek 2005, 156–62.

10 Adamek 2005, 161.

11 Adamek 2005, 162.

12 Zheng 2019, 15.

where the inscription reads 'Record of merit, with preface, for reverently painting the Great Compassionate Bodhisattva tableau transformation, depicting the true image' 敬繪大悲菩薩鋪變邈真功德記並序 and goes on to describe the image looked 'as though it were alive' (*sihuo* 似活).[13] Indeed, Huaiyu Chen points out that *miaozhen* is a result of the Buddhist transformation of earlier traditions of portraiture and portrait eulogies in China and that the emphasis on 'true likeness' may be related to Buddhist practices of visualisation.[14] This conceptual correspondence between portraits of the deceased figures and the bodhisattva is suggested in Stein painting 14 by its reference to the image of Avalokiteśvara as a 'true image' (*zhenxiang* 真像), echoing the 'depicting the true likeness' of the donor figures.

Furthermore, surviving eulogies, *miaozhen zan*, provide some evidence of the contexts in which such images were displayed. Zheng Yi 鄭弋 defines *miaozhen* as 'portraits of the deceased for offering sacrifices'.[15] He highlights three categories of *miaozhen* according to the sites or circumstances in which they appear: (1) in funeral and mortuary rites, such as placed on a vehicle in a funeral procession; (2) in spaces for worship and ritual offerings, such as in a family or temple hall, i.e., *zhentang* 真堂 or *yingtang* 影堂; and (3) in family cave shrines in the form of wall paintings or sculptures.[16] Given that Stein painting 14 depicts a group with a bodhisattva in the centre, rather than focusing on one individual, it seems more than likely that it was intended for display and veneration in a family or temple hall. This corresponds with the dating of the painting given in the inscription, which is the fifteenth day of the seventh month of 910. This was the day of the Ghost Festival, *Yulanpenhui* 盂蘭盆會, when families and the monastic community prayed, made donations and offerings, and performed rituals for ancestors, so that the deceased may enjoy a better rebirth or salvation from purgatory hell.[17] In Stein painting 14, the wish for the deceased to reach paradise in the afterlife through the power of Avalokiteśvara is clearly expressed in the inscriptions. For instance, the inscription above Yanhui states: 'I pray that the dead may be born in the Pure Land, that they escape the pain of the Three Ways and mount to the Heavenly Halls'.[18]

13 Transcribed in Zheng and Zheng 2019, 3:1623–26.

14 Chen 2017.

15 Zheng 2019, 3: 祭祀用的死者肖像。

16 Zheng 2019, 7–8; see also Jiang 1996, 77–86 and Zheng 2006.

17 On the Ghost Festival in medieval China, see Teiser 1996.

18 惟願亡者生净土，三塗免苦上天堂。Translation from Adamek 2005, 158, which was adapted from Waley 1931, 27.

Interestingly, although Yanhui and Zhang Youcheng appear like attendants to Avalokiteśvara in Stein painting 14, the depiction of the bodhisattva with followers or assistants was not firmly established in Dunhuang paintings when this work was produced in the early tenth century. While Avalokiteśvara in tantric form started to appear in the centre of groups joined by other heavenly beings in Dunhuang paintings from the early Tang dynasty, the attending heavenly beings in these compositions could be as large as Avalokiteśvara.[19] Depictions of the bodhisattva flanked by smaller, youthful recorders of good and bad deeds holding scrolls, i.e., the *shan tongzi* 善童子 and *e tongzi* 惡童子, date later in the tenth century and post-date Stein painting 14, such as Stein painting 28 which is dated to around 926–975, or Stein painting 54 dated to 983. A variation of this theme where Avalokiteśvara is attended by a boy and a girl, usually identified as Sudhana and the Dragon Princess, only appeared in Buddhist art from the twelfth century onwards.[20]

While this does not impact on Adamek's insightful observation that the figures in Stein painting 14 function as mediators in the afterlife, the pictorial model for this arrangement needs to be located elsewhere. Instead of comparing it to later images of the bodhisattva with attendants, the composition of Stein painting 14 may be related to other depictions of the deceased already in existence in the ninth century known as paintings of the Guiding Bodhisattva (Yinlu pusa 引路菩薩). In these compositions, a bodhisattva holding a banner guides the soul of the deceased to paradise. Both figures stand on the same cloud, as seen in Stein painting 47 that has been dated to the second half of the ninth century.[21] Although the Guiding Bodhisattva is not a clearly specified bodhisattva, there are instances where Avalokiteśvara takes on this role, as seen in Stein painting 46 where the deity has a prominent buddha image in his headdress.[22] This is also observable in a painting of this subject matter in the Harvard Art Museums but, in this case, the Guiding Bodhisattva is facing the front flanked by a man and a woman in three-quarter view (Fig. 8.4). All are standing on the same cloud in an arrangement similar to Stein painting 14. These comparisons suggest the painter of Stein painting 14 most likely referred to existing compositions that represented the deceased, which would have been appropriate for the memorial ritual purpose of the painting.

19 Shi 2016, 161 and 218.

20 Yü 1994, 163.

21 On the Guiding Bodhisattva, see Ng 2007, 158–60.

22 Ng 2007, 159.



FIGURE 8.4 Silk banner 'Avalokiteśvara Attended by Two Donors' from Dunhuang dated *c.* the ninth century

2 Yanhui and Zhang Youcheng

The inscriptions in Stein painting 14 not only record the names of Yanhui and Zhang Youcheng, but also their occupations and social positions. Zhang Youcheng was a Probationary Chamberlain (*shi dianzhongjian* 試殿中監). In the Tang-dynasty bureaucracy, *dianzhongjian* 殿中監 refers to the director of the palace administration.[23] Whether this applies to the Guiyijun bureaucracy is not known, but the nature of the role ought to involve looking after the ruler and his place of residence. A painting from Cave 17 in the Palace Museum, Beijing, dated to the tenth century, shows a very similar attendant holding a fan and a cloth-wrapped bundle standing behind a distinguished-looking male devotee who is venerating the white-robed Avalokiteśvara.[24] This may give some indication about the nature of this official role.

The nun Yanhui has the title *Falü lintan ni dade* 法律臨壇尼大德 of the Puguang Monastery 普光寺. *Falü* 法律 was a high-ranking Buddhist official title that was established under the latter part of the Tibetan period in Dunhuang (*c.* 800–848). It continued to be used in the Guiyijun period but was demoted to the lowest rank in the Buddhist bureaucracy.[25] Nevertheless, not many nuns in the historical records are known to have this title, which likely remained highly esteemed.[26] *Lintan dade* 臨壇大德 refers to Buddhists (in this case a nun or *ni* 尼) who were qualified to give ordinations. The prestige of this title can be observed in manuscript P.3556, which records the eulogies accompanying the portraits of three deceased nuns. All three nuns were relatives of important historical figures of Dunhuang and all had *lintan dade* in their titles.[27] One of them was the granddaughter of Zhang Yichao 張議潮 (851–867) who overturned Tibetan rule and was the founder of the Guiyijun.[28] Like Yanhui, she was also a nun of the Puguang Monastery. Located in the northwest of the city, the Puguang Monastery was one of five nunneries in Dunhuang from the latter part of the eighth century.[29] According to manuscript S.2575, it was

23 Hucker 1985, 502.

24 Image available on the Palace Museum website: https://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/paint/230775.html (accessed December 2022).

25 Yang 2009, 16, citing Chikusa 1961.

26 Yang 2009, 16.

27 These titles were *Dachengsi falüni lintan cizi dade shamen siyi* 大乘寺法律尼臨壇賜紫大德沙門厶乙, *Puguangsi falüni lintan dade shamen qingjingjie* 普光寺法律尼臨壇大德沙門清淨戒, *Lingxiusi lini lintan dade shamen Zhangshi xianghao Jiezhu* 靈修寺梨尼臨壇大德沙門張氏香號戒珠.

28 Yang 2009, 13; Li 1988, 79.

29 Li 1988, 79.

the site of ordination (*fangdeng daochang* 方等道場) in the year 929.[30] Apart from the granddaughter of Zhang Yichao, other women from notable clans in the region were nuns of the Puguang Monastery, such as the elder sister and daughter of Zhang Huaiqing 張淮慶 (act. early tenth century), who was married to the military commissioner Cao Yijin's 曹議金 (914–935) younger sister.[31] All of this suggests that Yanhui also came from an important clan, most likely the ruling Zhang family.[32]

While Yanhui and Zhang Youcheng may be linked to elite society in Dunhuang during the Guiyijun period, it is unclear how they are related to each other. Zhang Youcheng is referred to as the 'deceased younger brother' (*wang di* 亡弟) in the cartouche next to him, while Yanhui is addressed as *A zi shi* 阿姊師 or 'elder sister teacher' in the inscription in the top right cartouche. The longer inscription on the back indicates that Yanhui had passed away by using the designation *gu* 故. Since they were both deceased when the painting was produced, there must have been a separate patron who is not mentioned in the text. In his translation of the inscriptions, Arthur Waley assumes that Yanhui and Zhang Youcheng were siblings and the deceased elder sister and younger brother respectively of an anonymous patron.[33] Adamek agrees that the two donor figures were siblings and further suggests that Yanhui was the patron's teacher.[34] Roderick Whitfield only notes that Zhang Youcheng was the deceased younger brother of the patron, leaving Yanhui's position ambiguous.[35]

There are reasons to believe that Yanhui was not directly related to the unnamed patron. Yanhui is addressed as *A zi shi* in the upper right inscription on the front of the painting, which is written from the patron's perspective. This is not a commonly-used term in Dunhuang paintings. Instead, it is conventional to simply identify someone as 'elder sister' (*zi* 姊 or 姉). For instance, in MG 17778 the patron who is the younger brother of a deceased nun of high status addresses her as 'deceased elder sister' (*wang zi* 亡姉).[36] A reference to the term *A zi shi* appears in a Dunhuang manuscript S.4660 dated to 988.[37] This

30 On sites of ordination at Dunhuang, see Hao 1998, 25–73.

31 Chen 2012, Table 2.

32 Chen 2012 also makes this assumption.

33 Waley 1931, 26–29. Raphael Petrucci speculates that the painting was created at the behest of Yanhui who associated the offering with Zhang Youcheng, her dead younger brother. Petrucci did not seem to recognise that Yanhui was also deceased; Petrucci 1921, 1397.

34 Adamek 2005, 167.

35 Whitfield 1982–1985, 2:301; Whitfield and Farrer 1990, 38.

36 Giès 1994, 1:356 pl. 92.

37 S.4660《戊子年六月廿六日兄弟社轉帖》. See Zhang 2013.

is a circular for a local *she* 社 association, a voluntary social welfare organisation, notifying members of the death of a nun whom it refers to as *Anding A zi shi* 安定阿姊師.[38] It asks members to provide support for her funeral according to the agreement of the association. According to Hao Chunwen 郝春文, the reason for this arrangement is because the nun's younger brother, named Anding 安定, was a member of the association.[39] A follow up to this circular again refers to the deceased nun as *A zi* 阿姊.[40] As these documents were circulated to the whole association, *A zi shi* is used here as a respectful term referring to a nun who was the elder sister of a person within one's network of relationships. A person did not have to be a sibling or a student of the nun to address her by this title.

Moreover, the same inscription in the upper right cartouche lists the patron's wishes in order (written from left to right): peace at the borders, the continued turning of the wheel of Dharma, for *A zi shi* (Yanhui) and the patron's deceased parents (*wang kao bi* 亡考妣) to reach paradise in the afterlife. The deceased parents mentioned in this inscription are clearly less relevant in this painting since they are not depicted at all. However, referring to one's deceased parents after the sister goes against the convention of donor inscriptions, which normally follows family hierarchy based on seniority. In addition, the reference to 'elder sister' is not included in the inscriptions on the back of the painting where Yanhui is addressed by her official title. This means it is unlikely that Yanhui and the patron were siblings.

As for Zhang Youcheng, he may be the younger brother of either Yanhui or the unnamed patron, but he cannot be both based on the above. In paintings with a family of donor figures, the designation of each person corresponds to their relative position within the family, yet at no point is Yanhui referred to simply as 'elder sister' which would relate her directly to Zhang Youcheng. It seems more likely that Zhang Youcheng was the younger brother of the unnamed patron whose perspective is expressed in the inscriptions. If this is the case, it remains unclear why Yanhui and Zhang Youcheng were portrayed together in this composition with multiple, inconsistent writings. It is also curious that the inscription in the green cartouche omits Zhang Youcheng from its list of well wishes. Furthermore, the location of this cartouche is joined with the cartouche identifying Zhang Youcheng. This gives the impression that the wishes are coming from him. Could it be that this painting was meant to be Zhang Youcheng's commission but, because of his death, an unnamed patron

38 For an introduction to *she* associations, see Rong 2013, 296–300 and Galambos 2015.

39 Hao 1998, chap. 7, esp. 386.

40 S.4660v《兄弟社納贈還欠及罰宴席歷》. See Zhang 2013.

had to complete it for him? Or was Zhang Youcheng made to appear like the patron in the painting to enhance his merit in the afterlife? While this remains a speculation, a comparison of the inscriptions on the front and back of Stein painting 14 may offer further clues about the overall patronage of this painting.

The pieces of inscribed paper pasted on the back of the painting are a striking feature of Stein painting 14. There are other works from Cave 17 that once had fragments of writing on paper pasted on the back, but these additions were most likely used as repair material.[41] Stein painting 14 was conserved and remounted after it was brought to the British Museum in the early twentieth century. Unfortunately, there are no early conservation records that can confirm whether the current placement of the inscriptions on the back of the painting corresponds to their original location.[42] Nevertheless, the writings on both sides of the painting are undoubtedly closely related to each other. The shape and size of the paper on the reverse is similar to the sizes of the cartouches on the painting. This size was clearly planned since the inscriptions were written to fit the sheets of paper. For instance, the character *yang* 養 is squashed at the bottom edge of the paper identifying Zhang Youcheng. In addition, the inscriptions on both sides of the painting share similar features. The same standard phrase is used to identify Zhang Youcheng as a donor figure. Both the inscription on the left of the painting and the longer inscription on the back praise Avalokiteśvara for his power to protect human beings from suffering. They express a similar wish for the bodhisattva to save the deceased from the *santu* 三塗 (the paths of fire, swords, and blood, equivalent to the paths of hell, hungry ghosts, and animals) and safely deliver their souls to paradise or the Pure Land. Both include verse (seven-characters and four-characters, respectively), which have been likened to Buddhist hymns.[43] They give the same date using the same calendrical format, and end with the formal term *bigong ji* 畢功記, 'record of the completion of work'.[44]

41 Whitfield describes these additions as repairs to damaged areas of a painting; see the catalogue entry in Whitfield 2004, 285. Thirteen pieces of paper were once pasted on the back of Stein painting 50, which were separated when the painting was conserved and the fragments were kept in the British Library. See Rong 1998, esp. 79–81. Aurel Stein did not seem to have paid attention to the back of the paintings from Cave 17 and these fragments of texts, including those on Stein painting 14, were not mentioned in his entries in *Serindia*; Stein 1921.

42 It is also not clear from an early black-and-white photograph of Stein painting 14 whether there were inscriptions on the back of the painting prior to conservation; Stein 1921, 4:LXIX.

43 Li 2010, 9.

44 Whitfield 1982–1985, 2:301.

However, judging by the handwriting, the inscriptions on the front and the back of the painting were written by different people. The person who wrote the inscriptions on the back of the painting had a higher level of literacy and calligraphic ability. Although the writing is still a little awkward, the characters are tidier and more tightly formed, written with a good control of brushwork. This is in contrast to the messier writing on the front of the painting, which also includes some miswritten characters; for instance, *aihe* 愛河 is written as 愛何 and *huizhuang* 繪妝 is written as 繪莊. The text in the cartouches of Dunhuang paintings may have been added by the patrons themselves, since they were often not written very professionally. On the other hand, the neater writing on the back of the Stein painting 14 is similar to a type of sutra copying style seen on some manuscripts from Cave 17.[45] The person who wrote this could have been a scribe, a monk, or a hired hand.[46] The greater formality of the text might suggest an institutional connection, such as with the Puguang Monastery. This would be consistent with the inscription's emphasis on Yanhui's official position and monastic affiliation, which is not found in the writings on the front of the painting.

Interestingly, the writers of the inscriptions did not seem to have consulted each other's texts, although it is possible that the text was read aloud, since Zhang Youcheng's name is written in two different versions on the front and the back. In studying these inscriptions, Adamek observed repetitions and omissions in their content that 'create the impression of overlapping symbolic hierarchies'.[47] For instance, Yanhui is not properly named in the front of the painting, while the deceased parents are not mentioned on the back. Indeed, there seems to be two different perspectives represented in these inscriptions: one related to lay patronage, with its reference to Yanhui as *A zi shi*, and the other that emphasises Yanhui and her monastic title, which is perhaps connected to the Puguang Monastery. The possibility that there was more than one patron for Stein painting 14 may help to explain some of the unusual features of the inscriptions on this work.

3 The Tang-Dynasty Tianfu Reign Title

Another important piece of information that is provided in the inscriptions on Stein painting 14 is that it was completed on the fifteenth day of the seventh

45 It bears some resemblance to the Tang-dynasty regular script in Dunhuang described in Ma 2018, 219–20.

46 On Dunhuang manuscript culture more generally, see Galambos 2020.

47 Adamek 2005, 158, 161.

month in the cyclical year *gengwu* 庚午 and the tenth year of the Tianfu reign era. This is equivalent to the year 910. As mentioned earlier, the fifteenth day of the seventh month is the day of the Ghost Festival. Scholars have highlighted the use of the Tianfu reign title in the painting since it was the reign title of the Tang emperor Zhaozong 昭宗 (r. 888–904).[48] It was only in use for a short period of time, from 901 to 904, and the Tang dynasty itself ended in 907, several years before the painting was completed.

The continued use of the Tang-dynasty Tianfu reign date in Stein painting 14 alongside Dunhuang manuscripts after the fall of both the reign and the entire dynasty has been interpreted as evidence for the region's isolation from China proper, as the Hexi Corridor was by then under the control of the Ganzhou 甘州 Uyghurs.[49] During this time, the Dunhuang region was ruled by the Guiyijun who pledged allegiance to the Tang court after expelling the Tibetans who controlled the region from 786 to 848.[50] However, documents studied more recently indicate that the Guiyijun government was aware of the fall of the Tang dynasty before 910. Manuscripts from Cave 17, as discussed by Yang Baoyu 楊寶玉 and Wu Liyu 吳麗娛, record that Zhang Chengfeng 張承奉 (894–910), then-ruler of the Guiyijun, sent an envoy led by Zhang Baoshan 張保山 to the Later Liang 後梁 dynasty (907–923) in the year 908.[51] The safe return of the envoy to Dunhuang in the following year would have provided the Guiyijun government with up-to-date information about the political situation in China, including the forced abdication of the last Tang emperor to the Later Liang.

Given that news of the fall of the Tang had reached Dunhuang by 909, the continued use of the Tianfu reign title in Stein painting 14 and some manuscripts may be better understood as a deliberate choice by patrons or makers of the works rather than ignorance or isolation from China proper. This is consistent with the response of other regional powers in China at the time that chose not to recognise the Later Liang as the legitimate successor of the Tang dynasty and which continued to use Tang reign titles some years after the dynasty ended.[52] For instance, Li Maozhen 李茂貞 (856–924), the ruler of Qi 岐 based in the

48 Whitfield 1982–1985, 2:301; Whitfield and Farrer 1990, 38.

49 Whitfield 1982–1985, 2:301. For a list of Dunhuang manuscripts with Tianfu or Tianyou 天祐 reign era (904–924) titles, see Rong 2015, 214–19

50 For a concise introduction to the Guiyijun period, see Galambos 2020, 7–11 and Rong 2013, 40–46.

51 Yang and Wu 2010, based on manuscripts P.3518v, P.2945, and P.3931. See also Wen 2022a, 252–54.

52 Wang 2011, 108.

western part of present-day Shaanxi province, continued to use the Tianfu reign title until at least 920.[53] In the case of Dunhuang, there is indication from textual sources that Zhang Chengfeng intended to replace the Tang-dynasty reign title with a new one for the region, but ultimately ran out of time when he lost power, as we shall see below.[54]

4 The Kingdom of Jinshan

The *Old History of the Five Dynasties* (Jiu Wudai shi 舊五代史) records that:

> 沙洲，梁開平中，有節度使張奉，自號「金山白衣天子」。[55]
>
> In Shazhou, during the Kaiping reign of the [Later] Liang, there was a military commissioner called Zhang Feng who styled himself 'White-robed Son of Heaven of Golden Mountain'.

Shazhou refers to the region including Dunhuang, while the Kaiping reign era of the Later Liang marks the period from 907 to 911. The military commissioner at this time was Zhang Chengfeng, mentioned earlier. His self-proclaimed title expresses his grand ambition – 'Son of Heaven', the imperial title of the Chinese emperor. Jinshan (Golden Mountain), also called Jin'an shan 金鞍山 (Golden Saddle Mountain), located to the southwest of Dunhuang, was a sacred mountain that local people and officials venerated.[56] The term 'white robed' has been interpreted in different ways. One explanation is that Zhang 'courted the sympathies of the [nearby] Manichean Uyghurs of Kocho [i.e., Gaochang] and Zhangye, whose elect wore white robes'.[57] Another vmore convincing view is that both metal / gold and the colour white relates

53 Wang 2011, 299 fn. 28.

54 Wen 2022b, 57.

55 *Jiu Wudai shi* 138.1840. Translation from Wen 2022b, 44. Wen 2022b provides a detailed discussion of this kingdom and its place in the post-Tang world.

56 Zheng 1995, 127. 'Golden Mountain' might also have connections to Turkic culture, see Wen 2022b, fn. 33.

57 Baumer 2018, 2:312. Another explanation for 'white-robed' is 'those dressed in plain clothes', i.e., the common people, meaning Zhang was a commoners' emperor. See Morgan 1999, 210.

to the theory of the Five Phases.[58] According to this theory, all phenomena captured by the five phases are mutually generating and mutually conquering. The phase of metal / gold and white came after that of earth and its corresponding colour yellow. As earth and yellow were associated with the Tang dynasty, Zhang's choice of element and colour expresses his wish to be the emperor of a new state that succeeded the Tang. The official name of this state 'Golden Mountain Kingdom of Western Han' (henceforth, Jinshan kingdom) connects it with another major Chinese dynasty, the Han 漢 dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), while highlighting its regional distinctiveness with the addition of 'Western'.[59]

There is much debate over when the short-lived Jinshan kingdom began. Earlier scholarship suggests that it was founded in 905, but this has since been refuted.[60] Currently, the two prevailing views are that it began either in 909 in response to the news of the collapse of the Tang dynasty brought back by the envoy of Zhang Baoshan, or shortly before the end of the seventh month in 910 based on a reading of a Dunhuang manuscript.[61] If it was the former, then Stein painting 14, produced on the fifteenth day of the seventh month of 910, falls directly within the period of the Jinshan kingdom. If it was the latter, then it was produced on the eve of the kingdom's establishment. Regardless of exactly when the kingdom was founded, the period from 909 to 910 must have been a time of change in the Dunhuang region as the Guiyijun had to come to grips with the news of the fall of the Tang dynasty and the emergence of a fragmented China. It also had to chart its own path in the region, particularly in dealing with the neighbouring Ganzhou Uyghurs that were growing in strength during this time. In the seventh month of 910, the Ganzhou Uyghurs attacked Dunhuang and Zhang Chengfeng personally led the defence.[62] In 911, following military defeats, Zhang changed the name of the kingdom to the 'Kingdom of Dunhuang' (*Dunhuang guo* 敦煌國) and acknowledged the Uyghur Khagan as his father.[63] In 914, Cao Yijin took over rulership of the region, reinstated

58 For more on the Jinshan kingdom and the theory of the Five Phases, see Bao and Zheng 2015 and Wen 2022a, 253.

59 Wen 2022b, 51.

60 The year 905 was suggested in Wang 1935.

61 Yang Baoyu and Wu Liyu believe the kingdom was established in 909, see Yang and Wu 2010. Rong Xinjiang believes the kingdom was established in 910; Rong 2015, 214–19. The manuscript in question is P.3633 *Longquan shenjian ge* 龍泉神劍歌. For a summary of the various views, see Gong 2020.

62 Rong 2015, 225.

63 Rong 2013, 44.

the title of military commissioner of the Guiyijun, and abolished the Kingdom of Dunhuang, officially bringing an end to the Jinshan state.[64] This historical context gives new meaning to the standard wish 'for peace on the borders of the state' (*wei guojie qingping* 爲國界清平) in one of the inscriptions on Stein painting 14.

Although short-lived, the establishment of the Jinshan kingdom was an ambitious attempt by the Guiyijun, led by Zhang Chengfeng, to assert a new regional identity that was based on its links to dynastic China but that was also specific to the Dunhuang region. In the subsequent period, the Cao 曹 family of the Guiyijun that came into power would further develop this through marriage alliances with the Ganzhou Uyghurs and the Khotanese, while continuing ties with China proper.[65]

5 A Chinese Bodhisattva with Non-Chinese Characteristics

Stein painting 14 is therefore a rare image that can be associated with the short-lived Jinshan kingdom based on its dating, but the question remains as to whether this is observable in the painting itself or whether it simply follows established pictorial conventions. Initially, the painting's portrayal of Avalokiteśvara appears fairly typical, following the standardised iconography of a willow branch and water vessel that had developed in China from the Tang dynasty onwards.[66] Moreover, there is a large drawing of Avalokiteśvara in the British Library from Cave 17 that is very similar to Stein painting 14.[67] With the absence of the ribbons on the body of the bodhisattva, the drawing is a mirror image of Avalokiteśvara in Stein painting 14. Both are identified by an inscription as the Great Merciful, Great Compassionate Saviour from Hardship, the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (*Daci dabei jiuku Guanshiyin pusa* 大慈大悲救苦觀世音菩薩). Fraser suggests that the drawing was used in a painting workshop and could have served as an initial reference for Stein painting 14.[68] Indeed, there are other paintings of Avalokiteśvara from Cave 17 that share similar features to Stein painting

64 Rong 2013, 44.

65 See the chronology in Rong 2015, 1–43. On the Cao family and its marriage alliances, see the summary in Xia and Lu 2016, 207–30.

66 Yü 2001, 78.

67 S.9137. See Fraser 2000, 202 and Fraser 2004, 143–45.

68 Fraser 2004, 143.

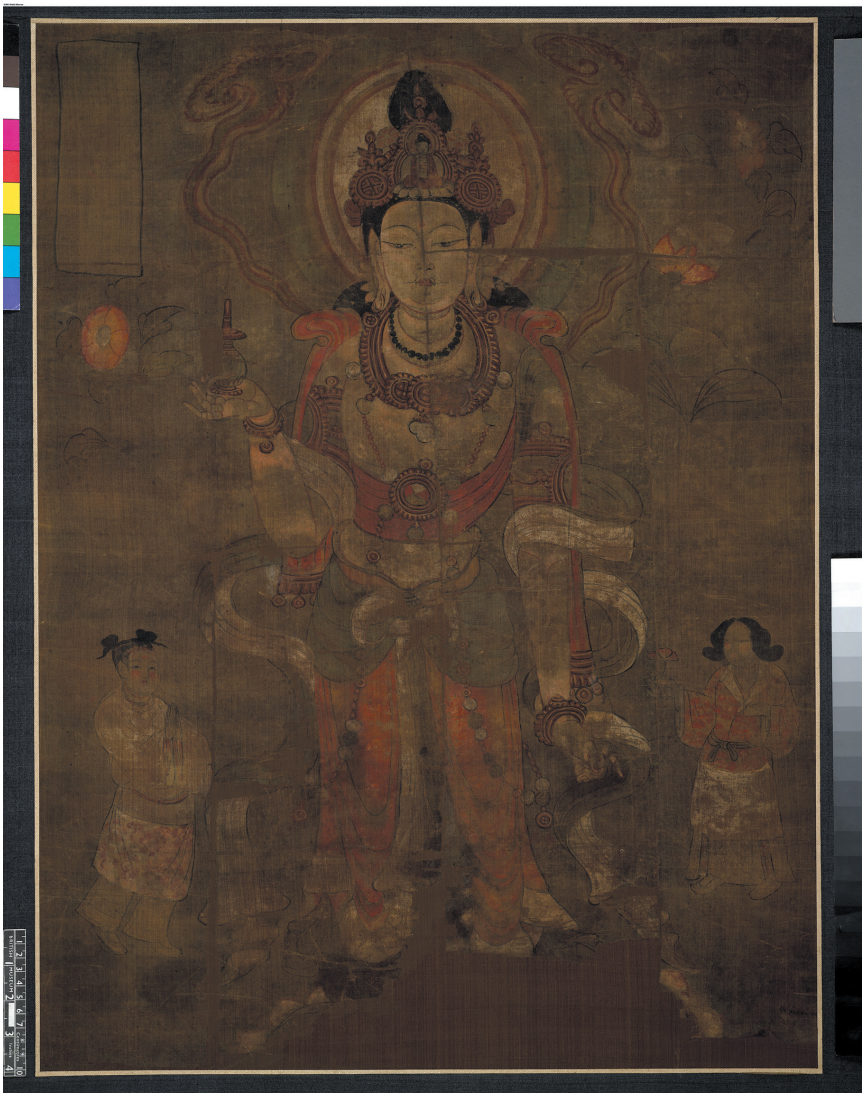


FIGURE 8.5 Stein painting 21 'Avalokiteśvara with Two Donor Figures' from Dunhuang and dated to *c.* 851–900

14, which indicates the circulation of a basic model. For instance, Stein paintings 21 (Figure 8.5) and 22 (Figure 8.6) likewise show the bodhisattva standing on a lotus with one arm lifted. His upper body is largely exposed as he wears only a shoulder scarf and jewellery, which is commonly described as an 'Indian' style. This contrasts with a 'Chinese' style of dress where the shoulders are covered by a shawl and the chest partially covered by a robe, as seen in Stein painting 8. He wears a crown with three main peaks and a



FIGURE 8.6 Stein painting 22 'Avalokiteśvara with Flowers' from Dunhuang and dated to *c.* 851–900

layered skirt tied at the waist, while another scarf loops around his arms and floats in the air.

However, the Avalokiteśvara in Stein painting 14 also differs from these other examples. It combines features that relate to a greater variety of

artistic conventions from both Chinese and non-Chinese sources. Although the bodhisattva's clothing can be described as 'Indian' in style, the white ribbon tied around his head and hanging from the side to his knees in a loop was not part of this tradition.[69] Instead, it appears in many examples dated to the second half of the ninth century depicting the bodhisattva in 'Chinese' style costume.[70] Notably, this feature that prominently circles the body of Avalokiteśvara was not included in the 'model' British Library sketch S.9137. It appears to be a deliberate modification by the painter in order to create a mixture of two different styles of dress.

Avalokiteśvara's hairstyle in Stein painting 14 is also different from Stein paintings 21 and 22. Whitfield has observed that Avalokiteśvara's blue hair here 'envelops the shoulders in a tracery', which is different from the 'spreading locks on the shoulders of ninth century bodhisattvas'.[71] While images of bodhisattvas at Dunhuang can appear with blue hair, the way it fans out across the shoulders in separate curls and also in individual spirals on the forehead in Stein painting 14 distinguishes it from the mass of hair along the shoulders and the smooth arch over the forehead seen in Stein paintings 21 and 22. This way of depicting Avalokiteśvara's hair bears resemblance to a painting of the tantric thousand-armed, thousand-eyed bodhisattva in Stein painting 35, dated to the ninth or early tenth century (Figure 8.7). Lilla Russell-Smith has suggested that this painting has links to paintings from the Turfan region and speculates that Uyghur painters may have been involved.[72] Several painting fragments depicting Guanyin from the Turfan region also show variations of this type of hairstyle, although they are not all in blue.[73] The depiction of individual curls falling on the shoulder is observable in a group of banner paintings that show Khotanese and Himalayan artistic qualities (Figure 8.8).[74] Moreover, the shape of Avalokiteśvara's body in Stein painting 14 is leaner and more angular compared to the curved bodies and wide shoulders of the bodhisattvas in Stein paintings 21 and 22. The bodhisattva's head is relatively large and

69 This narrow band and the loose locks of hair along the shoulder of the bodhisattva were noted as peculiar features of the painting in Stein and Binyon 1921, 1:34.

70 Examples include Stein paintings 3 (dated to the early tenth century); 8 (751–850); 111 (851–900); 122 (851–900); 125+ (dated to the ninth century); 136 (851–900); 139 (851–900); and 201 (851–950).

71 Whitfield 1982–1985, 2:301.

72 Russell-Smith 2005, 125–34.

73 See, for instance, MIK III 8001 from Yarkhoto dated to the ninth century and MIK III 8559 from Murtuk dated to the ninth–tenth centuries; Russell-Smith 2005.

74 There are ten of these paintings in total. Stein paintings 101–103 are at the British Museum and the rest are in the National Museum, New Delhi. See Whitfield 1982–1985, 1: pls. 46–48; Whitfield and Farrer 1990, 62–63; and Chandra and Sharma 2012, 221–23.



FIGURE 8.7 Stein painting 35 'Thousand-armed, Thousand-eyed Avalokiteśvara with Accompanying Figures' from Dunhuang and dated to the ninth–early tenth centuries

wide, and the arms are long.[75] His posture is stiffer and the 'S' shape posture is much reduced. These qualities are also comparable to the banner paintings

75 The stiffness of the figure and his relatively large head are noted in Stein 1921, 1059; Waley 1931, 16; Whitfield 1982–1985, 2:301. Fraser 2004, 143 notes that 'the face is a wide oval and the crown is overly large; in fact, both are top-heavy and slightly tilted to the arm with the flask'.



FIGURE 8.8 Stein painting 102, part of a group of banners from Dunhuang and dated to *c.* 801–850

associated with combined Khotanese and Himalayan traditions, especially in terms of the leanness of the body, the long arms, and the flattening of the physical form.

A further difference between Stein painting 14 and Stein paintings 21 and 22 is the dominant use of red outlines for painting the bodhisattva. Black lines were used to highlight his facial features, hair, jewellery, and robes, but the bodhisattva's body is outlined in red that obscures any black underpainting. Combined with the reddish shading mixed with white on his body, the red outlines result in a soft physical border that gives the bodhisattva an ethereal quality. This contrasts with the two donor figures beside him who are outlined entirely in ink. Painters at Dunhuang normally began by outlining a composition, which they then painted over with colour and added contour lines.[76] In the Mogao Caves, ink and ochre-red lines were used on the murals for the under-drawing and the final contouring. There were periods, namely the Sui 隋 dynasty (581–618) and the Tibetan period, when there seemed to have been a preference for using ochre-red outlines on the wall paintings.[77] Portable paintings from Cave 17 tend to be outlined in ink or a combination of ink and red outlines. It is less common to have only red outlines with the ink under-drawings obscured. While the development and spread of this feature requires further investigation, it is a feature that is once again observable in the group of bodhisattva paintings linked to Khotanese and Himalayan traditions. This red outlining method on the deities' bodies was used on Turfan silk paintings now housed in the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Berlin.[78] It can also be seen on murals from Sogdiana in Panjakent, Tajikistan, dating to the eighth century.[79]

In addition to the painting's content and techniques, the inscriptions on Stein painting 14 may also indicate connections to non-Chinese cultures. Most of the inscriptions on the front and back of the work are written in vertical vcolumns from right to left, according to Chinese convention. But the inscription in the upper right cartouche on the front of the painting is written in the opposite direction. Imre Galambos has suggested two possible explanations for this combination of writing directions. One explanation is the creation of a sense of symmetry where the text emanates from the central bodhisattva.[80] Another explanation for the phenomenon of left-to-right writings in

76 Fraser 2000, 191, 203. On the process of painting a banner, see Zaleski and Cailleteau 2016, 85.

77 Duan and Tan 1994, 45, 47, 48, 50, 58, 144, and 186.

78 These paintings are discussed in Russell-Smith 2005, 116.

79 Kulakova 2014, 93.

80 Galambos 2020, 188–89.

Dunhuang manuscripts and votive paintings during the Guiyijun period, starting from around 890, is interactions with non-Chinese scribal cultures, especially those of the Uyghurs.[81] Taking Stein painting 28.+ dated to 892 as an example, he suggests that the combination of right-to-left and left-to-right writing may be 'due to its relatively early date, when the practice of writing devotional inscriptions from left to right was still gaining momentum'.[82] The interaction with non-Chinese scribal cultures offers an intriguing reason for the different writing directions in Stein painting 14.

While the depiction of Avalokiteśvara in Stein painting 14 combines different features that evoke Chinese and non-Chinese associations, the bodhisattva is undoubtedly situated in a Chinese context. This is shown through the inclusion of bamboo as the chosen background to the bodhisattva and the donor figures. Bamboo is not a plant associated with Indian art but is found in Chinese depictions of landscapes, being associated with 'concepts of sages, retired gentlemen and immortals' in China.[83] Early depictions of bamboo in paintings can be found at the Mogao Caves, such as in the early-Tang Cave 322, where a grove of bamboo with feathery leaves are depicted as the backdrop to a scene of the buddha preaching.[84] Traces of bamboo leaves are also visible in a fragment of a silk painting depicting an apsara in the Musée Guimet, Paris, dated to the mid- to late-seventh century.[85]

Bamboo did not become a standard part of Guanyin's iconography until the creation of the Water-moon Avalokiteśvara (*Shuiyue Guanyin* 水月觀音) as a subject matter, which Chün-fang Yü described as 'the first truly Chinese Kuan-yin image'.[86] This subject matter evokes Potalaka, the bodhisattva's sacred island home. In paintings, the Water-moon Avalokiteśvara is typically shown seated on a rock in a relaxed half-lotus position with a large circular aureole that gives an impression of the moon (as in Figure 8.9). Bamboo and water are among other features that are included in these compositions.[87] The creation of the Water-moon Avalokiteśvara is credited to the Tang-dynasty painter Zhou Fang 周昉 (*c.* 730–800), as *Record of Famous Paintings through the Ages* (Lidai minghua ji 歷代名畫記) mentions the inclusion of bamboo

81 Galambos 2020, 192.
82 Galambos 2020, 181.
83 Yü 2001, 239 citing Yamamoto 1989.
84 The cave has been digitised and images are available on the Digital Dunhuang website.
85 This is discussed in Whitfield 2003. The fragments of Stein painting 345 in the Musée Guimet are reproduced in Giès et al. 1994, 2: pl. 86.
86 Yü 2001, 21.
87 Kang 2016, 32.



FIGURE 8.9 Stein painting 15 'Water-moon Avalokiteśvara' from Dunhuang and dated to *c.* 926–975

in his mural painting of this subject matter.[88] While Zhou Fang's paintings do not survive, the earliest dated example of a Water-moon Avalokiteśvara confirmed by an inscription is a portable painting from Cave 17 dated to 943, now housed in the Musée Guimet, Paris. The bodhisattva is seated next to bamboo in the composition. On the other hand, images of Avalokiteśvara on his own or with donor figures in earlier paintings from Cave 17 tend to show the bodhisattva surrounded by stylised lotus flowers, such as in Stein paintings 22 and Stein painting 28.+ dated to 892. Therefore, bamboo was included as a background in Stein painting 14 at a time when this combination was still a relatively new development in the bodhisattva's iconography in Dunhuang. It was also a visual motif that shared clear associations with Chinese art and culture.

In Stein painting 14, Avalokiteśvara, which originated from India, has to an extent been transformed into a Chinese bodhisattva through the use of bamboo, the addition of a white head ribbon, and the iconography of a water vessel and a willow branch, which were attributes that developed in China. Other features in the painting, however, seem to reference non-Chinese artistic conventions. Stein painting 14 presents an interesting parallel to the wider historical circumstances in the Dunhuang region in the early tenth century with the establishment or imminent establishment of the Kingdom of Jinshan. Just as the kingdom was framed as a Chinese state that needed to negotiate its relationships with its multi-ethnic neighbours, the image of the bodhisattva in Stein painting 14 incorporates non-Chinese motifs in its form within a predominantly Chinese framework. This may be interpreted as an expression of a new and growing sense of regional identity in Dunhuang.

6 Thoughts on Stein Painting 14

Stein painting 14 is a painting with many features that warrant closer examination. It is a surviving example of portraits of the deceased known as *miaozhen* from tenth-century Dunhuang, supplementing textual references to this popular genre of painting. As a painting that contains such portraits, it would have been displayed in a family or temple hall for commemoration and ritual offerings during the Ghost Festival. The figures in Stein painting 14 can be

88 *Lidai minghua ji* 3.62.

distinguished from conventional donor figures not only through the care with which they were painted, but also the religious connotations of *miaozhen* and the visual cues of the figures' deceased status. These are factors that shaped the distinctive composition of Stein painting 14, in which the two donor figures are unusually large and close to the central bodhisattva. Moreover, through a close reading of the inscriptions, it can be concluded that both Yanhui and Zhang Youcheng were part of the elite in Dunhuang. Despite being called *A zi shi*, the nun Yanhui was not the direct elder sister of Zhang Youcheng and the unnamed patron of the painting, and that Zhang Youcheng and the patron were most likely brothers. The inscriptions on the painting encompass different perspectives that point to the possibility that there was more than one patron in the production of this painting.

Furthermore, the continued use of the Tang-dynasty Tianfu reign title in the inscription of Stein painting 14 does not reflect Dunhuang's isolation from China proper and the region's subsequent ignorance concerning the fall of the Tang dynasty, given records of a successful diplomatic mission to the Later Liang in 908–909. Instead, it can be understood as a choice reflecting allegiance and political authority. By seeing this dating as an active decision, we may also reconsider other aspects of the painting in relation to the local context of the Dunhuang region.

The date of the painting being 910 situates it in or shortly before the founding of the Kingdom of Jinshan. Faced with the collapse of the Tang dynasty and the growing strength of the neighbouring Ganzhou Uyghurs, the Guiyijun led by Zhang Chengfeng, like other regional powers that were once part of the Tang domain, had to decide on a new identity for itself.[89] The combination of Chinese and non-Chinese pictorial elements in Stein painting 14 is arguably consistent with the growing regionalism in Dunhuang under Zhang Chengfeng's short-lived rule. This painting suggests new artistic and cultural developments during the establishment of the Jinshan kingdom and the transition from the Zhang to Cao family rulership during the Guiyijun period. Material sources like Stein painting 14 offer evidence beyond textual sources of the emergence and potential diffusion among elite circles of a distinct regional identity in Dunhuang during the early tenth century.

89 Wen 2022b.

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CHAPTER 9

How to Handle a Scroll? Evidence from Pelliot Chinois 3812

Nadine Bregler

Abstract

This chapter examines how users engaged with scrolls as physical objects. The chapter opens by considering the hypothetical possibilities of how scrolls can be handled. These insights are then complemented by contemporary pictorial evidence from Dunhuang of officials utilising scrolls. Finally, the scattered texts on the verso of Dunhuang manuscript Pelliot chinois 3812 are compared and contrasted with the poetry anthology recorded on the scroll's recto. In this case study, content on the verso of this manuscript indicates usage by students with different levels of literacy, who engaged with the main text found on the recto in various ways. By examining the exact placement and writing direction of content on the verso, the different methods for handling and using the scroll can be reconstructed. This contributes to ongoing scholarship assessing whether content on the verso is related to the main text on the recto or whether these additions constitute unrelated reusage of blank space on the scroll.

At the turn of the twentieth century, over 50,000 manuscripts and fragments written in various languages and scripts were discovered in Cave 17 of the Mogao Caves 莫高窟 near Dunhuang 敦煌.[1] Soon after, many of the manuscripts were acquired by various expeditions and explorers, with these acquisitions now being housed in several institutions around the world.[2] Endeavours in recent years to digitise the holdings of these different institutions have greatly facilitated present research on these materials. While such readily available high-quality images show physical aspects of the manuscripts, such as state of preservation or paper quality, it remains difficult to fully grasp the materiality and dimensions of a manuscript by looking at a two-dimensional image. This inevitably pushes research towards primarily focusing on the texts alone and impedes an accurate understanding of these manuscripts as objects.

1 See Galambos 2016a, 33.

2 On the discovery and dispersal of the manuscripts, see Rong 2013, 79–108.

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For instance, despite the reading direction of Chinese running from right to left, the verso (back) sides of scrolls are presented online with the last sheet of a scroll first.[3] Texts written on the last sheets are therefore often the focus of much scholarship, while scattered and disconnected writings found throughout the scroll are frequently neglected.

Beyond their textual value, these scattered writings on the verso are the direct result of manuscript (re)usage. In essence, they evidence the circulation and continual use of manuscripts.[4] Recent studies have demonstrated that the seemingly disconnected writings seen on the verso of many scrolls are far from random. For instance, the verso of scrolls produced in educational settings often contain poems, copies of dates and colophons, as well as the titles of other educational texts. Their position on the scroll reveals more general patterns, which ultimately serves to identify further manuscripts as being produced or used by students.[5] Moreover, shorter sections of educational texts that were written on the recto (front) could also be repeated at different places on the verso. At times, these served as markers for what sections students had to copy.[6] The scattered content on the verso, hereafter paracontent, therefore demonstrates that students were actively engaged with the main texts on the recto.[7]

Given the notable relationships between texts on both sides of scrolls, it must be asked how these scattered notes were physically added to the verso of scrolls while (or indeed, if) consulting the recto. The objective of this chapter is to shed light on different methods of physically handling and using scrolls and will begin with a general discussion of how scrolls could be handled. Then, the case of Dunhuang scroll P.3812 will nuance these initial findings through a detailed analysis of the physical relationship between its core content and paracontent. This chapter aims to emphasise that manuscripts found at Dunhuang were physical objects, not just texts. How they were held, interacted with, experienced, and used is therefore just as important in contextualising the manuscripts as the poems, letters, and exercises they contain.

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3 This is especially true for the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF) website, where only sections of the scrolls are visible at any one time. Fortunately, the International Dunhuang Project (IDP) website provides full images of both sides of the scrolls.

4 Galambos 2020, 138.

5 Galambos 2016b, 517–19.

6 For example, Galambos 2020, 132–33 argues that short notes on the verso of Dunhuang scrolls containing the *Classic of Filial Piety* (Xiaojing 孝經) marked passages from the main texts on the recto that were to be worked on.

7 The term paracontent refers to content that appears in addition to the main content. How these scattered notes on the verso should be classified according to codicological principles is not of immediate relevance to the present topic, therefore the term paracontent will be used for all content except the main content on the recto. For a definition of core content and paracontent, see Ciotti 2018. On students' engagement with Dunhuang manuscripts, see Galambos 2020, 138.

1 Possible Ways to Handle a Scroll

Starting with the recto face-up, a scroll could be flipped over to the verso along a horizontal or a vertical axis (Figure 9.1).[8] To flip the scroll along the vertical axis, both arms must be crossed over and under each other. The paracontent added to the verso then appears in the same writing direction as that of the main content on the recto. Contrary to this, it only requires a small turn of both hands to flip the scroll along the horizontal axis. Using this method, the paracontent is written in the opposite direction to the main content, which will here be referred to as 'upside-down'.

There are two additional ways to create 'upside-down' paracontent. First, instead of turning the scroll over completely, it is possible to fold the scroll in half along the horizontal axis (Figure 9.2).[9] A second possibility is to hold the rolled-up ends of the scrolls at both ends and turn the scroll around 180 degrees without flipping it over to the recto (Figure 9.3). Compared to flipping the scroll on either the vertical or horizontal axis, the movement of both arms here tends to be even more exaggerated and presumably cumbersome, much like crossing both arms over each other when turning a steering wheel. It is possible to roll both ends further inwards to reduce the obstructive size of the scroll, however this remains a rather laborious movement. Moreover, this scenario calls into question whether the paracontent was still related to the main content of the scroll or whether the verso was simply re-used for its paper.

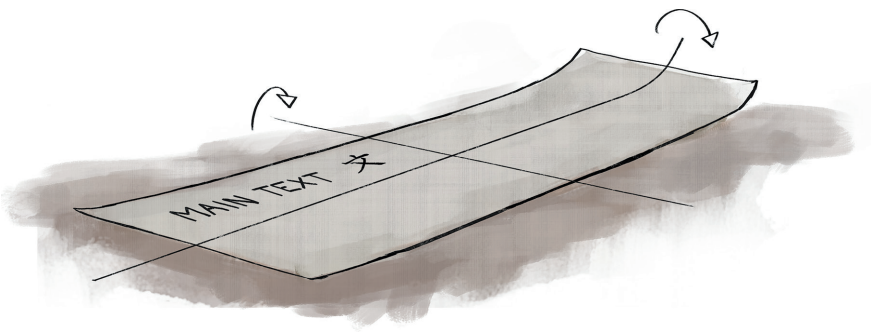


FIGURE 9.1 Illustration of two ways to flip a scroll over from the recto to the verso

8 The theories introduced here are by no means meant to encourage treating the manuscripts in such destructive manners for research purposes nowadays.

9 In the Permanent Seminar on Manuscript Analysis, Description, and Documentation at the Cluster of Excellence of the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures in Hamburg, Imre Galambos highlighted horizontal folding lines on some scrolls. Whether these lines resulted from folding for transportation, storage, or usage awaits further research.

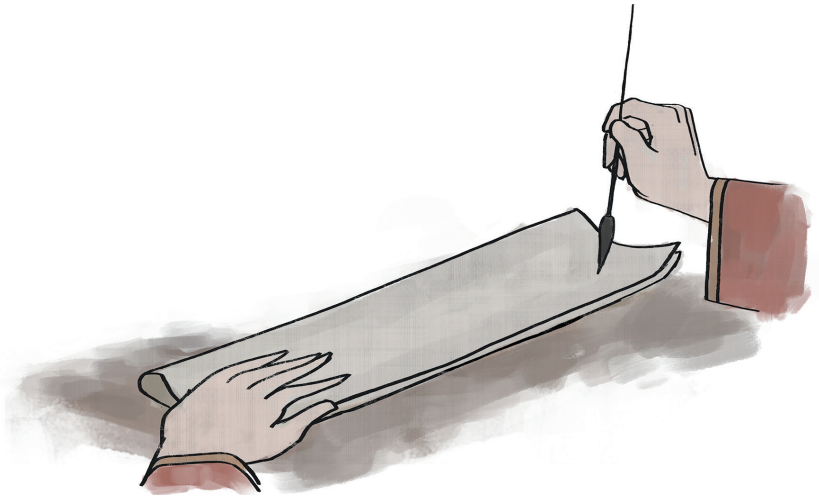


FIGURE 9.2 Illustration of a sheet folded along the horizontal axis to create 'upside-down' paracontent

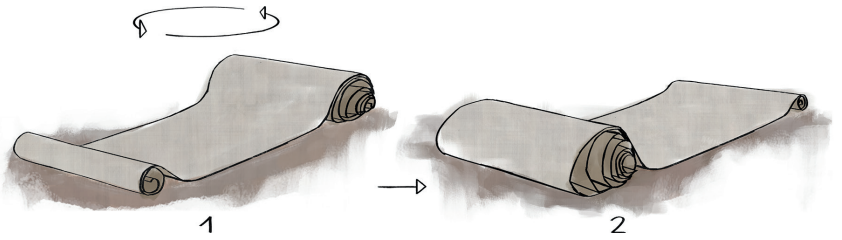


FIGURE 9.3 Illustration of turning a scroll 180 degrees while unrolled to create 'upside-down' paracontent

When a scroll is unrolled with the recto facing upwards, parts of the verso are constantly available on the rolled up ends. This is evident from contemporary depictions, including Dunhuang manuscript P.4523 containing the *Scripture on the Ten Kings* (Shi wang jing 十王經) (Figure 9.4).[10] The fourth king is shown holding the lefthand rolled-up part of the scroll back with his forearm while brandishing a brush in his right hand. The righthand end of the scroll dangles from the table, with the still partly rolled-up end being held aloft by an assistant. This depiction suggests that remarks could be added to the rolled-up verso ends of a scroll while viewing the recto. Therefore, without having to turn the scroll, the core content could be read while one was simultaneously able to add texts to the verso (illustrated in Figure 9.5).

10 I am grateful to Kelsey Granger for pointing this manuscript out to me. For the role of the *Scripture on the Ten Kings* in medieval China, see Teiser 1994.



FIGURE 9.4 Section of P.4523 depicting the fourth king using a scroll

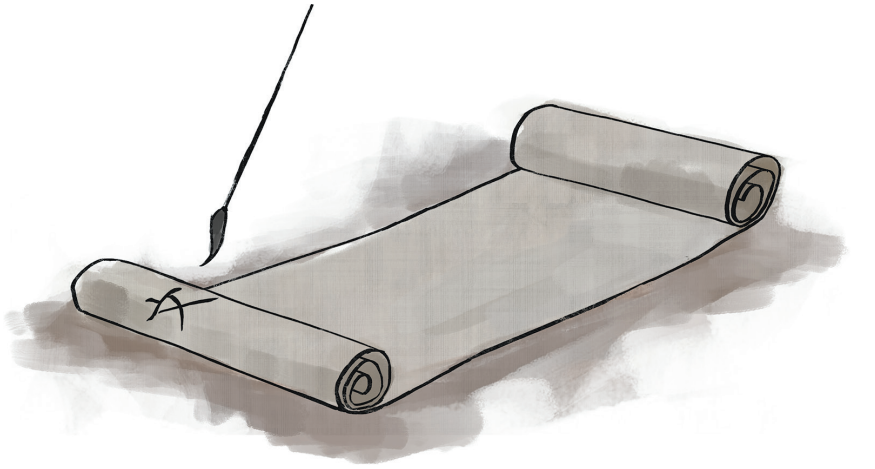


FIGURE 9.5 Illustration of writing on the verso while interacting with the recto

An additional possibility is also shown in the same Dunhuang manuscript. In this illustration from the *Scripture on the Ten Kings*, an official is shown reading a scroll, though here both ends are rolled in different directions (Figure 9.6). In this case, the right part of the scroll would not be available for writing when the scroll



FIGURE 9.6 Section of P.4523 depicting an official reading a scroll

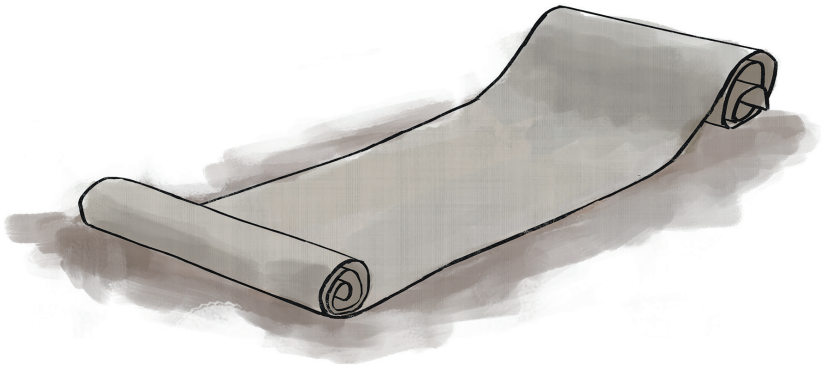


FIGURE 9.7 Illustration of consulting the recto with both ends rolled in different directions

is laid down (illustrated in Figure 9.7). This is different from letting both ends of the scroll curl up, following the natural bend of the paper created by rolling the scroll.

With there thus being several possible ways of adding paracontent to manuscripts, focusing on the specific positions of paracontent on the verso helps differentiate how the scroll was physically handled. This ultimately contributes to our understanding of the contexts under which paracontent could be added.

2 The Case of P.3812

This particular scroll measures 26 cm × 315.5 cm.[11] The first sheet at the beginning of the scroll is only 15.5 cm wide and was likely attached later to prevent damage to what thereby became the second sheet of the scroll. This is suggested by the horizontal rulings at the upper margins, which are not continuous. An additional indication is that on the second sheet, two columns are left blank before the text starts in the third column.[12] It is clear, then, that sheets two to nine were assembled in one go. The paper throughout is almost completely preserved, except for a torn end and considerable damage seen on the second sheet, which is missing a large part of the paper to the upper and lower edge. From the second to eighth sheet, each measures 38 cm wide. The last, torn sheet which has similar paper to the previous sheets only measures 34 cm. The joining of the eighth to the torn ninth sheet is neat, and the horizontal ruling of the paper is continuous, which suggests that the ninth sheet also originally measured 38 cm.

The texts on the recto are written in a fluent hand which runs outside of the upper and lower ruled margins of the sheets. The scroll's main content is an anthology of poems.[13] Several of the poems are written from the perspective of a woman and make use of reoccurring topics. For instance, some of the poems describe journeys to the frontier as well as the hardships of life in foreign regions or borderlands. In addition to themes relating to military service and war, further poems are centred on the topic of returning to one's homeland. Separation from a loved one is a prominent theme throughout the anthology, including extended descriptions of loneliness, longing, and nostalgia. These themes are prominent in the cycle of eighteen poems titled 'Songs of the *hu* Reed-Whistle in Eighteen Beats' (Hujia ci shiba pai 胡笳詞十八拍), starting from col. 113. This cycle is written from the perspective of Cai Yan 蔡琰 (b. 178), daughter of Cai Yong 蔡邕

11 Unless indicated otherwise, all information regarding the measurements and contents of Pelliot chinois manuscripts referenced in this chapter has been taken from the online catalogue accessible via the BnF's digital library website: gallica.bnf.fr.

12 The two empty columns will still be considered as columns one and two when indicating column numbers for the main content.

13 This anthology is transcribed and annotated in Xu 2000, 379–91.

(133–192). Cai Yan was abducted during a period of civil war and was taken to live among the southern Xiongnu 匈奴, where she remained for twelve years before she could return home.[14] In sum, themes of military service, farewells and separations, and remembering loved ones are apparent in nearly all poems included in this anthology, connecting the collection with the familiar topoi of the *Classic of Poetry* (Shijing 詩經).[15] This suggests that the poems in this anthology were chosen by someone with a higher level of learning.

Compared to the anthology on the recto, the different hands of the paracontent found on the verso are less skilled. On the verso of the first sheet, two lines of a heptasyllabic quatrain are written in faint ink. The poem was either jotted down prior to the first sheet being attached to the scroll, or after the paper was added. This is now difficult to ascertain, meaning that the poem's relationship with the main content of the scroll is ambiguous. The poem is immediately visible when the scroll is rolled up, which puts it in a rather prominent place (Figure 9.8). More scrolls must be considered to answer whether this was a common practice, and whether there existed reasons for writing the poem here, such as helping a person to distinguish several scrolls from each other without having to open them.[16] The poem reads:

靈俊言出永着下。
好個郎君不須寡。
好個郎君莫永(求)人。
言語出來勾勾(句句)真。[17]

Always adhere to what Lingjun speaks.
A good young lord should not be alone.
A good young lord must not seek favours from others.
When speaking, his every word should be true.

14 Frankel 1983, 133–34. Frankel 1983, 134 alternately translates the title as 'Songs of the *hu* Reed-Whistle in Eighteen Stanzas'.

15 The *Classic of Poetry* continued to be edited and altered into the Tang 唐 period (618–907). Here, no attempt at literary analysis will be made to investigate which genre and poetic forms are new. Instead, the summary is based on traditional topoi that can be traced to the *Classic of Poetry* which may be distinguished from newer content, for example those tied to local events or places.

16 This usage most likely relates to practices by students in educational settings. Further research on manuscripts produced by lay students is described in Mair 1981. For a recent study on literary training as reflected in Dunhuang manuscripts, see Nugent 2024.

17 This poem is also recorded in Xu 2000, 378. I follow Xu in reading *yong* 永 (always) as *qiu* 求 (seek), and in reading *gou gou* 勾勾 (hook for hook) as *ju ju* 句句 (every word). Punctuation marks have been added here to aid readers.



FIGURE 9.8
Poem on P.3812 visible when the scroll is rolled up

This poem appears to be a kind of maxim for a later user.[18] As Chen Huaiyu points out, the repeated term *langjun* 郎君 (young lord) commonly refers to the sons of military governors, and as Galambos has shown, this phrase is also often found on manuscripts written or used by students.[19] While it is possible that the poem was intended as an addition or response to the main content, the aforementioned uncertainty about when this poem was added to the scroll means that its relationship to the poetry anthology remains ambiguous.

On the second sheet, there are six columns of an almost illegible text in faint ink in a different hand. To the right, three further columns are written over the joint of the second and third sheet, also in faint ink. While the wording of these two texts is not entirely the same, a comparison of how reoccurring characters

18 The name Lingjun might refer to the monk from the Lingtu Temple 靈圖寺 during the Later Jin 後晉 (936–947) period; Xu 2000, 378–79.

19 See Chen 2022, 97 on the term *langjun* and Galambos 2020, 127–29 for further manuscripts containing these characters.

were written suggests that they were written by the same scribe. However, the three columns to the right are written in a slightly more cursive script and positioned 'upside-down'. It is unclear whether these mostly illegible texts relate to the main content on the recto. If the texts do relate to the core content, the scroll could have been turned over more than once, once along the vertical axis and another along the horizontal axis, which caused one of the texts to appear 'upside-down'. If, however, these texts do not relate to the main content, it is likely that the user left the scroll with the verso facing upwards and turned it around 180 degrees to create this 'upside down' writing.

On the verso of the third sheet, there is a repetition of the beginning of the poem found in col. 3 on the second sheet of the recto. The repetition is not physically close enough to the main text to appear on the left rolled-up end when viewing the recto. It stands to reason that the entire scroll was therefore turned over to the verso when this was written, meaning that the main text was not visible at this time. This repetition reads:

> 正月孟春春漸暄。
> 一別強夫經數年。
>
> The first month [of the year], the first month of spring, spring is slowly getting warmer.
> Once having parted from you, strong man, several years have passed.

The poem from the recto is repeated here almost verbatim, the only exception is that instead of *qiang fu* 強夫 (strong man), the main content has the characters *kuang fu* 狂夫 (crazy man), which could also be a term of endearment.[20] The Middle Chinese pronunciation of the characters *qiang* 強 (MC *gjang*) and *kuang* 狂 (MC *gjwang*) was very similar.[21] It is therefore possible that the poem here was learned by heart and so a character with a similar pronunciation was mistakenly inserted. But it is also possible that this was an intentional and playful engagement with the theme of the poem.

On the verso of the ninth sheet is a repetition of the first two characters, *wang gong* 王公, of the last text on the torn end of the scroll, titled 'Song of Happiness' (Gaoxing ge 高興歌). The poem is known from six further Dunhuang

20 Xu 2000, 378. The term refers to one's husband in the poem 'Song of Upturned Cups' (Qingbei yue' 傾杯樂) given on P.2838.

21 For the Middle Chinese pronunciation of *kuang* 狂 and *qiang* 強, see Kroll 2017, 245 and 364 respectively.

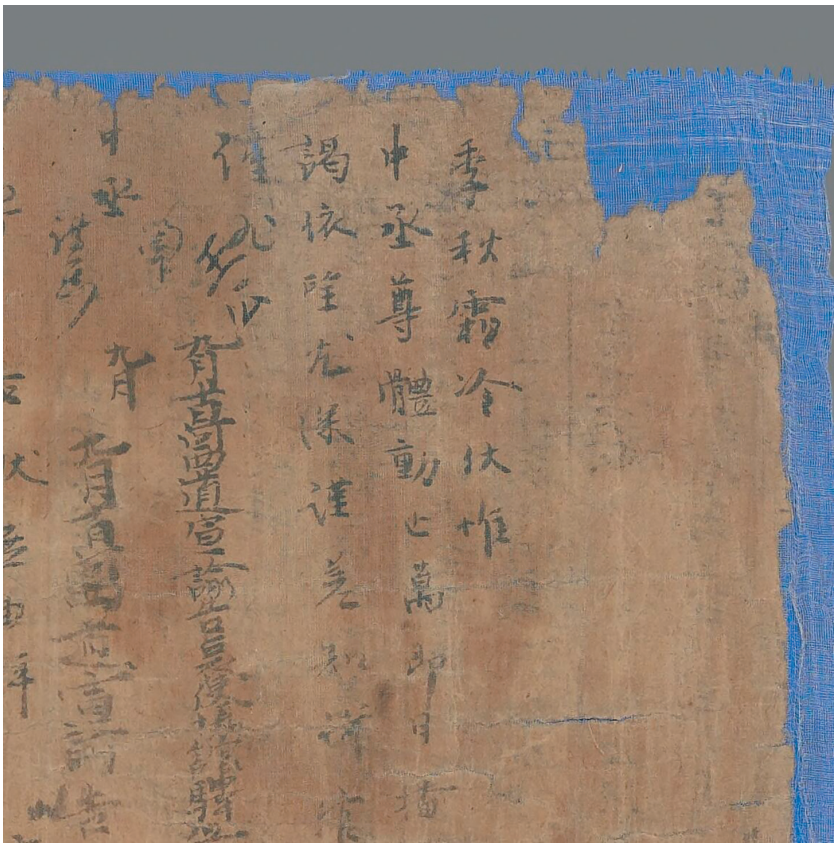


FIGURE 9.9 Slanted repetition of characters on the ninth sheet of P.3812

manuscripts.[22] Interestingly, the two characters are written at a slanted angle between copies of correspondence letters (Figure 9.9). With only these two characters being written, it is difficult to ascertain whether the scribe intended to continue with the text of the poem or to write something else, for example a comment to the poem.

The placement of these characters is particularly interesting. As they are written diagonally, it would seem that the end of scroll was already torn by this time, leaving the scribe with no more sheets to roll up and write on. It seems likely that the scribe then folded the torn end over to add these characters. If this was the case, then it is likely that the paper was held down by the left

22 Wang 1987, 138–46 introduces the poem and discusses its function on Dunhuang manuscripts by considering its different titles and its use in combination with various further texts.

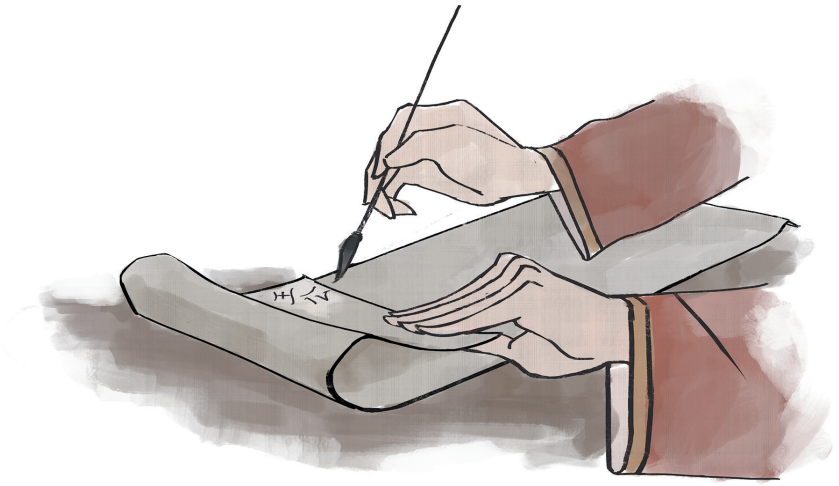


FIGURE 9.10 Illustration of folding the end of the sheet to write the paracontent

hand while the scribe moved their right hand holding the brush towards the folded-over verso, which created a change of the usual writing position of the hand and therefore a slant in the writing (Figure 9.10).[23] This also shows that the scroll was continuously used and read even after the scroll was damaged.

In addition, there are two instances where it becomes clear that the left rolled-up end of scrolls was indeed written on while viewing the recto content, as was first suggested in relation to the image of the fourth king on P.4523. The main content of P.3812, a poem anthology, begins in col. 3 on the second sheet with a cycle of twelve poems without titles. The poems describe the seasons and the activities of a married couple over the course of a year. They narrate, mainly from the perspective of the wife, how her husband leaves for the borderlands for military service, her subsequent solitude and longing for her husband, as well as her duties in the household such as teaching her son. Each of these twelve poems covers one month of the year. Therefore, the poems start by mentioning their respective month, i.e., 'the first month', 'the second month', 'the third month', etc. through to the 'twelfth month'.

A scattered note is visible together with the recto poem in col. 9 concerning 'the fifth month' (Figure 9.11). The discontinued text on the left rolled-up end of the verso is written in large characters and black ink but is now left partially

23 The scenarios described here also raise the question about the ratio and importance of left- and right-handed people at that time. For this, a systematic analysis of the placement of writing on the scroll may yield further insights.

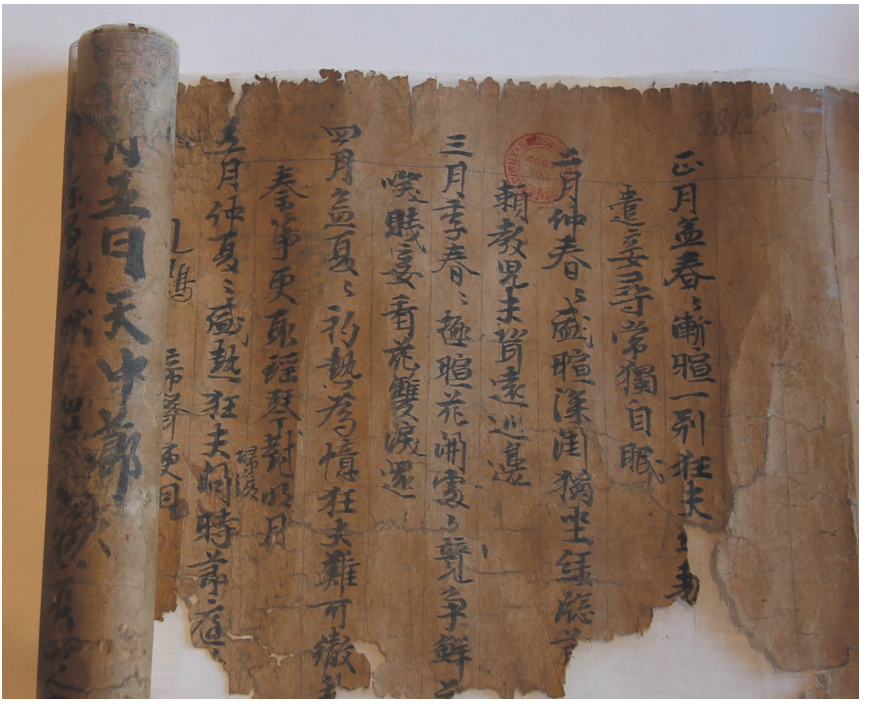


FIGURE 9.11 Photograph showing the Tianzhong incantation on the rolled-up verso and, on the recto to the right, the poem on the fifth month

incomplete due to a tear in the paper. The characters are quite balanced, but not necessarily well-written. The discontinued sentence reads:

> [...] [五]月五日天中節
>
> On the fifth day of the [...] month, Tianzhong festival...

This sentence is a Daoist incantation known from verso sides of several further Dunhuang manuscripts, notably often manuscripts relating to students, as well as in transmitted sources. It concerns the Tianzhong 天中 festival which was held on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month.[24] Therefore, the missing character of the sentence on this scroll must have been *wu* 五, five. The two characters *wu yue* (fifth month) do not appear in any of the other poems on the verso, which further suggests the paracontent shared a direct relation solely

24 For this incantation, see Galambos 2020, 120–23. It is likely that the incantation is used differently on student manuscripts.

with this poem. These texts only align when the verso is rolled on the left – if rolled to the right, it is instead visible with the poem on 'the ninth month' in col. 19 on the recto. It is therefore evident that the right rolled-up end was not used in this case.

The same situation is also evident for a second poem in col. 29 on the third sheet. This poem begins with *zicong fu bie* 自從夫別, 'ever since you, my husband, have left…' Likewise, three discontinued columns starting with characters relating to 'since' followed by terms for parting immediately begin on the left rolled-up end (Figure 9.12). These three columns are likely related to the context of writing letters. For example, the opening phrase *zicong mianbie* 自從面別, 'ever since bidding farewell…' of the second and third column is also the beginning of a letter on the verso of the joint Dunhuang scrolls S.329 and S.361 in the British Library.[25] In the case of P.3812, the three columns are written in the same rather untrained hand. The ink is faint and so the texts are difficult to decipher. In addition, the choice of characters does not seem to make much overt sense. This could indicate that the text was already corrupt, that there were errors in transmission, or that the scribe had a lower level of knowledge and learning.

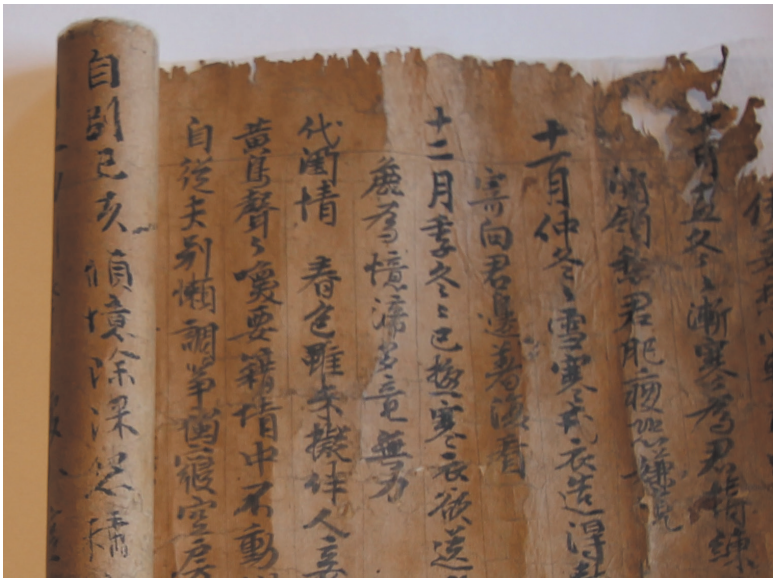


FIGURE 9.12 Photograph of the verso and recto both showing phrases starting with 'since'

25 For the complete text of this letter, see Xu 2005, 300.

Both cases, the incantation relating to the Tianzhong festival and the three columns possibly connected to letter-writing, suggest different levels of literacy on the part of their respective scribes. Both pieces of paracontent are also intimately connected with the content and placement of the recto text when rolled to the left, particularly when compared to the repeated poem on the verso which was written further away from its respective main content. The physical proximity to the related poems in these two instances means that both texts are visible together and can be easily located. This further suggests that the situation and motivations behind writing the poetic repetition and the two pieces of paracontent tied to the twelve-month poem cycle were somehow different.

3 Understanding the Placement of Paracontent

This chapter has considered scrolls to be primarily physical objects in order to gain insights into the different methods later users employed when handling Dunhuang scrolls to add writing on the verso. After considering possible ways of turning and rotating scrolls to produce same-direction or 'upside-down' text, sketches from P.4523 suggested that a small section of the verso would be available to the left while viewing the main content. In addition, the depiction of an official holding a scroll up and rolling the right end behind suggests that it was not necessarily common to write on the right rolled-up end of the scroll.

P.3812 makes a fascinating case study for analysing how users handled scrolls because of the variety of paracontent on its verso, both in terms of content and placement. The text on the recto shares similar themes with the *Classic of Poetry*, which indicates that the poems were compiled by a relatively literate person. It is written in a good hand, which is not particularly indicative of being produced within a student setting. Codicological analysis of the scroll suggests that the short sheet at the beginning of the scroll was attached at a later point in time, most likely to prevent further damage to the second sheet and to better preserve the scroll. A poem written on the verso of this first sheet may or may not have been already written prior to attaching the first sheet to the scroll. This makes it difficult to judge whether it was intentionally added in relation to the anthology. Nevertheless, the poem is immediately visible when the scroll is rolled up, which is indicative of some kind of agenda for putting it in such a prominent place.

The positions of further scattered writings on the verso reveal that different methods for handling and using a scroll are already evident in this single case study. The second case of paracontent introduced in this study were two

almost illegible texts written by the same scribe, one written in the same writing direction and the other 'upside-down'. It is not clear how these two texts relate to the recto of the scroll or whether they are instead a separate usage of blank space. Either way, there are two scenarios for how this content ended up written in two different directions by the same hand: either turning the scroll several times by returning to the recto as starting point, each time along a different axis; or by leaving the scroll with the verso facing upwards and turning the scroll around 180 degrees.

The remaining examples share clear physical and thematic relations to the poetry anthology found on the recto, but again indicate different ways of handling the scroll and varying motivations for adding paracontent. First, a repetition of a poem from the first sheet can be seen further away on the second sheet of the verso, suggesting that the entire scroll was turned over to write on the verso. With the recto content not visible when this paracontent was written, it would seem that the writer had memorised the poem but, in doing so, substituted a different phonetically-similar character in their repetition. Second, further repeated characters on the verso at the end of the recto imply that the torn end of the scroll was folded over to write the first two characters of the last poem on the recto. This attests to the anthology being read and the scroll used even after the end was torn, most likely by students.

As suggested by contemporary depictions, the case study revealed that in two cases paracontent was added to the left rolled-up verso end of a scroll as expected. Moreover, the proximity to the respective poems on the recto enables a quick retrieval of the paracontent. The scribe's engagement with the poems and their addition of related content connected by shared vocabulary speaks also to levels of literacy and an active participation with the recto poems.

The findings of this study thus forward pragmatic examples of the many ways in which Dunhuang scrolls were handled and used. These initial suggestions are not only useful when considering Dunhuang scrolls as physical objects, but also Dunhuang paintings and sketches. Comments could also be added in similar ways to depictions of scenes, such as P.4524 which bears illustrations connected with the *Transformation Text on Subduing Demons* (Xiang mo bianwen 降魔變文) on the recto and five pieces of related heptasyllabic verse in several places on the verso.

Ultimately, paracontent preserves different layers of users and usages of a scroll. Their positioning on the scroll enables us to judge how the scroll was physically handled and the aims for adding such writings. Much of the paracontent on P.3812 is suggestive of use by students, with these different methods of engagement with the main content, physical proximity or distance from the text being engaged with, and the content of these additions

perhaps reflecting differing levels of literacy. Considering Dunhuang manuscripts as *objects* that were held, folded, turned, and torn contextualises what may at first seem like scattered, unrelated additions. Considerations of content and proximity when handling scrolls are vital tools in being better able to distinguish between paracontent related to the main content and scattered notes that mark a reuse of blank space for unrelated texts or sketches. In addition to gaining a comprehensive understanding of the life of a single scroll, these object-based considerations could be applied to a wider range of scrolls. Considering reoccurring patterns on a broader scale would lead to a more accurate picture of Dunhuang manuscript culture, (re)usage of scrolls, and reading experiences.

Acknowledgements

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CHAPTER 10

Manuscripts on the Move: A Codex's Journey from Lingzhou to Dunhuang

Jing Feng

Abstract

Starting from a codex completed in Lingzhou 靈州 in 982, this chapter reconstructs the movement of manuscripts and travellers along the Silk Roads in the tenth century by examining codices recovered from the Dunhuang 敦煌 Library Cave. Manuscript paper from the ninth and tenth centuries was mostly thick and coarse, featuring uneven fibre distribution and wide laid lines. The paper of a few tenth-century codices, however, has closely-packed, thin laid lines. These codices were possibly produced outside Dunhuang using paper from other regions. They constitute a small but valuable group of artefacts which shed light on the travels of manuscripts along the trade and diplomatic routes between Dunhuang and other regions in the ninth and tenth centuries.

1 A Codex from Lingzhou

A codex is a book form that consists of one or more quires of bifolia sewn or glued together along their centrefold.[1] Some 450 codices and fragments of codices have been discovered in the Dunhuang Library Cave, which are currently housed in different institutions around the world.[2] P.3912, the focus of this chapter, is a sewn codex containing the Buddhist dhāraṇīs *Dhāraṇī Sutra Spoken by the Buddha on Mārīcī-deva* (Foshuo Molizhitian tuoluoni zhou jing 佛說摩利支天陀羅尼呪經) and *Dhāraṇī of the Extensive, Perfect, Unimpeded and*

1 A bifolium is a sheet of paper folded in half, containing two 'folios'. Each folio has two writable sides, called 'pages'. A quire is a gathering of bifolia which are inserted into one another and sewn together.

2 For codices recovered from the Dunhuang Library Cave, see Drège 1979 and 2014, 373–76; Li 1991, 93–95; Du 2003, 451–59; Fang 2020, 222–37; Galambos 2020, 37–66; and Feng 2022a, 2022b, and 2022c.

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Great Compassionate Mind of the Thousand-handed, Thousand-eyed Bodhisattva Guanshiyin (Qianshou qianyan Guanshiyin pusa guangda yuanman wuai dabeixin tuoluoni 千手千眼觀世音菩薩廣大圓滿無礙大悲心陀羅尼), alongside other mantras. At the end of the codex, there is a colophon, reading: 'Copied in Shuofang on the seventh day of the seventh month of the seventh year (982) of the Taiping xingguo reign era' 太平興國七年七月七日寫在朔方. 'Shuofang' here refers to Lingzhou, a transport hub and military outpost on the major artery between the Central Plains 中原 and the Western Regions 西域. In the tenth century, one of the major routes connecting the Central Plains with the Hexi Corridor passed through Lingzhou, Liangzhou 涼州, Ganzhou 甘州, Suzhou 肅州, Guazhou 瓜州, and Shazhou 沙洲 (Dunhuang), as shown in Figure 10.1. A vivid example of this route is provided by S.529, a manuscript of six letters by a monk named Guiwen 歸文 who travelled from Dingzhou 定州 (in today's Hebei) to India. Based on the letters we know he reached the city of Lingzhou in 924. As shown in another manuscript, P. 2638, he finally arrived at Shazhou sometime between 933 and 936.

Envoys and traders also travelled along this route, as illustrated by multiple Dunhuang manuscripts.[3] However, the copyist of the codex P.3912 does not

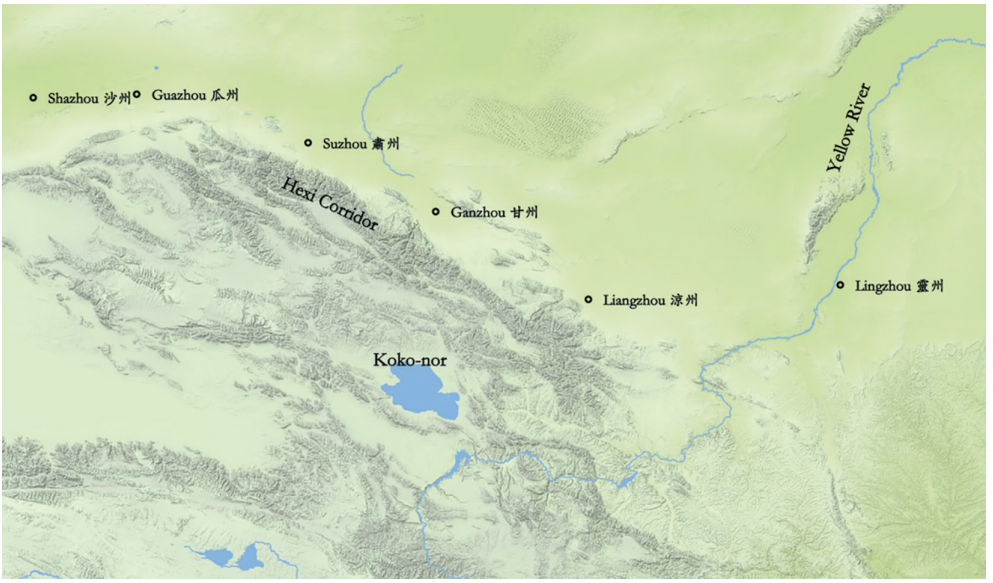
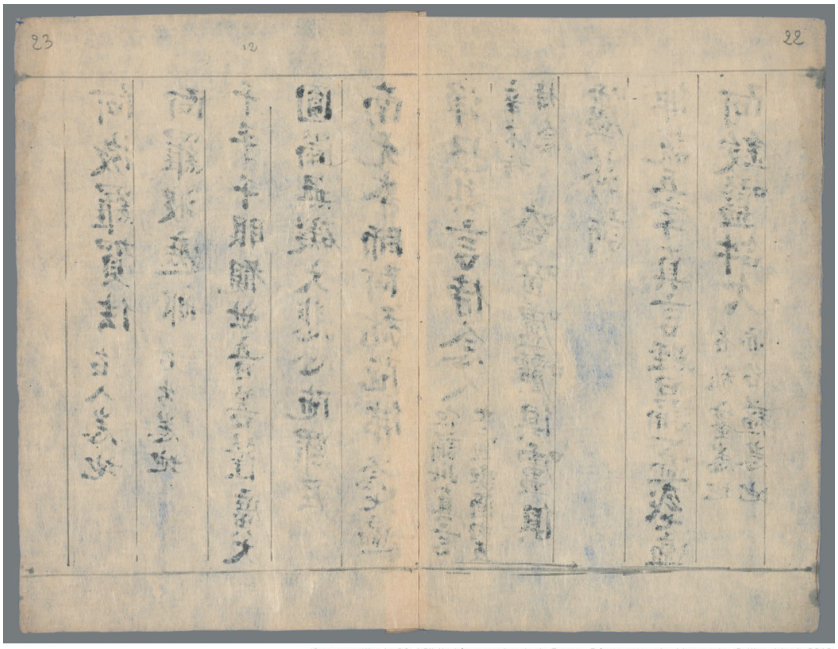


FIGURE 10.1 Key locations on the route connecting central China and the Western Regions in the tenth century

3 See Hamilton 1955, 28; van Schaik and Galambos 2012, 49–59; Zhao 2001, 2003, and 2009; and Rong 2015, 102–105.

mention his status in the manuscript. All we know is that he came to Lingzhou, then travelled to Shazhou and left this booklet there, as this codex was discovered in the Dunhuang Library Cave. The size of the codex is only 15.4 cm in height and 10 cm in width, which would be suitable for travellers to carry. The dhāraṇīs, one of which is about the guardian deva Mārīcī, also granted the codex protective functions. An apotropaic booklet like this would be a useful aide when traversing the desert sands.

In terms of its inner structure, P.3912 contains 32 folios divided into four quires. Each quire is comprised of four bifolia, i.e., eight folios. They are bound together with white thread, which goes through four sewing holes pierced along the centrefold. Curiously, the copyist of the codex repeatedly skipped pages. As shown in Table 10.1, squares in black represent pages which have text while squares in white denote blank pages. The first text starts from folio 3 and ends on folio 10. At this stage, the copyist still wrote on both sides of the paper. From folio 11, the folios alternate between being blank and filled. The reason the copyist only used one side of the paper may have been related to the quality of paper. In Figure 10.2, we can see ink bleeding through to the other side, hindering the copyist from writing on both sides. This is uncommon in most Dunhuang codices as they usually were made of thick paper.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France. Département des Manuscrits. Pelliot chinois 3912

FIGURE 10.2 Ink bleeding through the paper of P.3912

TABLE 10.1 Layout of blank and filled pages in P.3912

Quire 1	f. 1		f. 2		f. 3		f. 4		f. 5		f. 6		f. 7		f. 8	
	p.1	p.2	p.3	p.4	p.5	p.6	p.7	p.8	p.9	p.10	p.11	p.12	p.13	p.14	p.15	p.16
Quire 2	f. 9		f. 10		f. 11		f. 12		f. 13		f. 14		f. 15		f. 16	
	p.17	p.18	p.19	p.20	p.21	p.22	p.23	p.24	p.25	p.26	p.27	p.28	p.29	p.30	p.31	p.32
Quire 3	f. 17		f. 18		f. 19		f. 20		f. 21		f. 22		f. 23		f. 24	
	p.33	p.34	p.35	p.36	p.37	p.38	p.39	p.40	p.41	p.42	p.43	p.44	p.45	p.46	p.47	p.48
Quire 4	f. 25		f. 26		f. 27		f. 28		f. 29		f. 30		f. 31		f. 32	
	p.49	p.50	p.51	p.52	p.53	p.54	p.55	p.56	p.57	p.58	p.59	p.60	p.61	p.62	p.63	p.64

Indeed, taking a closer look at the paper of P.3912 reveals further intriguing details: firstly, the paper is thin and homogeneous, while the paper of other contemporary codices in the Dunhuang corpus, as mentioned above, is thick, usually with a coarse or irregular texture. Secondly, the laid lines of the paper are straight, dense, and evenly-distributed, as seen in Figure 10.3. The width of 20 laid lines is only 3.0 cm. This number is much lower than that of local

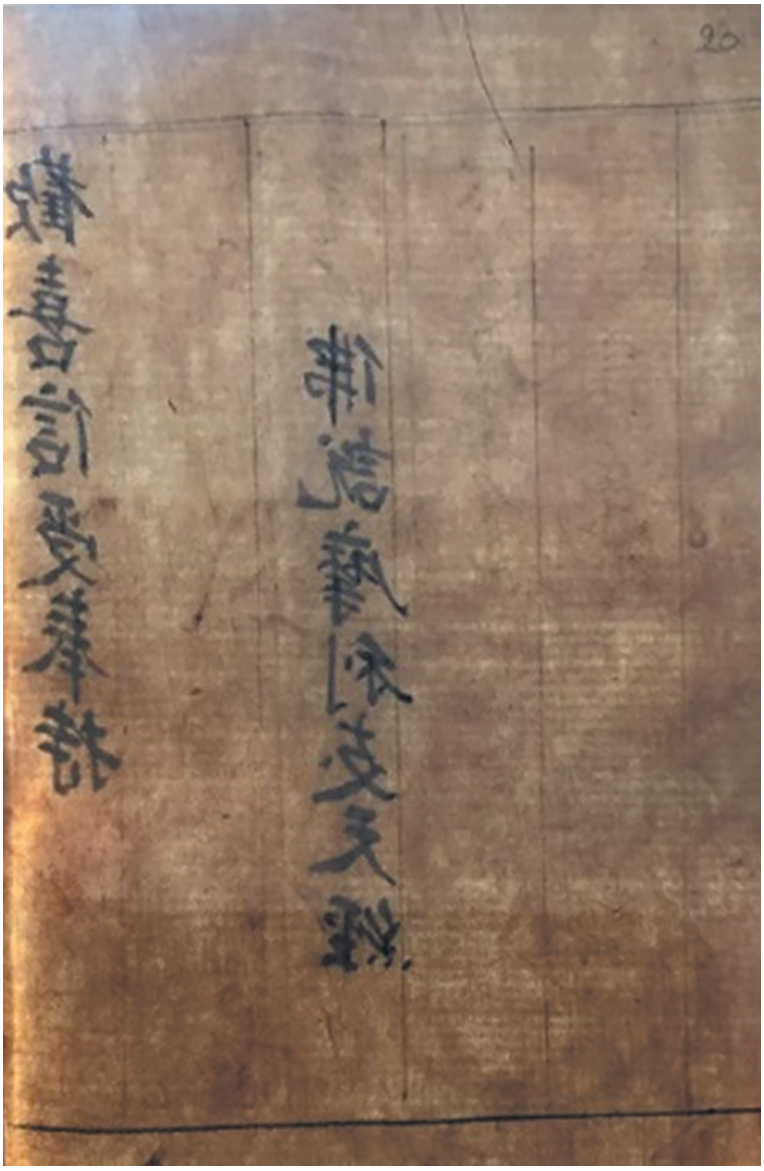


FIGURE 10.3 The paper of P.3912, photographed with a lightbox

Dunhuang codices from the same period, which range between 4.0 cm and 6.0 cm. Thirdly, the colour of the paper is a greyish brown, which is also an uncommon colour among Dunhuang codices. In sum, the paper of P.3912 is very different to typical codices produced locally in Dunhuang and so was likely produced outside this region. These material differences can help us to identify additional manuscripts which were produced outside Dunhuang, especially those which lack colophons noting the place of their production.[4]

2 Typical Traits of the Paper Used for Dunhuang Codices

According to Akira Fujieda's 藤枝晃 analysis of paper to date and locate Dunhuang manuscripts, the development of Dunhuang manuscripts can be divided into three chronological stages: the fifth and sixth centuries (the Northern Dynasties), the seventh and eighth centuries (the Sui and Tang dynasties), and the ninth and tenth centuries (the Tibetan Period and the Guiyijun 歸義軍 Period). Manuscripts from each stage have particular material characteristics.[5] For instance, paper from the pre-Tibetan period is much finer than paper produced in the ninth and tenth centuries. The best-known examples of this fine paper are scrolls of the *Lotus Sutra* (Miaofa lianhua jing 妙法蓮華經) and the *Diamond Sutra* (Jingang bore boluomi jing 金剛般若波羅密經) commissioned by the Tang court between 671 and 677.[6] The paper was dyed yellow and was carefully polished. It bears an outstanding appearance, is of regular size, and has thin laid lines (1.8 cm/20 laid lines). In contrast, paper from the ninth and tenth centuries was thicker with a coarse surface, uneven fibre distribution, and patchy laid lines. The width of 20 laid lines rises to above 4.0 cm and sometimes even reaches 6.0 cm.[7] The paper used in Dunhuang codices mostly falls within this range, with notable exceptions being codices that reuse earlier manuscripts and codices produced outside Dunhuang, wherein the paper is quite different.[8] We can thus credibly date the majority of Dunhuang codices to the ninth and tenth centuries.

4 The colophons of Dunhuang manuscripts usually note the date and the location of copying manuscripts. See Ikeda 1990. Most of the manuscripts, however, do not contain colophons due to their damaged condition.

5 Fujieda 1973a and 1990. This section is based on my examination of the manuscripts in person and is a supplement to Drège's 1979 study of the paper used in Dunhuang codices.

6 For scrolls manufactured at the Tang court, see both Fujieda 1961 and 1973a, 121–22, and Zhao 2006.

7 For data concerning laid lines, see Drège 2002a, 147–175.

8 Some codices reuse good-quality paper cut from scrolls produced by the Tang court, such as S.5470, S.5538, and S.6250. See Feng 2022a, 319–25.

Another typical trait of the paper used in Dunhuang codices is curved laid lines, as shown in Figure 10.4. This suggests that the screens used for making paper were made of soft material such as reed or grass, which would easily deform under the weight of the pulp. Reed and grass are more readily available than bamboo in dry areas such as deserts, and so the wavelike laid lines are the result of the local availability of material rather than poor craftsmanship of the screens themselves. These curved laid lines also prove that most of the codices were produced locally in Dunhuang or other dry northwest regions on the peripheries of the Chinese states.

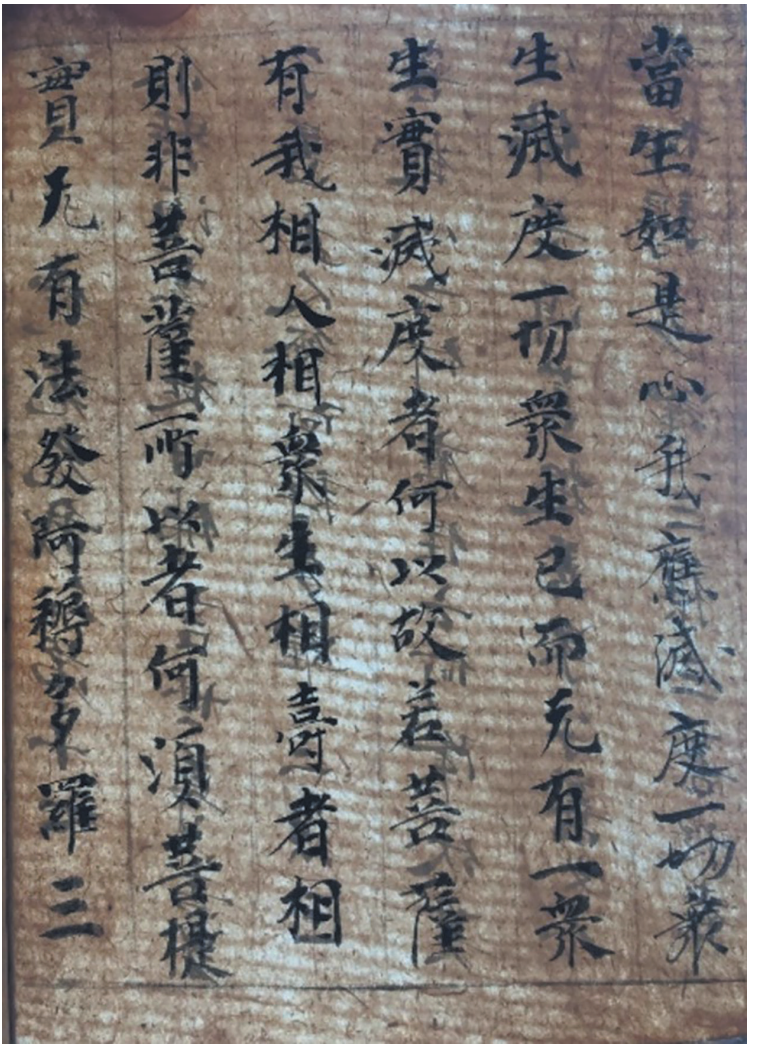


FIGURE 10.4 Curved laid lines seen on P.3824, photographed with a lightbox

The paper used in Dunhuang codices can be further divided into two types based on its quality. The first type features irregular texture and poor craftsmanship. The thickness varies, which is the result of the uneven spread of pulp on the screen during the paper-making process. Sometimes the craftsman did not perfectly lift the entire undried sheet from the screen, leading to internal damage and imperfections. As shown in Figure 10.5, the brighter triangle on folio 5 of P.3910 is one such site of damage. Folio 3 shows another type of damage: the darker area to the right marks where a loose tissue from the paper has partially lifted and, later, has been pasted back onto the paper. The poor skill of craftsmen can be one of the reasons for such damage, as could the weak bonding strength of the fibres. In this first type, we also see uneven fibre distribution, evidencing inadequate fibre blending, as shown in Figure 10.6.

The second type of paper is buff or light beige. Like the first type, the paper of the second type is thick with a coarse surface and wide laid lines. What is different is that the texture of the second type is more homogeneous and the paper has a better overall appearance. One such example is P.3913, a copy of

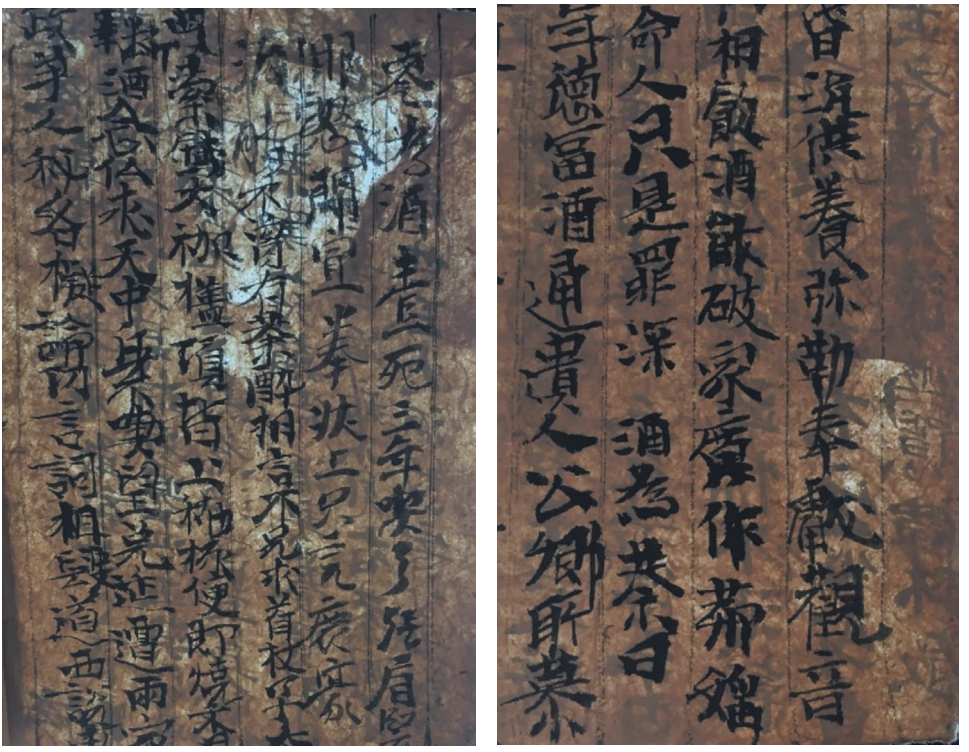


FIGURE 10.5 Areas of damage seen on codex P.3910 folio 5 and folio 3, as photographed with a lightbox



FIGURE 10.6 Uneven fibre distribution seen on P.4044, photographed with a lightbox

the *Ritual Instruction for Altar Methods* (Tanfa yize 壇法儀則).[9] The codex has a vertical shape measuring 28.5 × 10.1 cm, containing a total of 174 pages divided into 11 quires of eight folios (the last quire only contains seven folios). The laid lines of the paper are visible on the surface, as in Figure 10.7, which

9 On this text, see Hou 2008; Goodman 2013; and Sørensen 2020.

range from 5.6 cm/20 lines to 6.6 cm/20 lines. The paper is thick and strong with a homogeneous light-buff colour (though it has been marred by later water creases and dark stains). The binding of this codex also shows deliberate thought. Eight sewing holes are placed equidistant from one another at *c.* 3.35



FIGURE 10.7 Laid lines on P.3913, photographed with and without a lightbox

cm apart. The distance of the top sewing holes from the upper edge (2.65 cm) also approximates that of the bottom holes from the bottom edge (2.7 cm). The main text starts from page 4 and ends on page 171, leaving three blank pages at the front and another three at the back. This suggests that the copyist planned in advance to keep an equal number of blank pages at the front and back.

Another well-produced codex made of quality paper is P.3921, containing the *Sutra Spoken by the Buddha on the Primary Activities of the Bodhisattvas* (Foshuo pusa benye jing 佛說菩薩本業經) and the *Sutra of the Utmost King of the Great Vehicle* (Dacheng dingwang jing 大乘頂王經). The paper of P.3921 is thick and of a light buff colour with visible horizontal laid lines (5.2–6.0 cm/20 lines). The size of this codex (26 × 9.6 cm) is close to that of P.3913, and both codices are composed of quires of eight folios and have eight sewing holes. The sewing holes of P.3921 are also placed evenly along the spine, at a distance of *c.* 3.4 cm. The material similarities between P.3921 and P.3913 suggest there is a connection between the two manuscripts, with both perhaps being produced by the same workshop or in the same monastery. Unlike most copyists who started copying texts on the first page or the second page of the codex, the copyist of P.3921 also left three blank folios at the front of the codex, reflecting an intention to create a better visual appearance and thus treating the manuscript as a more formal object.

Other codices made using this second type of paper include P.3904 and S.5458. The first manuscript contains the *Heart Sutra* (Bore boluomiduoxin jing 般若波羅蜜多心經) and the *Sutra of Guanyin* (Guanyin jing 觀音經 i.e., the twenty-fifth chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*: 'The Universal Gateway of Bodhisattva Guanshiyin' 觀世音菩薩普門品), both with commentaries. The second codex contains the *Sutra of Guanyin*, the *Sutra Spoken by the Buddha on Wholesome and Unwholesome Causes and Effects* (Foshuo shan'e yinguo jing 佛說善惡因果經), the *Heart Sutra*, the *Sutra of Bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha* (Dizang pusa jing 地藏菩薩經), and the *Sutra on Questions Asked by a Deity* (Tianqingwen jing 天請問經). The two codices are of similar size (23.1 × 7.7 cm and 23.5 × 7 cm) and are both composed of quires of eight folios sewn together with eight sewing holes. The paper is homogeneous and of a decent quality, though each has a different colour. P.3904 uses paper that is light buff, while S.5458 uses paper that is bright yellow.

It is noteworthy that the above four codices made of quality paper were all constructed with quires of eight folios, have eight sewing holes and a vertical shape, and all contain Buddhist texts. These codices form an interlinked group which were possibly produced in a similar context. More importantly, these codices offer a local perspective which problematises the argument that paper from the ninth and tenth centuries in the Dunhuang collection is inferior

and of low quality. Indeed, the paper of these codices is thick and has wide and sparsely-distributed laid lines, which is quite different from our general impression of 'good paper' which should be fine and thin. This impression, however, is established on the basis of Tang court paper, assuming that paper from central China must have been 'better' than paper produced in peripheral regions. These codices prompt us to reassess the Dunhuang local paper as perhaps being a distinct regional style rather than the result of local technical inferiority.

3 Other Codices from beyond Dunhuang

With these typical traits in mind, it becomes clear that the paper of codex P.3912, the focus of this chapter, does not correspond with any aforementioned types. Taking the place name Shuofang in the colophon into account, we can conclude that this codex was not a local product of Dunhuang and was instead produced in Lingzhou. Another codex, P.4071, is also connected with Lingzhou. The beginning of the codex is missing, with the first text on the remaining part being a divination text which tells the fortune of those born in the fifth year of the Tiancheng 天成 reign era (930). The colophon, located at the end of the first text, informs us that the text was authored by Kang Zun 康遵, who was a 'soothsayer in white clothes' 白衣術士人 from Lingzhou, on the eleventh day of the twelfth month of the seventh year of the Kaibao 開寶 reign era (975). Following the colophon, the same hand, as made clear by the writing sloping to left as in the first text, continues to copy the *Dhāraṇī Sutra of the Miraculous Incantations of the Great Corona of Tathāgata beneath the White Canopy* (Da foding rulai dingji baigai tuoluoni shenzhou jing 大佛頂如來頂髻白蓋陀羅尼神呪經). From the colophon, it is not clear whether the copyist copied the texts in Lingzhou or elsewhere. However, the paper of the codex suggests it was probably not a local product of Dunhuang. The paper is of a light buff colour and has neat, visible laid lines. The width of 20 laid lines is around 3.9–4.0 cm, which is lower than most of the Dunhuang codices. On the other hand, the paper of P.4071 has sparser laid lines and a more coarse, irregular texture than the paper of P.3912. Evidently, P.3912 and P.4071 used different kinds of paper despite both possibly being manufactured in Lingzhou.

One further codex, S.5613, a collection of epistolary models, may have come from even further east. Fujieda Akira noted that the paper of this codex was 'soft, light buff' and that the copyist used a brush rather than a pen – a common writing tool used in Dunhuang in the ninth and tenth centuries. He thus

suggested that this codex was possibly from the Central Plains.[10] My examination of S.5613, P.4050, and the missing piece of S.5613 confirms his findings. Both S.5613 and P.4050 use soft, homogeneous paper of a buff colour. The width of 20 laid lines is around 3.1–3.2 cm, again much lower than typical Dunhuang codices. The content of the codex also shares a connection with the Central Plains, since Zhao Heping's 趙和平 study reveals that the author of the letters was probably an official from the Hebei region.[11] The owner of this manuscript may also have been someone who needed these letter models for reference, possibly a government official as well, though which circuit he served in is unclear. He may have been a member of a diplomatic mission from the Guiyijun who went to the Central Plains and brought back this manual, or he may have been an envoy from the Central Plains travelling with this handbook who, for some reason, left it in Dunhuang. In either case, this pocket-sized codex (18.5 × 14.5 cm) teaching how to write letters was no doubt suitable for use when travelling.

The codices P.3912, S.5613 and P.4050 discussed above share one key characteristic: they all use paper with thin laid lines. This feature distinguishes them from locally-produced Dunhuang manuscripts and represents paper-making techniques from other regions. Based on the laid lines, I have identified further codices in the Dunhuang collection that possibly came from outside Dunhuang, as given in Table 10.2.[12] The laid lines of the paper of these codices are lower than 4.0 cm/20 laid lines, thinner than other codices from the same period. There is no evidence to confirm that they were all produced in Lingzhou or the Central Plains, except for P.3912, S.5613, and P.4050 discussed above. The rest of the manuscripts provide no clear indication of their geographical origins. The

10 Fujieda 1973b, 408.

11 Zhao 1995a and 1995b. Zhao 1995c, 263 points out that many manuals of letter models are preserved in codex form, such as P.3449, P.3864, P.3931, S.5613, and P.4050. Zhao suggests that these manuals were probably carried from the Central Plains to Dunhuang. For more on letter models from the Central Plains, see Wu 2018.

12 Manuscripts containing texts which were composed or translated outside Dunhuang were not necessarily produced outside of Dunhuang. Here, I focus on codices which were physically manufactured outside Dunhuang. For texts and other manuscripts originating from outside Dunhuang, see Lin 1991, 370–412, and Hao and Wu 2019, 92–116. Descriptions in Table 10.2 are based on my examination of the manuscripts in person and the catalogues of the Stein and Pelliot Chinois collections (Giles 1957, Soymié, Michel et al. 1983, 1991, and 1995). The table includes fewer manuscripts from the Stein Collection and Oldenburg Collection due to a lack of data. A comprehensive examination of paper in these two collections will grant us a larger pool for further studies. The examined codices usually have irregular, curved, or blurry laid lines, which do not allow for accurate counting. Therefore, the data of laid lines in Table 10.2 is approximate. Regarding the descriptions of colour, it should be remembered that the paper we see today is no longer its original colour as humidity and light exposure have caused degradation and changed the paper's colour and texture.

TABLE 10.2 Codices with thin laid lines

Pressmark	Content	Laid line (cm/lines)	Texture	Colour
S.5586	Dhāraṇīs	1.8/20	Homogeneous	buff
P.4038	Medical manual	2.4–2.6/20	Homogeneous	beige
P.4837	Treatise on military tactics Medical manual	2.5/20	Homogeneous	greyish brown
P.4878	Poems by Zhang Hu 張祜 (*c.* 785–*c.* 852)	2.5/20	Homogeneous	light beige
P.3912	*Foshuo Molizhitian tuoluoni zhou jing* 佛説摩利支天陀羅尼呪經 *Jingkou zhenyan* 浄口真言 *Foshuo wuzi zhenyan* 佛説五字真言 *Qianshou qianyan Guanshiyin pusa guangda yuanman wuai dabeixin tuoluoni* 千手千眼觀世音菩薩廣大圓滿無礙大悲心陀羅尼	2.9–3.0/20	Homogeneous	greyish brown
S.5613 and P.4050	Letter models	3.1–3.2/20	Homogeneous	buff
Дх-2823	Manual of Buddhist terms	3.3/20	Irregular	beige
P.3761	*Yanluowang shouji jing* 閻羅王授記經	3.3/20	Irregular	light beige
P.3650A and P.3650B	*Yingjin* 籯金	3.3/20	Irregular	beige
P.3759	*Foshuo bayang shenzhou jing* 佛説八陽神咒經 *Foshuo Molizhitian tuoluoni zhou jing* 佛説摩利支天陀羅尼呪經 *Foshuo jie baisheng yuanjia tuoluoni jingzhou* 佛説解百生怨家陀羅尼經呪	3.8/20	Irregular	light buff

paper in the table vary in terms of texture, colour, and laid lines (1.8 cm–3.8 cm/20 laid lines), which shows that they may not have derived from one single workshop or region.

P.2292, a lecture scroll from Xichuan 西川 (in today's Sichuan), raises the possibility that some of the manuscripts made of light-coloured paper may have come from southwestern China. The scroll, dating to 947, contains a lecture text of the *Sutra Spoken by Vimalakīrti* (Weimojie jing 維摩詰經). Two colophons appended to the end of the scroll are written in the same hand as the main text. The first colophon states that this manuscript was produced at the Jingzhen Chan Monastery 靜真禅院 in Xichuan. The second colophon provides the context: the copyist held a lecture at the Yingming Monastery 應明寺 and presented the content to the audience. The paper of this scroll is of a good quality in a very light grey colour, again being different to the paper used in tenth-century Dunhuang. Sichuan had been a centre for papermaking since the Tang dynasty, and Dunhuang and Sichuan were closely connected regions in terms of religion, literature, and art.[13] Numerous texts in Dunhuang manuscripts originated in the Sichuan region, so it would not be surprising if some manuscripts found in Dunhuang were also physically produced in Sichuan.

Returning to Table 10.2, four manuscripts, i.e., Дх-2823, P.3761, P.3650A and P.3650B, have alternate blank and filled pages akin to P.3912.[14] All of these codices used beige, filmy paper with thin laid lines (3.3 cm/20 laid lines, see Figures 10.8 and 10.9), and we can see ink bleeding through the paper to the other side. Two of these codices, P.3761 and Дх-2823, are tiny codices of just 5 × 5 cm in size, smaller than the palm of one's hand. Дх-2823 is a manual teaching Buddhist terms through question-answer conversations. P.3761 is a copy of the *Scripture on the Ten Kings* (Yanluowang shouji jing 閻羅王授記經). It consists of 85 bifolia stacked one after another with glue applied along the outer edge of the centrefold of each bifolium. Two laminated sheets are attached to the beginning and the end of the text block as the front and back covers. Another double-layered sheet is glued to the binding edges of the covers, wrapping around the spine.

P.3759, another codex given in Table 10.2, resembles P.3761 in many aspects. This manuscript is composed of 65 bifolia glued in the same way as P.3761. Both manuscripts are of the same tiny size and were carefully bound. The binder of P.3759 stiffened the first and the last folio with extra paper and wrapped the covers and spine with a piece of blue silk. The modest size enabled their users to carry them around and this portability was suitable for long-distance travel. The paper of P.3759 is also thin and light in colour, though it is more homogeneous than P.3761 and has wider laid lines (3.8 cm/20 laid lines). More importantly,

13 Tsien 1985, 45, 77, 94, and Mair 1989, 7–8.

14 Дх-2823 from the Oldenburg collection, St. Petersburg contains a total of twelve blank pages. Photos in Eluosi kexueyuan dongfang yanjiusuo shengbidebao fensuo et al. 1998, 68–71 do not show all the blank pages.

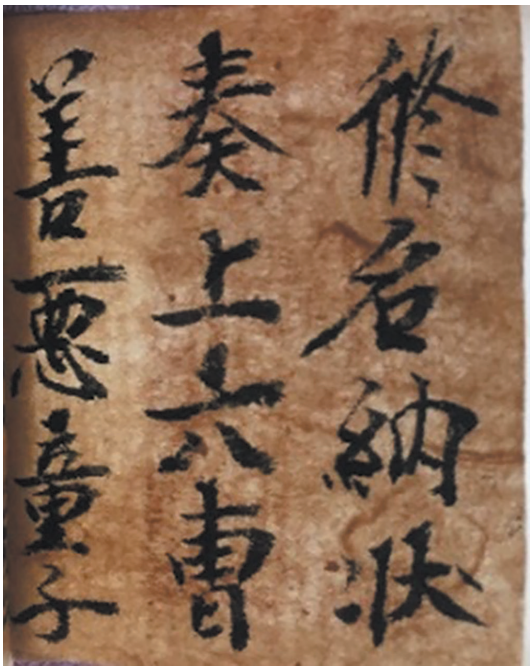


FIGURE 10.8 Laid lines of P.3761, photographed with a lightbox

both P.3761 and P.3759 are related to religious practices. P.3759 contains three texts, the *Sutra Spoken by the Buddha on the Miraculous Incantations of the Eight Yang* (Foshuo bayang shenzhou jing), the *Dhāraṇī Sutra Spoken by the Buddha on Mārīcī* (Foshuo Molizhitian tuoluoni zhou jing), and the *Dhāraṇīs Spoken by the Buddha for Dispelling Resentment Accumulated in the Course of a Hundred Lifetimes* (Foshuo jie baisheng yuanjia tuoluoni jingzhou). These texts have an apotropaic function to avert misfortune and disasters. At the end of the codex, there is a colophon which records how the copyist used this codex: 'Every day I uphold the sutras, recite them three times, and keep the precepts of clothing and food in mind. (In this way,) my family will always prosper'.[15] Another codex, P.3761, contains the longer recension of the *Scripture on the Ten Kings*. This version, which contains hymns and prayers, was used for religious services and ceremonies, though its tiny size makes it less likely to have been a prop for public performance. As suggested by Stephen Teiser, the codex was probably

15 日誦三遍，日日持經，念戒依(衣)食，字(自)然日日家興。 The date of this colophon is the sixteenth day of the fifth intercalary month of the *wuzi* 戊子 year. The year should be 988 instead of 928. See Fujieda 1973b, 431.

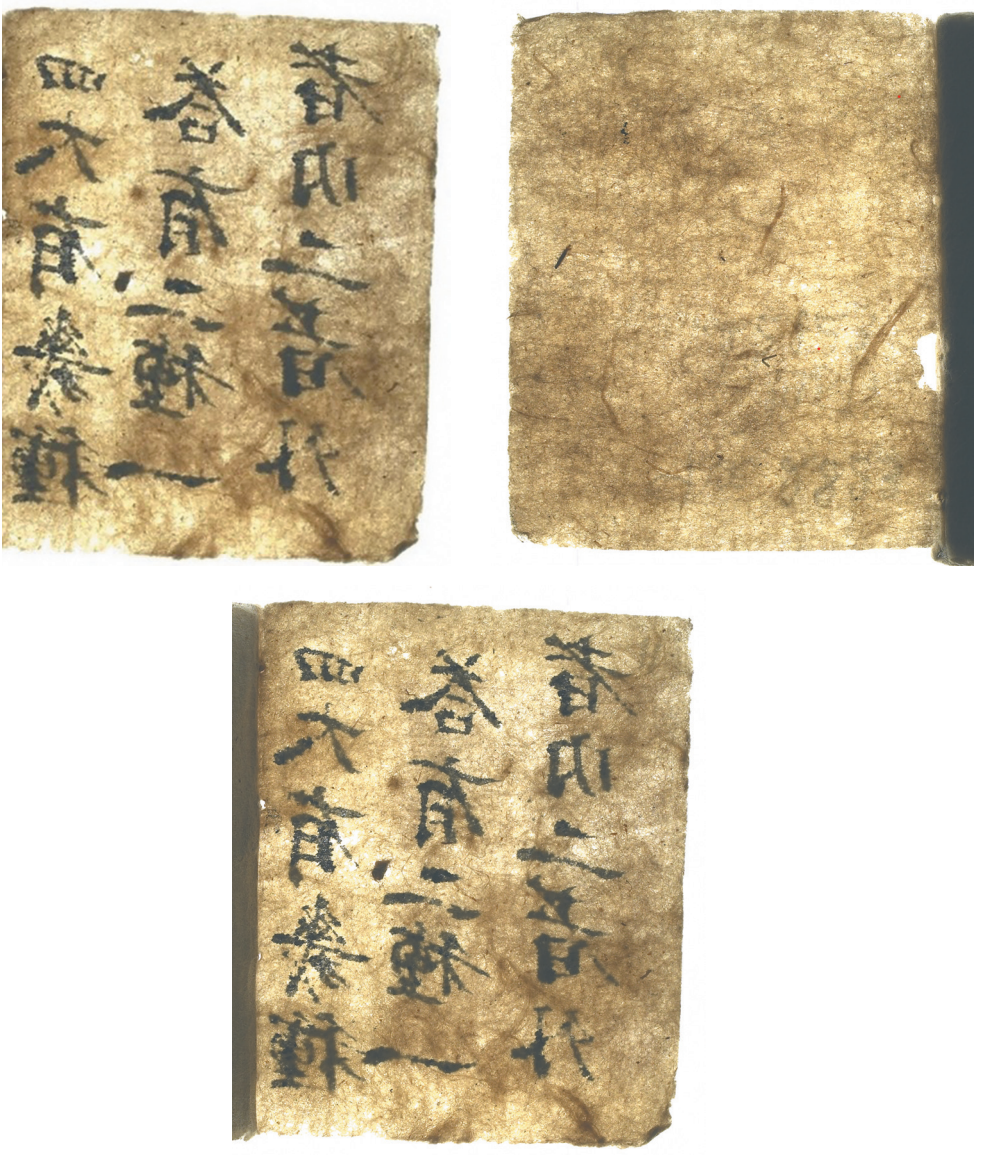


FIGURE 10.9 Laid lines of Дх-2823, photographed with a lightbox

the personal study guide of a priest, who needed to prepare and practise privately before he performed rituals in public.[16] Considering that this codex was probably not a local product of Dunhuang, the owner of P.3761 may have been

16 Teiser 1994, 99–101, 152–53.

an itinerant evangelist who performed rituals and delivered sermons during his journey. He took this codex to Dunhuang and, for an unknown reason, left it there.

In comparison, P.3650A and P.3650B, measuring 28.5 × 21.5 cm, are less portable. They are both fragments of a codex containing a literary manual *A Basket of Gold* (Yingjin), which collects allusions for article writing. The copyist only wrote on the second and the third page of each bifolium and skipped the first and the fourth page, exhibiting the same pattern as P.3761.[17] If we disassembled the codex and unfolded the bifolia, it would turn into a stack of sheets, each of which would be written on one side only. Furthermore, the alternate blank and written pages in P.3761, P.3650A, and P.3650B may be related to the printing cultures of the Central Plains and Sichuan. As noted earlier, the copyists of these codices only wrote on the second and the third page of each bifolium and skipped the first and fourth page. We find similar practices in printed booklets from the Song 宋 (960–1279), Khitan (916–1125), Tangut (1038–1227), and Jurchen (1115–1234) regions. The binding of these booklets is known as 'butterfly binding' (*hudie zhuang* 蝴蝶装), wherein sheets were printed on one side and folded in half. In each bifolium, the second page and the third page contained texts, and the first page and the last page were blank. The binder then applied glue along the outer edge of the centrefold of each bifolium and pasted them to one another, creating a booklet with alternate printed and blank pages. The physical appearance of butterfly-bound books corresponds with P.3761, P.3650A, and P.3650B, except that butterfly-bound booklets are printed material rather than written manuscripts. A further exploration of the relationship between these two types of booklets may grant us a better understanding of the interplay between manuscripts and printed books during the medieval period.

4 Manuscripts on the Move

This chapter began with the examination of P.3912, a codex recovered from the Dunhuang library cave. This codex contains a colophon dating to 982, wherein the copyist stated that this codex was copied in Shuofang (Lingzhou). Analysis of its paper further demonstrates that this codex did not originate in Dunhuang. The paper of this codex is filmy and homogeneous with thin and

17 On the blank verso of folio 1 of P.3650A, there is a note which includes place names along the Hexi Corridor.

straight laid lines, while manuscripts from the same period are mostly made of thick, coarse paper with wide and curved laid lines.

P.3912 was not the only manuscript which came from outside Dunhuang. Based on the laid lines, this study identifies a group of further codices which were produced outside Dunhuang. The study not only reveals paper-making techniques in other regions, but also enables us to contextualise and situate these codices relative to the movement of manuscripts on the Silk Roads in the ninth and tenth centuries. By considering manuscripts as *objects* and not just vessels for texts, we are able to trace the movement of people through the movement of manuscripts. We see travellers carrying sutras as amulets to protect themselves from danger, officials on diplomatic missions using epistolary manuals, and itinerant monks preaching sermons and performing rituals while journeying. All these peoples constitute part of the social landscape of the Hexi Corridor at the end of the first millennium CE. As Rong Xinjiang 榮新江 points out, the Silk Roads were 'the Roads of Manuscripts'.[18] The history of the Silk Roads is thus also the history of manuscript culture.

Dunhuang was undeniably an important transport nexus on the Silk Roads during the medieval period. Envoys, merchants, and pilgrims came and went, bringing with them new objects, techniques, and cultures. It is therefore reasonable to assume that manuscripts with unusual physical characteristics may have come from other regions. Thus, the fact that some manuscripts were made of paper with finer laid lines and lighter colouration does not necessarily mean that these manuscripts were earlier products dating to the seventh and eighth centuries.[19] While I have limited my observations to codices in this chapter, there is little doubt that the same method can be used to study other

18 Rong 2017, 75–103.

19 Consider, for instance, S.5478. This codex is made of homogenous, smooth paper in a buff colour and the laid lines are invisible. Based on taboo characters, Zhang 2010, 66–67 has tied this manuscript to the reign of Emperor Ruizong 睿宗 (r. 684–690). Fang 2016 analysed the codex's physical characteristics and taboo characters, contending that the copying of the manuscript was between 684 and 690. While taboo characters are accepted as a method of dating Dunhuang manuscripts, how this system functioned in practice awaits further study, and the reliability of the method is debatable; see Dou and Xu 2004 and Galambos 2013. Indeed, the copyist of S.5478 may have transcribed the taboo characters already given in the text – meaning that the taboo characters instead indicate the earliest possible date of the manuscript, not its exact time of production. It is thus possible that this codex, like most codices recovered from the Dunhuang library cave, dates to the ninth and tenth centuries but was produced outside Dunhuang with paper from other regions, giving it its unusual material traits. A scientific analysis of the paper of seventh-century manuscripts and a comparison of the results with the paper of S.5478 may reveal more information on the date and the geographical origin of this codex.

book forms in the Dunhuang corpus, such as scrolls, concertinas, and pothis. A comprehensive survey which integrates as many items as possible may grant us a clearer picture of the manuscripts, paper, and people that passed through the Hexi region during the ninth and tenth centuries.

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CHAPTER 11

The Life and Afterlife of a Funerary Divination Scroll

Mélodie Doumy

Abstract

Only a few of the manuscripts from the sealed Cave 17, discovered in 1900 at the Mogao Caves 莫高窟 complex near Dunhuang 敦煌, do not relate to Buddhism. Among these, about a dozen deal with funerary geomancy, a divination art relating to what is colloquially referred to as *fengshui* 風水. The focal point of the present chapter is the scroll S.3877, acquired by the British-Hungarian explorer Marc Aurel Stein in 1907 and now held at the British Library. This manuscript offers guidance on where best to position a grave and is likely dated to the late-ninth to tenth centuries. The drawing on the recto, spanning its entire two-metre long surface, constitutes a rare illustration of funerary divination based on hill formations. In order to understand the function (or functions) the scroll may have served before being deposited in a cave for almost a thousand years, this chapter begins by investigating its various physical characteristics before honing in on its specific content, concluding by examining the possible circumstances of its circulation at Dunhuang.

Geomancy or topomancy is an ancient form of Chinese divination linked to a range of practices now commonly referenced under the umbrella term *fengshui* 風水. This term, which literally translates as 'wind-water', only became widespread from the Song 宋 dynasty (960–1279) onwards. In Classical Chinese, there appear to be no equivalent for the terms *fengshui* 風水, *dili* 地理, or *kanyu* 堪輿 used today, but we do find expressions such as *zhaijing* 宅經, referring to the classics for siting residences, and *zanglu* 葬錄 for burial manuals.[1] Indeed, geomancy helped to determine the siting of buildings and residences, as well as the appropriate time, location, and orientation for funerary structures. The principles of grave divination were certainly in use as early as the Zhou 周 dynasty (*c.* 1046 BCE–256 BCE) and a corpus of specialised writings in

1 Kalinowski 2003, 557.

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this field seems to have developed as early as the Warring States 戰國 period (*c.* 475 BCE–221 BCE).[2]

There are remarkably few Dunhuang writings relating to funerary geomancy considering the tens of thousands of Dunhuang manuscripts recovered from Cave 17. According to Huang Zhengjian 黃正建 and Jin Shenjia 金身佳, only thirteen texts fall under this category, some of which actually feature on the same manuscript.[3] Dated to the Tang 唐 (618–907) and the Five Dynasties 五代 (907–960) periods, they provide crucial insights into the development of this particular form of divination and into the funerary practices of the time. Their content covers methods and guidelines for various matters relating to burials, including date divination, topomancy of gravesites, the use of the Five Surname system, and the right routes to approach a gravesite. By the Tang period, the preference was to dig graves on the south side of a mountain, a position favoured for many Tang imperial tombs built around the capital Chang'an 長安.[4] Outside of the imperial retinue, many members of Chinese society equally believed that a grave's surroundings could impact surviving family members and future generations in both positive and negative ways.

Offering guidance on where best to position a grave, scroll S.3877 illustrates the popularity of this custom during the ninth and tenth centuries. The manuscript was acquired by Marc Aurel Stein when he visited the Mogao Caves during his second expedition to Central Asia (1906–1908) and is now housed at the British Library. This particular scroll is unique in being the only geomantic manuscript discovered in the Dunhuang cache that features an illustration of hill formations. Additional texts and doodles are scattered around this sketch, as well as on the other side of the scroll, bearing witness to the reuse of S.3877 by multiple people.

The present chapter considers the manuscript to be first and foremost a physical artefact whose material attributes, layout, illustrations and, finally, textual content all bear witness to this scroll's rich social life and tell us of the function(s) that it served before being sealed for almost a thousand years. We will thus start by investigating the 'anatomy' of S.3877, that is to say its physical characteristics and its later conservation. This will then naturally lead us to focus on the specific funerary geomantic content of the scroll. Finally, we will

2 For an introduction to the history of *fengshui*, see Bruun 2003, 263–84.

3 These texts are P.2534, P.2550B, P.2831, and P.4930 all housed at the Bibliothèque nationale de France; S.12456B, S.12456C, S.10639A, S.2263 recto and verso, S.3877 recto and verso, and S.5645 held at the British Library; and F279 in the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, St. Petersburg. See Huang 2001, 82–88 for a summary of these thirteen manuscripts; see also Jin 2007, 207–328 for a thorough transcription of each text.

4 Yang 2003.

examine the circumstances of its circulation at Dunhuang during the ninth and tenth centuries, situating it in the broader context of mantic arts and education in the region.

1 The Anatomy of the Scroll

In its current state, S.3877 is a horizontal scroll made of eight sheets of yellow paper joined together to form a continuous roll of 23.8 × 228.6 cm (Figure 11.1). Given that rather large sections are currently missing at the beginning and at the end of the scroll, it is clear that the manuscript must have originally been much longer. Only a tiny portion of the first sheet has survived, roughly measuring 12 × 3.4 cm. The last sheet is also badly mutilated and only just over half of it is now extant (18.3 cm). The second to fifth sheets are all of a comparable size, around 37.2 cm wide, but the sixth and seventh sheets are slightly shorter, being 35.6 and 36.8 cm wide respectively. The scroll's height is smaller than average, as scrolls from Cave 17 tend to be between 25–30 cm high depending on the type of text and date of production, but this could be due to damage that the scroll sustained before being placed in Cave 17.[5]

A geomantic sketch, described by Lionel Giles as a 'plan for an auspicious site for a family tomb, with scribbled notes', entirely dominates the recto of the manuscript. This side is also covered with several doodles and inscriptions, as well as titles of famous books, a contract, and a lay society circular.[6] This scroll is one of the few manuscripts from Mogao Cave 17 that bears illustrated content.[7] Although most of these illustrated manuscripts are Buddhist sutras with either an imaged frontispiece or in-text illustrations, there are also other kinds of works requiring visual content, such as medical charts, divination texts, and manuals. Generally, the text is the main element and images accompany it for decorative or explanatory purposes.[8] In contradistinction, here we have a geomantic sketch that unfolds across the whole length of the scroll and fills the available paper. The relevant text is limited to a series of short captions which, together with the sketch, offer guidance on where best to position a grave in relation to the surrounding landscape. Paired with textual elements,

5 Drège 1981, 305–60; Drège 2002, 115–79.

6 Giles 1957, 225 no. 6971.

7 According to Drège 1999, there are only about 120 illustrated manuscripts in the collections of the British Library and Bibliothèque nationale de France. This includes items with doodles.

8 Drège 2014, 317.

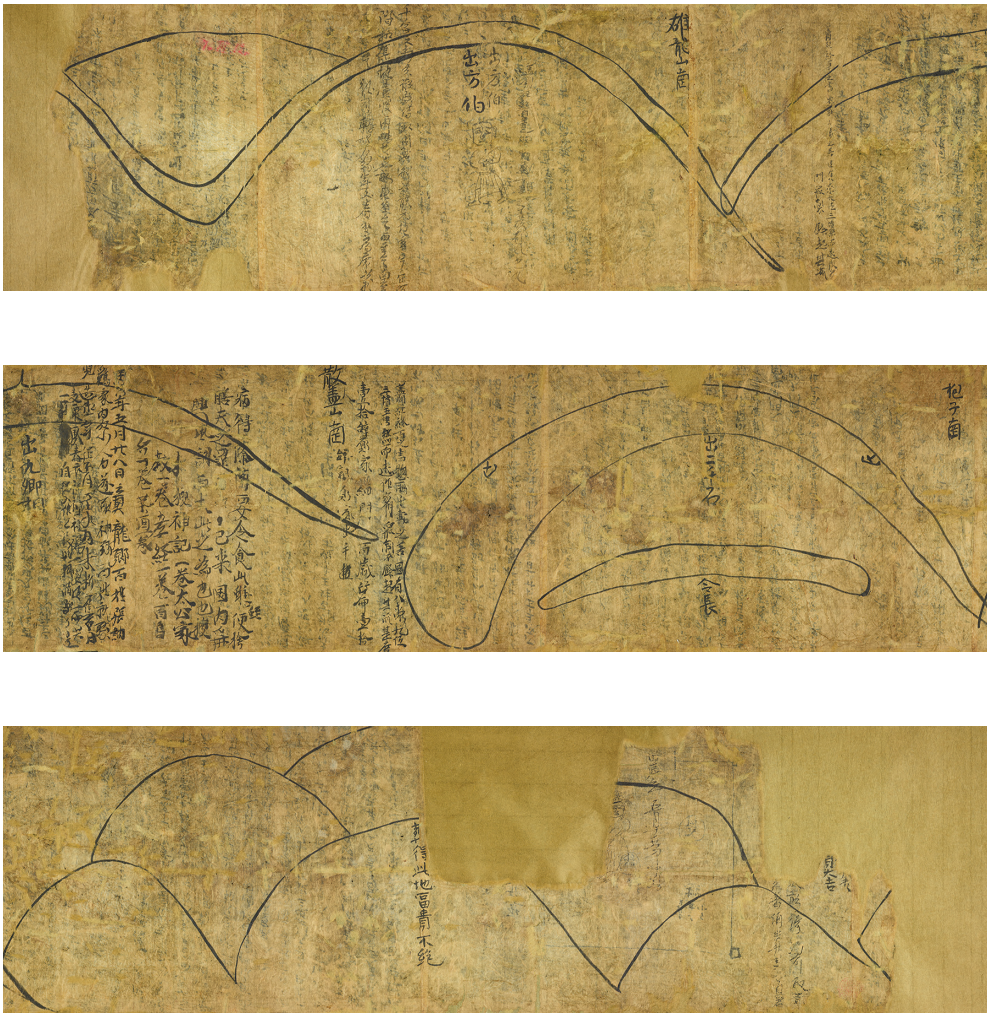


FIGURE 11.1 The recto of S.3877

these images are characteristic of *tu* 圖, graphic illustrations typically meant to convey technical knowledge and to be 'templates for action'.[9]

In addition, the other side of the scroll contains what appear to be miscellaneous notes and drawings in different hands. From right to left, which would have been the normal reading direction, we have several contracts concerning topographical measurements and cyclical dates, and part of *Words of a Waiting Maid* in one volume (*Xianü fuci yi ben* 下女夫詞一本). These miscellaneous notes start directly after the diagram of a family gravesite, which appears to be upside down but which was actually drawn following the same orientation as the large geomantic sketch on the recto. Because of the quality of the paper, the ink has bled through, making the writings on both sides harder to read in some places. The paper is extremely thin, almost translucent, and is uneven in its structure. It does not display any laid lines, indicating that it must have been produced using textile sieves, and is composed of extremely long and coarse fibres (possibly bast fibres) that occasionally pierce through the surface. Although we would need to undertake further analysis to confirm this, it is possible that the paper of S.3877 was not manufactured locally but was instead produced in an area close to the Himalayas, such as in Sichuan or Yunnan, where floating moulds were common.[10]

In 2016, the scroll underwent conservation at the British Library Conservation Centre and was then digitised in order to provide high-resolution images on the website of the International Dunhuang Project (IDP). The most time-consuming part of the conservation treatment consisted in reversing previous interventions. Conservators Vania Assis and Wong Wing-hui removed the heavy, thick backing paper, as well as the silk gauze pasted with animal glue to the recto and verso of the manuscript. These old repairs initially aimed to prevent further deterioration, but they turned out to have several adverse effects, including discolouring the paper and making it more brittle.[11] Due to extensive damage to the manuscript, Assis and Wong used acid-free Japanese paper to stabilise multiple micro tears, lacunae, and dents in the central area and along the bottom and top edges. Moreover, large fragmentary areas at both extremities of the scroll were infilled with much larger pieces of Japanese paper.

As part of this process, the conservators had to take apart some of the sheets of paper in order to properly reattach them. When trying to re-assemble the sixth and seventh sheets of S.3877, Assis was faced with a dilemma as she

9 Bray 2017.

10 Personal correspondence with Agnieszka Helman-Ważny on the 9th April, 2022. See also Helman-Ważny 2016.

11 Assis 2016.

realised she would need to compromise the integrity of the content of either the recto or the verso. She had to choose between leaving the lines forming the geomantic sketch of a hill uninterrupted, or covering part of them with the seam so that the text on the verso of the scroll could be read. A decision was made to leave the text of the verso legible, which resulted in the obscuring of a small section of the geomantic sketch on the recto. A few millimetres of the characters and the drawing are thus hidden under the edge of the preceding sheet of paper, causing the lines of the sketch to look broken up (Figure 11.2). Comparisons with the microfilms of the manuscript produced in the 1950s revealed that this was already the case back then. Because these black and white images post-date conservation work at the British Museum, they would not suffice to confirm whether the manuscript was assembled in this way when it was discovered in Cave 17.

At some point prior to the scroll's placement in the cave at the beginning of the eleventh century, its component elements had become detached, whether accidentally or intentionally, and were glued back so that more text could be written on the verso. This indicates that the geomantic sketch was probably drawn first, making the side of the scroll with the sketch the 'recto', as noted in several catalogue entries.[12] Such an identification is confirmed by the fact that the scroll naturally curls up around its large illustration, indicating that this shape is deeply ingrained in its physical memory. The way the sheets of S.3877 are joined together also provides another clue for determining whether the geomantic sketch was considered the primary side. Their arrangement, with the end of the first sheet being pasted on top of the beginning of the subsequent sheet, conforms to that observed by Jean-Pierre Drège in his study of the dated manuscripts from the Pelliot and Stein collections.[13] The sixth and seventh sheets now comply with this rule, but, as Figure 11.2 shows, they would not have done so when the geomantic drawing was executed. The most compelling evidence for the sheets originally being pasted with the overlap in the other direction would be the small traces of glue in the form of a brown residue still visible alongside the top of the seam. This irregularity was potentially corrected later on, before text was added on the verso of the scroll. Whoever would have done so did it at the expense of the sketch's outline, which was not preserved. This is comparable with the fragment of the *Old Tibetan Annals*, Or.8212/187, where two sheets were glued back together before the Chinese text

12 See Giles 1957, 225 no.6971 and Mair 1981. A digital version of this catalogue is available on the IDP website (https://idp.bl.uk/S.3877); for cataloguing information about S.3877, see entry no. 325.1981.

13 Drège 2002, 119.



FIGURE 11.2 Detailed image of the join between the sixth and seventh sheet of S.3877

of the *Sutra of the Medicine Buddha* (Yaoshi jing 藥師經) was written, leaving the first sheet of the Tibetan text now upside down in relation to the rest.

Upon closer examination, it is also clear that margins and guidelines were laid out on the recto in preparation for text. These are very faint and quite uneven: they tend to be narrow at the top and to widen out towards the bottom of the columns that they delineate. The columns are approximately 1.7 cm wide on average, but can actually range from 1.5 to 2.2 cm. As for the margins, they measure between 2 cm and 2.4 cm from the top, and between 0.5 and 0.8 cm from the bottom. These margins and guidelines show that the primary reason for the scroll's production was to present textual content, however they

remained mostly unused and S.3877 instead ended up being used for the large geomantic drawing that spans its surface. The sketch and some of the accompanying captions also run across the joins between the sheets of paper.

Careful analysis of the scroll's anatomy thus clarifies some important information. The fact that S.3877 is made of woven paper could indicate that it was manufactured outside of Dunhuang. The recto of the manuscript had initially been prepared to receive text, as shown by the addition of margins and guidelines. However it was instead used, perhaps by somebody else, to arrange the large geomantic sketch. Later on, two of the scroll's sheets, which had seemingly been assembled incorrectly, became detached and were glued back together in the opposite direction before more texts were inscribed on the verso. Was the sketch drawn at Dunhuang on the blank manuscript? Or did S.3877 make its way there having already been illustrated and subsequently served as a receptacle for the diagram, texts, and scribbles covering both of its sides? We may never find out, but the physical characteristics of the scroll hint at the fact that it went through several stages in the course of its 'life'.

2 The Geomantic Sketches on the Scroll

The funerary divination texts that were found in Cave 17 can be roughly divided into two categories: those dealing with selecting the appropriate time for undertaking the various ceremonial actions linked to the funeral; and those concerned with the construction and layout of the burial site, as well as the organisation of the funerary ceremony. The treatises and manuals belonging to the second category not only stipulate rules relating to the structure of the burial site itself, but they also contain a wealth of information about the material form of the graves: from the size of the funerary sites and the height of the funerary mounds to the ornamentation of graves with a stone stele and stone statues.

The geomantic sketches on scroll S.3877 provide advice on the positioning and layout of tombs. The recto depicts four different landforms. Due to the fragmentary state of the manuscript, the first topographical configuration is incomplete and missing a label. It is composed of a group of five medium-sized semi-circles on top of each other – three at the bottom, then two in the middle and one at the top. They evoke a cluster of hills receding into the distance. Labels located at the top of the scroll precede each of the remaining four landforms and give their names: *Baozi gang* 抱子崗, *Sangai shangang* 散盖山崗, and *Xionglong shangang* 雄龍山崗. The second site represented on the scroll, *Baozi gang* or 'Child Hugging Hillock', shown in more detail in Figure 11.3, is a

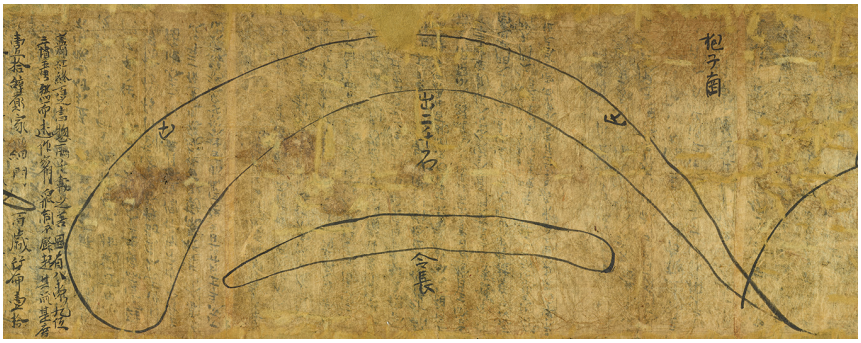


FIGURE 11.3 Detailed image of the second land formation on the recto of S.3877 *Baozi gang* with labels marking auspicious and inauspicious burial sites

curved convex shape that begins with a thin tapered edge to the right and grows wider in its second half, ending with a rounded edge to the left. It encloses, almost embraces, the flat portion of land located below. The third site is another convex land formation characterised by a small pointed spire on its apex. This shape suggests that the first character, *san* 散, could actually be a misspelt variant of *san* 澈 for *san* 傘, meaning 'umbrella'.[14] The toponym *Sangai shangang* therefore ought to be read as 'Umbrella Cover Hill'. The fourth and last site is *Xionglong shangang*, which translates as the 'Mighty/Male Dragon Hill'.[15] It is now impossible to know what it looked like in its entirety, as only the first part of it remains extant. It starts as a convex and thin mount that then slopes down before curving back up again. A small form rises just above the dip and looks similar to the hills at the beginning of the scroll but with a much flatter top.

Could the landscapes sketched on S.3877 have corresponded to actual places? Although this is a possibility, we should bear in mind that they might not necessarily have been located in the Dunhuang region, particularly as the paper used, at the very least, may not have been locally-produced and we lack a colophon clarifying where and when the sketches were added.[16] Alternatively, they may reference generalised topographic features of the land, and, in this case, to particular shapes of hills or mountains. The scroll would therefore have functioned as a map of ideal types, displaying the range of formations that one

14 Jin 2007, 365.

15 The character written on the scroll looks more like *dui* 碓, but scholars interpret it as *xiong* 雄. See Kalinowski 2003, 599 and Jin 2007, 324.

16 In their 2009 study of S.5645, Chi Yu Jen 紀又仁 points out that a siting method based on hill formations and water flow would not have been directly relevant and applicable to the region of Dunhuang, where there were mostly sand dune oases. This is the reason why Chi posits that the places mentioned in the text were in Jiangxi and Hunan.

may encounter when planning a burial. According to Jin Shenjia's 金身佳 classification system, this illustration belongs to literature on the 'Earth Veins of Hills' (shangang dimai 山崗地脈). The only other work in this category from the Dunhuang corpus is the *Instructions on Veins of the Earth obtained through Sima's Austerities* (Sima toutuo dimai jue 司馬頭陀地脈訣), which also interprets the physical characteristics of mountains for the selection of suitable sites.[17] The text is attributed to a certain Mr. Sima 司馬 who supposedly lived in Jiangxi in the south of China during the reign of Emperor Xuanzong 宣宗 (r. 847–859) and may therefore have referred to real (or imagined) formations in the south of China.[18]

The geomantic sketch on S.3877 is complemented by several comments in the same hand as the toponyms. Most of these are written at the centre of each individual land configuration, designating the locations to choose or to avoid for a family tomb. Carefully selecting where to lay to rest the deceased was of the utmost importance as this could influence the fate of both the deceased and succeeding generations. While an auspicious spot could bring prosperity and glory to their family, an inauspicious one had the potential to generate long-term misfortune. Thus, funerary geomancy came to be perceived as a way to influence the future by ensuring good fortune to one's descendants. At the beginning of the scroll, under the large infill added recently by British Library conservators, is a very fragmentary inscription of which only the characters *da ji* 大吉 have survived. Written in the same hand as the comments following it, it indicates what must have been a 'very lucky' or 'highly auspicious' location. In the middle of the first mountainous formation, a caption states that being buried there would bring 'unending riches and honour' 葬得此地, 富貴不絕. The following comments are predictions that refer more specifically to the career prospects of descendants depending on the burial spot selected for their ancestors. For instance, according to the inscription on the second land formation, the offspring of the deceased may become high-ranking officials ('will produce officials who earn 2,000 bushels' 出二千石).[19] Almost directly below this comment are the two characters *lingzhang* 令長, which may refer to

17 Jin 2021, 5–6 and 27–28.

18 This manuscript would be S.5645 in the British Library's Stein collection, contained in folios 27 to 35 of a multiple-text booklet that also includes prayer models and Buddhist texts. See also Kalinowski 2003, 564–65 and 601 and Jin 2021, 320–23. For detailed research on this particular item, see Chi 2009.

19 Hucker 1985, 205 no. 1828. The '2,000 bushels of grain' refers to an official entitled to an annual salary of that amount.

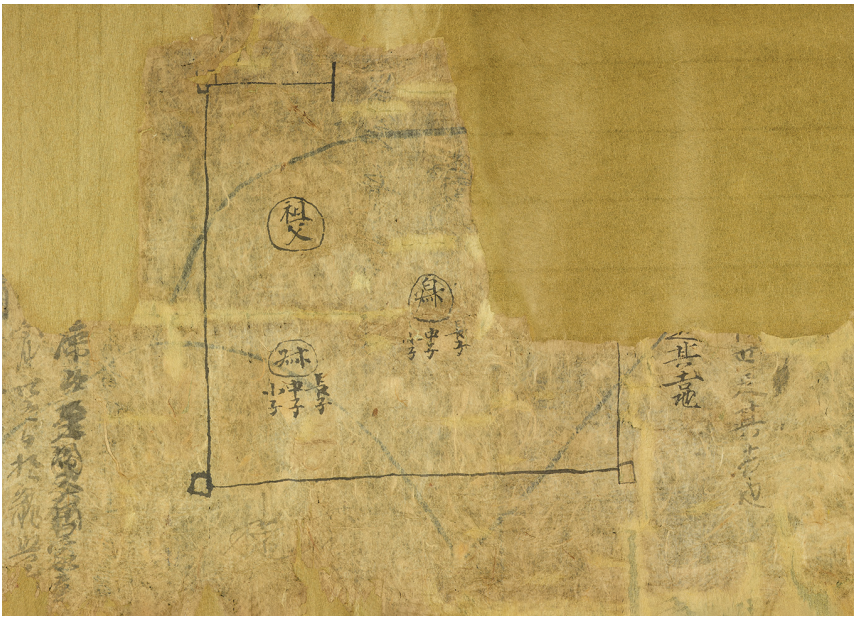


FIGURE 11.4 Geomantic diagram of an ancestral tomb on the verso of S.3877

the post of district magistrate.[20] These two characters seem connected to the flat extent that forms part of the land formation represented here, but scholars have tended to associate them with the preceding characters as one single caption.[21] In addition, on both flanks of the mountain ridge, the character *xiong* 凶 meaning 'ominous' or 'inauspicious' singles out sites considered as a potential source of bad luck. Finally, on the third and fourth landscapes on the manuscript, the labels 'will produce government ministers' 出九卿相(?) and 'will produce regional inspectors' 出方伯 respectively indicate that the location will generate future high-ranking officials.

The verso of the scroll contains another geomantic sketch, which is a diagram of an ancestral grave (Figure 11.4). It is located on the last sheet of the verso and is followed by a text that bears no connection with it. The handwriting is completely different to that of the captions accompanying the topomantic illustrations, suggesting that it was probably added later. The sketch consists of a square enclosure, with fortified corners or watchtowers represented by small squares surrounding the plot of land. The line at the top is interrupted,

20 Hucker 1985, 313 no. 3737.

21 Kalinowski and Jin read all the characters on that line together as *chu erqian shi, lingzhang* 出二千石, 令長. See Kalinowski 2003, 599–600 and Jin 2021, 28.

signalling an opening that was probably the entrance. Inside the walls of the ancestral grave, three extant circles represent the burial mounds of the successive generations interred there. This mirrors the general practice of burying multiple generations from one family branch together in a family cemetery.[22] Here, the first generation is marked by the tomb of the grandfather, *zufu* 祖父. It is located near the top left corner, slightly apart from and above the tombs of the second generation. Captions indicate that these are for two of his sons, the 'father's brothers' respectively named *bai shu* 白叔 and *shu* 叔. As specified by inscriptions underneath their funerary mounds, which are placed diagonally underneath the grandfather, each of them is buried with their offspring, listed as the eldest son (*zhangzi* 長子), middle son (*zhongzi* 中子), and youngest son (*xiaozi* 小子). Unfortunately, because of a large lacuna in the scroll, the top right section of the diagram is now lost. Only the last characters, [*zhi*] *qi ji di* [之] 其吉地 are now visible on the right. This can be translated as '[of] this auspicious land', implying that it must have been linked to the diagram.

This diagram shows that individual tombs within the same auspicious family burial site adhered to specific requirements or rules in their arrangement. It evidences the importance of generational hierarchy and sibling order in determining the spatial configuration of cemeteries. Another scroll fragment in the British Library collection, S.2263, bears a more detailed illustration (Figure 11.5). Here, the ancestral tomb (*zumu* 祖墓) also occupies the upper left corner and likely represents the first generation or member of the family branch buried in a new site.[23] Below it are the four tombs of the second generation: that of the father (*fumu* 父墓), second uncle (*ershu* 二叔), third uncle (*sanshu* 三叔), and fourth uncle (*sishu* 四叔). Their distribution across the cemetery reflects the rank of the siblings within the family, as determined by birth order. Assuming that the same order applied to the diagram on the verso of manuscript S.3877, with the oldest brother in the top right corner and the youngest in the lower left corner, we can infer that the tomb of the father is the one obscured. Recent studies have confirmed that Tang dynasty cemeteries adhered to this hierarchical layout.[24]

The large sketch of hill formations on the recto of S.3877 and the fragmented diagram on its verso reflect funerary customs and practices popular around the time the manuscript was produced and first used. They both enable us to better understand some of the key decisions made in relation to interments.

22 See Yang 2019, 98.

23 Yang 2019, 99.

24 Ye 2005, 70–79; Cheng 2012, 207–13.



FIGURE 11.5 Detail of the geomantic diagram of a family grave on the recto of S.2263

The geomantic sketch highlights the importance of burying one's ancestor in an auspicious location to ensure the wellbeing and fortune of future generations. Whether the landscapes depicted refer to actual places (if so, these may not be local hills) or to ideal mountainous formations, they served as a visual aid when choosing the appropriate spot for a grave. The diagram of the ancestral cemetery found on the verso concentrates on how the burial mounds of the various members of a family branch should be arranged in relation to each other. As already mentioned, it was produced by a different hand. This could have been added later on by an individual who engaged with this scroll because of their own expertise or interest in geomancy, highlighting the continued relevance and reuse of this scroll.

3 Circulation of the Manuscript

We know little about the status or transmission of the divination texts discovered in Cave 17, including those concerned with funerary geomancy. Several individuals must have contributed to the various illustrations and texts on S.3877, but in the absence of a colophon or textual data giving the names of either authors or scribes, the identity of the people who produced, added to, and used the manuscript through the successive phases of its life remains uncertain. In order to find out more about its circulation, we must analyse how the collection of geomantic sketches, doodles, scribbles, and inscriptions were added over time to both sides of this scroll, and then situate this process within the broader sociocultural context surrounding the dissemination of mantic knowledge in Dunhuang.

In order to find a propitious location for a tomb, people would have sought out the services of a trained geomancer who could look at the shape of the hills for them and make recommendations in relation to spatial arrangements and orientation. As shown by economic texts from Cave 17, diviners were integrated into local society. For instance, the accounts of Dunhuang's prefectural administration record the supply of a piece of fine cloth to two diviners, including one named Xi Binglüe 悉兵略, on the second day of the fifth month in 899, and of five sheets of paper to a Tuyuhun 吐谷渾 diviner on the twenty-eighth day of the same month.[25] Furthermore, sources suggest that diviners did not necessarily belong to a single group of professionals, but instead were comprised of various social strata.[26] The colophon on a funerary geomantic manuscript, P.2550B, indicates that it was part of the personal collection of a diviner that included forty-five texts in total ('No. 37 of forty-five texts [belonging to] a diviner' 四十五家書第三七). Moreover, we have evidence that monasteries may have been involved in divination practices. For example, a list of accounts from the Jingtu Temple 淨土寺 mentions income derived from gifts collected on the occasion of a visit by a diviner.[27] Some monks had knowledge of these traditional sciences and fulfilled functions supervised by the local administration.[28]

25 P.4640, lines 9 and 69.

26 For an overview, see Kalinowski 2006, 109–33.

27 See the verso of P.2040.

28 See Or.8210/S.6169, showing that a monk at Longxing Temple 龍興寺 was a specialist of the Yin and Yang arts (*yinyang ren* 陰陽人). More details are given in Kalinowski 2003, 26.

A number of the people who authored or copied divination texts appear to have been well established, holding official positions in the local administration.[29] Zhang Zhongxian 張忠賢, who was active during the tenth century, is a particularly relevant example. He produced a funerary treatise entitled the *Records of Burials* (Zanglu 葬錄), of which only the draft preface has survived. Dated to 896, it is preserved on the verso of scroll S.2263.[30] This work was composed under the patronage of Zhang Chengfeng 張承奉, military commissioner (*jiedushi* 節度使) between 894 and 910. In this preface, Zhang Zhongxian goes by the title 'doctor of the prefectural school' (*shou zhouxue boshi* 守州學博士) of Dunhuang and concludes by stating that the treatise is designed to be used by knowledgeable people, perhaps referencing diviners specifically.[31] In addition, we know from other documents that Zhang Zhongxian was also in charge of the redaction and revision of almanacs.[32] This is probably the reason why he was allocated three *tie* 帖 (approximately 150 sheets) of fine paper in 899, according to the expenditure account in the manuscript P.4640.

From this, it would seem that the prefectural school of Dunhuang was particularly instrumental in shaping and disseminating mantic arts.[33] The official complex was located in Dunhuang itself, on the west side of the town, and subjects such as divination, astrology, and hemerology were regularly taught there.[34] Divination texts formed part of the educational materials that were used in prefectural schools, and pupils were sometimes tasked with reproducing whole compendia.[35] Equally, one cannot exclude the possibility that mantic writings could have originated from Buddhist monastic schools, whose instruction was based on similar sources.[36] Indeed, some divination documents were copied in Dunhuang monasteries.[37] This shows, as Marc Kalinowski asserts, that 'a popular practice can very well be absorbed at any

29 See Mollier 2008.

30 For a description, see Kalinowski 2003, 598–99.

31 For a complete transcription of the preface, see Rong 1996, 208.

32 One such almanac is P.4996 copied by Lü Dingde 呂定德 for the year 893.

33 Kalinowski 2003, 21.

34 On Dunhuang prefectural school, see Kalinowski 2006 and Gao 1986.

35 See, for example, the verso of S.3724. For a description of this work, see Kalinowski 2003, 301–68.

36 For an overview of the educational documents used in Dunhuang's school system, see Gao 1986, 260–62. In addition, Oliver Moore demonstrated that it was not uncommon for students taking Tang examinations to reside in monasteries, showing that there was no strict divide; Moore 2004, 87, 157, and 191.

37 Examples include the hemerological notes written in 948 or 949 on the recto of P.3175 by Yuande 願德, a monk from the Bao'en Temple 報恩寺; and a treatise on cleromancy contained in P.3498 that was inscribed in the Sanjie Temple 三界寺.

time by one of the acknowledged religious systems – Buddhism, Daoism or other – just as these systems have themselves given birth to popular forms of religiosity'.[38]

The physical characteristics of S.3877, including its almost see-through and coarse paper, uneven guidelines and margins, as well as its roughly-executed sketches, doodles, and inscriptions gradually added on both of its sides, suggest that this item served a very practical function. More specifically, it could have been produced, used, or reused in a setting related to learning. The diagram of the ancestral grave drawn on the verso, for instance, is a simpler, more rudimentary version of the one seen on S.2263. This latter manuscript is actually the very same scroll that bears the draft of Zhang Zhongxian's preface. This points to the fact that S.3877 is probably connected to the prefectural school of Dunhuang and its teachings, if not directly to Zhang Zhongxian.

Of particular interest are the addition of three anthropomorphic figures depicted within the hilly landscapes of the verso. These were hastily drawn in a much lighter ink than the rest of the manuscript's content. The first figure stands barefoot on the unnamed group of hills shown at the beginning of the manuscript. Its execution is quite rough overall, especially the lower part of the body which is very imprecise compared to its face and elaborate headdress. It is in a three-quarter profile view and turned to the left. There is another figure situated just below, though only a single boot and the hem of its dress is visible. These two figures can be seen in Figure 11.6. Finally, a third figure is located closer to the end of the manuscript, underneath the last landform. Carrying an unknown object in its arms, it wears what looks like a pleated loincloth or apron with a pair of boots. It is unclear whether the top half of its body is dressed. Whoever drew it seems to have copied the characters *chu fangbo* 出方伯 at the same time. According to Yang Yi, the first figure could be a geomancer, an identification she bases on the term *qinqwu* 青烏 written next to it in a very cursive and mostly illegible hand.[39] Drawing a parallel with a statue found in a Southern Song 南宋 dynasty (1127–1279) grave, she also suggests that the third character could be a geomancer holding a *luopan* 羅盤. This tool, otherwise known as the *fengshui* compass, was designed to determine the best direction for a structure, place, or item.[40]

These doodles and the additional diagram on the verso are still closely related to the original geomantic content of the scroll, and they may have been intended to augment it. However, once this information or knowledge ceased

38 Kalinowski 2006, 109–10.

39 Yang 2019, 34–35.

40 Yang 2019, 101.



FIGURE 11.6 Detail of two figures on the recto of S.3877

to be useful or relevant, the manuscript was repurposed. As we have already seen, another physical element that denotes this important step in the life of S.3877 is that two of its sheets, as far as we can tell, were glued back together so that students, who were practising their literacy skills, could gradually cover the item with various scribbled notes, characters, and texts. Often, these sorts of jottings are consigned to the verso of a document. Here, they also spread across the recto of the scroll where they cover some sections of the hill configurations. It is obvious when looking at these writings that the various individuals who inscribed them were not practising their calligraphy given their messy and poor writing standards![41] This may be because they actually copied these texts for memorisation purposes.[42]

41 Mair 1981.

42 Galambos 2021, 102.

The texts on the verso all face the opposite direction to the geomantic sketch on the recto and the diagram on the verso. The first text on the verso starts on the sheet immediately adjacent to the diagram. It is a contract dated to 897 that deals with the sale of an ancestral house by Zhang Yiquan 張義全. The text is 17 lines long and provides some topographical details about the building, which is said to be located on Yongningfang Lane 永寧坊港. A very similar agreement, whose date differs only by a few days, can be found further down the scroll. [43] Several other legal texts were also copied, all being laid out very close together. This includes an employment contract by Linghu Anding 令狐安定 dated to 878, an employment contract by Zhang Naji 張納鷄 dated to 894, a contract for the exchange of land by Cao Daxing 曹大行 dated to 902, a deed for the sale of land by An Lizi 安立子 dated to 909, and a contract for the sale of a child by A Wu 啊吳 dated to 916.[44] It would be tempting to assume that the scroll was used to copy this series of texts over the course of several decades, but if these texts were all copied as part of a learning exercise, the scribe perhaps drew from a store of earlier contracts to write these all at once.[45]

The last text inscribed on the verso of the scroll is an incomplete ballad, whose end is missing, containing a dialogue between a lady and her lover. This is one of the vernacular texts known as 'transformation texts' (*bianwen* 變文) that would have been told by travelling storytellers and which took elements from Buddhism and other popular traditions.[46] It is entitled *Words of a Waiting Maid* in one volume, as indicated by the head title which was written twice. As mentioned by Imre Galambos, transformation texts seemed to be a consistent feature on manuscripts copied out by students and its presence thus ties in with further content scribbled on the recto of the scroll.[47]

The recto contains the titles of several famous texts, including *Record of Seeking Spirits* (Soushenji 搜神記), *Family Teachings of the Grand Duke* (Taigong jiajiao 太公家教), *Classic of Filial Piety* (Xiaojing 孝經), *The Names of One Hundred Birds* (Bai niao ming 百鳥名), and *On Tea and Wine* (Cha jiu 茶酒). All are followed by the phrase *yi juan* 一卷, signifying that they are to be copied in one *juan* or fascicle. It should be noted that the *Classic of Filial Piety* and *Family Teachings of the Grand Duke* were both primers commonly copied by students

43 Sha 1998, 8–9 and 10–11.

44 Sha 1998, 248–249; 250–51; 12–13; 18–19 and 75–76 respectively.

45 Xiao Yunxiao has indeed argued that all these private contracts belonged to the same family. For information, refer to the brief report of a presentation given by Xiao on 1 April 2022, https://glorisunglobalnetwork.org/xiao-yunxiao-report-workshop-on-chinese-buddhism-and-dunhuang-manuscripts-chinese/, last accessed on 20 December 2023.

46 On *bianwen* literature, see Mair 1983 and 1989.

47 Galambos 2016, 497.

throughout the medieval period.[48] A contract, almost identical to the employment contract by Zhang Naji on the verso, and a lay society circular are also recorded. This combination may seem random, but Galambos has amply demonstrated that surviving manuscripts used by students tend to include not only educational texts, such as the primers, but also fragments or fully-copied practical texts like contracts and circulars.[49] In this respect, the additional texts inscribed on S.3877 are what we would typically expect to see on a manuscript produced in an educational setting.

It is clear that multiple hands engaged in the gradual production of S.3877 as it exists today, and that this is likely to have been linked to its circulation within an educational setting, perhaps at the prefectural school of Dunhuang. These hands engaged with the large geomantic sketch on the recto of the manuscript with different degrees of 'familiarity'. The diagram copied on the verso and the anthropomorphic figures on the recto are more closely connected with the original purpose of S.3877, indicating that whoever added them responded to the mantic knowledge already contained on the scroll. By contrast, the additional titles and various texts, especially on the verso, indicate that the geomantic content was no longer needed or in use given that the diagram was partially obstructed. This shows the complex and dynamic relationship between S.3877, as both a knowledge repository and a writing medium, and its users over time.

4 The Life and Afterlife of S.3877

Designed to provide guidance to those looking to select the most appropriate burial site for their forebearers, the content of this manuscript belongs to a long Chinese tradition of practices revolving around finding the right time, location, and positioning for family graves. As demonstrated by the corpus of Dunhuang manuals and treatises relating to funerary geomancy, this was an important concern in medieval China, and these texts are of great value for the study of funerary customs.[50] The recto of scroll S.3877 depicts a succession of named hill formations that are complemented by brief and simple captions indicating which spots are auspicious or inauspicious for burials. This large geomantic sketch is truly unique in that it is the only visual representation of hill *fengshui* to have survived from this period. The diagram of a family gravesite, reflecting

48 Galambos 2021, 101–102.

49 Galambos 2016, 497.

50 Hao 2020, 263.

how graves were arranged according to generational hierarchy and sibling order, was then probably added on the verso of the manuscript at a later stage.

Diviners were integrated into the social, cultural, and economic fabric of Dunhuang, as attested by further documents discovered in Cave 17. A quick foray into the broader context surrounding mantic arts at Dunhuang during the ninth and tenth centuries reveals that their activities were regulated by official institutions and that local elites were involved in the production of the technical works disseminated in the region. Dunhuang's mantic literature may have had a popular dimension, but this did not mean that works like the scroll at the centre of this chapter were 'vulgar substitutes incommensurate with the supposedly learned treatises consigned to the imperial libraries'.[51] These works also contributed to the diffusion of Tang legislation in society and helped frame regional and funerary traditions.[52] The prefectural school of Dunhuang played an important role in the circulation of divination texts, including those specialised in funerary geomancy. Not only did its doctors compile divination works but mantic arts were also taught there, with divination texts forming part of the educational materials used by students. The doodles, scribbles, and other inscriptions that were added to this scroll over time comprise the titles of famous texts, a series of pragmatic texts, and part of a transformation text. All are indicative of the circulation of S.3877 within an educational environment.

Throughout this study of S.3877, we have sought to look at this single manuscript holistically, investigating it as an item in its full right and trying to understand how its different features interacted together. This object-based approach has allowed us to reconstruct and outline the basic chronology of the scroll's content, starting with the large geomantic sketch drawn on its recto, probably followed by the diagram of the ancestral grave on the verso which faces the same direction, and perhaps the doodles representing human figures. As the geomantic teachings contained in S.3877 perhaps became less relevant to students, the scroll was used to inscribe additional texts, most of which are upside down in relation to the rest of the scroll and which do not interact with the original content. Such a study has therefore provided insight into several strata of local society: those who produced and assembled the paper of this manuscript as intended for textual content; those who codified and produced the geomantic sketches; those who employed these sketches in their divinations; and the students who utilised this scroll as part of their training at local schools.

51 Kalinowski 2006, 118.

52 Kalinowski 2003, 582.

In this chapter, we began by looking at the materiality of the scroll S.3877. We carefully considered its main 'innate' physical characteristics, such as format, material, codicological features, and alterations resulting from conservation activities conducted in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In doing so, we countered assumptions concerning the relative importance of illustrated versus textual content in determining which side of the manuscript was written first. This approach confirms that, although the scroll had initially been prepared for receiving text, its primary purpose was the drawing of the large geomantic sketch spanning its entire recto. Then, later during its life, the item was gradually augmented with additional content and even reassembled in order for it to accommodate new writings. This indicates that it may have performed different functions for different people through various successive phases.

If this manuscript is exceptional for its contribution to our understanding of funerary geomancy based on topographic configurations, its composite makeup equally constitutes another one of its fascinating peculiarities. The content of S.3877 is not a Buddhist text copied to accrue merit, and therefore the gradual accumulation of illustration and text on the scroll bears witness to an entirely different process to that seen in other multiple-text manuscripts from Dunhuang that could be also be produced by several individuals.[53] Although it would be easy to assume at first glance that a divination text such as this one was primarily used for divination, we see that this was instead a scroll that was gradually adapted to a multipurpose role in teaching and learning. Its life and afterlife thus shed light on the successive uses and users of this scroll, and the wider manuscript culture and educational environment of ninth- and tenth-century Dunhuang.

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53 Galambos 2021, 23–84.

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Saved from Desert Sands, edited by Kelsey Granger and Imre Galambos, unites historians, codicologists, art historians, archaeologists, and curators in the study of material culture on the Silk Roads. The re-discovery of forgotten manuscript archives and sand-buried cities in the twentieth century has brought to light thousands of manuscripts and artefacts. To date, textual content has largely been prioritised over physical objects and their materiality, but the material aspects of these objects are just as important. Focusing primarily on the material and non-textual, this volume presents studies on silver dishes, sealing systems, manuscripts, Buddhist paintings, and ceramics, all of which demonstrate the centrality of material culture in the study of the Silk Roads.

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