

## SOGDIAN “ANCIENT LETTERS” (II, IV, V)

In Iranian Studies, the “Ancient Letters” is a name for the Sogdian letters on Chinese paper, found in 1907 by Aurel Stein in the ruins of the watchtower TXIIIa of the Chinese Wall. The garrison of this tower, which is located to the West of Dunhuang (Early Middle Chinese *twān-γwan*),<sup>1</sup> near the “Jasper Gates,” guarded the part of the Silk Road between Dunhuang (Sogd. *δrw’n, δrw’n* |*Oruwān*|, Ptolemy *Θροάνα*) and Louliang (Sogd. *Kr’wr’n* |*Krōrān*|). Five letters were preserved almost entirely, although with some lacunas, and the fragments of three other letters were also found. Each letter was folded several times, and the names of the sender and the addressee were written on the outer side of the letter. The second letter, the largest in volume, was wrapped in silk and placed in a covering made of rough linen fabric. This letter was addressed to Samarkand (Sogd. *Sm’rknδh, Sm’rknδh* |*Smārkanθ(ā)*|), which is located 3800 km to the West of Dunhuang.

The “Ancient Letters” are the earliest surviving Sogdian texts that were written in a script of Aramaic origin with numerous Aramaic ideograms. It is possible to deduce from the letters, that at least two of them were written in Dunhuang, one — in Guzang (Early Middle Chinese *kə-tsan*). The letters, most likely, were placed in a bag that was lost or left by the deliverer. The first and the third letter were dictated by a woman named Myovnai (lit. “Little Tiger”), left by her husband, a Sogdian merchant Nanaidat (lit. “Created by the Goddess Nanai”) in Dunhuang.<sup>2</sup> The second, the fourth, and the fifth letter represent messages sent to Sogdian merchants by their contractors, who were making business transactions in China. As with other Sogdian texts, found or procured by Stein, the “Ancient Letters” are kept in the British Library in London.

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(1) I would like to express my gratitude to T. A. Pan and P. B. Lurje, whose expertise in Chinese Studies I have used.

(2) For the Russian translation of these Letters, see: В. А. Лившиц, Согдийские «Старые письма» (I. III), in: *Письменные памятники Востока*. Т. I (8) (Москва, 2008) 173–176.

The dating of the “Ancient Letters” to 312–313, was established by Henning on the basis of the contents of the second letter that reports the events happening during those years in China: the war with the Xiongnu, (Sogd. *xwn* |*xūn*|), the fire in the Western capital Luoyang (Early Middle Chinese *lak-ĵian*, Sogd. *sry* |*Sar* or *Saray*|) and in the town of Ye (Early Middle Chinese *ŋiap*, Sogd. *’nkp’* |*Ankapā*|), the flight of the Emperor, who tried to escape from the Xiongnu, famine and devastation in China. Henning established that the letters were written after the Xiongnu captured the town of Ye in 307 and Luoyang in 311.<sup>3</sup> Harmatta suggested dating the letters to 196,<sup>4</sup> but Grenet and Sims-Williams confirmed the dating of Henning.<sup>5</sup> The second letter was written between June 6 and July 5, 313. The dating in the letters is given in the Chinese way — the number of the month (and the Sogdian name of the month in the second letter) and of the days are provided.

(3) W. B. HENNING, The Date of the Sogdian Ancient Letters, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 12.3–4 (1948) 601–615.

(4) J. HARMATTA, Eine neue Quelle zur Geschichte der Seidenstrasse, *Jahrbuch für Wissenschaftsgeschichte* 2 (1971) 135–143; IDEM, The Archaeological Evidence for the Date of the Sogdian “Ancient Letters,” *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, 24.1 (1976) 71–86; IDEM, Sir Aurel Stein and the Date of the Sogdian “Ancient Letters,” in: *Jubilee Volume of the Oriental Collection 1951–1976* (Budapest, 1978) 73–88; IDEM, Sogdian Sources for the History of Pre-Islamic Central Asia, in: *Prolegomena of the Sources on the History of Pre-Islamic Central Asia* (Budapest, 1979) 153–165.

(5) F. GRENET, N. SIMS-WILLIAMS, The Historical Context of the Sogdian Ancient Letters, in: *Transition Periods in Iranian History. Actes du Symposium de Fribourg-en-Brisgau (22–24 Mai 1985)* (Leuven, 1987) (*Studia Iranica*, 5) 101–122. See also: N. SIMS-WILLIAMS, The Sogdian Ancient Letter II. in: *Philologica et Linguistica. Historia. Pluralitas. Universitas. Festschrift für H. Humbach zum 80 Geburtstag am 4 Dezember 2001* (Trier, 2001) 267–280; IDEM, Towards a new Edition of the Sogdian Ancient Letters: Ancient Letter I, in: É. DE LA VAISSIÈRE, E. TROMBET (éds.), *Les Sogdiens en Chine* (Paris, 2005) (*Études thématiques*, 17) 181–193; F. GRENET, N. SIMS-WILLIAMS, É. DE LA VAISSIÈRE, The Sogdian Ancient Letter V, *Bulletin of the Asia Institute. New Series* 12, 91–104; V. A. LIVŠIĆ, The Sogdian “Ancient Letters” (I, III), *Scr* 4 (2008) 306–310. Transliterations of the texts of “Ancient Letters,” made by Sims-Williams are available at the Internet site of the Titus Project [<http://titus.uni-frankfurt.de/texte/etcs/iran/miran/sogd/sogdswc/sogdn.htm>, pt. 377, downloaded on 03.10.09]. I am grateful to P. B. Lurje who sent me the offprints of these transliterations.

In the early fourth century, the Sogdian merchant settlements in the towns of China were quite sizable. The “Ancient Letters” mention “a hundred noble Samarkand men” in a town whose name was not preserved. There were “forty Sogdians” in Jiujuan (Early Middle Chinese *tsuw’* — *dzwian*, Sogd. *Δry’n*).

The second letter is addressed to Samarkand. The other four letters were sent, apparently, to Luoyang and other towns of Western China. Four letters tell us about the transactions made by the Sogdian merchants: the purchases of fabric made of linen and coarse wool, silk (Sogd. *pyrcyk* | *pīrčīk* |, lit. “related to silkworm”<sup>6</sup>), musk, pepper, camphor, wheat, lead, dishes, goldware. The prices of the goods are given in silver staters (their weight and value are the same as in Central Asia of the time) or according to the rate of bronze coins that were issued in China.<sup>7</sup>

### *Translation of the second letter.*

Address (on the covering, made of linen fabric).

*Recto*: (1) [This] letter (2–3) should be sent [and] brought to Samarkand. And (4) [noble Master Varzak ...] should receive (?) it in a complete [form]. (5) [ ] (6) [ ] [This letter] was sent by (7) [his] servant Nanaivandak.<sup>8</sup>

*Verso*: (1–5) To Master, Lord Varzak, [the son of] Nanaisvar,<sup>9</sup> [from the family of] Kanak. [This letter] was sent by his servant Nanaivandak.

(6) Cf. Hotan pira — “worm, silkworm, silkmoth,” see: P. O. SKÆRVØ, Sogdian Notes, *Acta Orientalia* 37 (1976) 113–114.

(7) On the contents of the first Letter and its connection to the third Letter, see: HENNIG, *The Date...*, 615. For the first edition of transliterated texts and Hermnan translation of the “Ancient Letters” see: H. REICHELT, *Die soghdischen Handschriftenreste des Britischen Museums, II. Die nichtbuddhistische Texte* (Heidelberg, 1931) 1–56; see also: F. ROSENBERG, *Zu Reichelt’s Ausgabe der soghdischen Handschriftenreste des Britischen Museums. II, Orientalistische Literaturzeitung* (1932) Nr. 12, 758–763; Ф. А. РОЗЕНБЕРГ, *Согдийские «Старые письма». К ранней истории согдийских колоний Центральной Азии, Известия АН СССР» VII сер. ООИ* No. 5 (1934) 445–469; H. H. SCHAEDEER, *Beiträge zur mitteliranischen Schrift- und Sprachgeschichte, ZDMG* 96 (1942) 1–22.

(8) Lit. “servant of (the goddess) Nanai.”

(9) Lit. “given (by the goddess) Nanai.”

*Text of the letter*

*Recto:* (1) To Master, Lord Varzak, [the son of] Nanaisvar [from the family of] Kanak, a thousand [and] ten thousand times blessing [and] (2) kneeling obeisance, the way the gods receive [it].<sup>10</sup> Sent by his servant (3) Nanaivandak. And, o Masters,<sup>11</sup> the day [would be] splendid for one who could see you happy, without illnesses. (4) And, o Masters, [if the news about] your [good] health were [heard by me], I would consider myself happy.<sup>12</sup> (5) And, o Masters, Armatsach in Jiujuan is without scathe [and] safe. And Arsach in (6) Guzang is without scathe [and] safe. And, o Masters, three years [have passed] since a Sogdian came from the “inside” (= from China) (7). And I sent Gbtasmach [there?], he is without scathe and safe. (8) He went to Kureng (?),<sup>13</sup> and no one has come from there yet, so (9) I could write you about [those] Sogdians that went “inside” (= to China), what (10) happened to them [and] what lands they reached. And, o Masters, (11) the last<sup>14</sup> Emperor — as [people] say — fled Luoyang because of famine, and (12) the fire ran through his whole palace and city, and the palace was burnt (13), and the city [was destroyed?]. There is no more Luoyang, no more Ye! (14) And also [ ] the Xiongnu (?), and they [captured?] Changnan<sup>15</sup> [ ], they captured [this town (?) and lands] up to Nainai<sup>16</sup> (16) and Ye — the same Xiongnu, [who only] yesterday were the subjects of the Chinese Emperor. (17–18) And, o Masters, we do not know whether the Chinese who remained [alive?] will be able to drive the Xiongnu from Changnan, from China, or the [Xiongnu] (19) will capture other (?) lands. And [in ... there are] a hundred noble men (20) from Samarkand... [and] in Drijan there are forty men. (21) And, o Masters, [...] three years have passed (22) since [...] came from] “inside” (= from China) [...], unmanufactured [fabric?]. And from (23) Dunxuang up to Jincheng<sup>17</sup> [it is possible?] to sell, linen fabric (24) is

(10) On the combination 'YKZY XKyHMw βγ'nw βyrt, see: W. B. HENNING, Soghdisch βγ'n, ZDMG 90 (1936) 197–199.

(11) On the Sogd. *xwt'ynβ*, “masters, lords,” see: SIMS-WILLIAM, The Sogdian Ancient Letter II..., 273.

(12) Lit. “immortal.”

(13) *Kwr'ynk*.

(14) That is, “the current.”

(15) Early Middle Chinese *driaj-ʔan*, Sogd. 'xwmδ'n |θxyṃdān|.

(16) *N'yn'yčh*.

(17) Early Middle Chinese *kim-dziain*.

sold well.<sup>18</sup> And if somebody has unmanufactured [linen fabric?] or coarse woolen<sup>19</sup> [fabric, which] is not yet brought [to market (?), are yet] not taken,<sup>20</sup> (25) [he can (?)] sell [them] all... And, o Masters, as for us, those, who are [in the land] from Jincheng to Dunxuang, (26) we are [barely] alive,<sup>21</sup> (27) and while [...] is alive. We [both] are without families, [we] are both old (28) and are on the fringe of death. If it were not [like this], I would not have been ready (29) to write you [about] how we are doing. And, o Masters, if (30) I were to write you about everything that has happened [now] with China, [it would have been] beyond [all] grief. (31–32) There is no use for you [to know about that?]. And, o Masters, [it has been already] eight years since I sent Sagrak and Farnagat “inside” (= to China) and three years since (33) I received an answer from there. They were safe ..., [but] now, when the last (34) disaster happened, I [did not] receive an answer from there about what happened to them. (35) And it has been also already four years since I sent another man named Artikhuvandak.<sup>22</sup> When (36) a coffle left Guzang, [a Sogdian named] Vakhush[ak] ... was there, and when (37) they reached Luoyang, b[oth they], the Indians and the Sogdians there (38), all died of famine. [And I] sent Nasjan to Dunxuang, (39) and he came “outside” (= out of China) and entered [Dunxuang, but] now he left without my permission (40), and great punishment [afflicted] him — he was beaten [and] killed in Krach (?).<sup>23</sup> (41) O Master Varzak, my greatest hope is in your Greatness.<sup>24</sup> (42) Pesak, [the

(18) Lit. “sought after,” “in demand.”

(19) *ryzk*, cf. Sogdian Manichaean *ryzy* “wool, woolen,” in the documents from the castle on Mount Mug *ryzcyk* |*rayzčik*| “woolen,” *ryzyn’k* |*rayzīnē*| “from coarse wool,” Yaghnobi *rayzá* “woolen pants.” *ráyzañka* “belt for the pants,” Tadjik (from the Sogdian?) *rayzá* “woolen fabric; woolen cloth of lowest quality,” Shungan *rayzá* “woolen fabric.” Cf. N. SIMS-WILLIAMS, J. HAMILTON, *Documents turco-sogdiens du IX<sup>e</sup>–X<sup>e</sup> siècle de Touen-houang* (London, 1990) (Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum. Pt. 11: Inscriptions of the Seleucid and Parthian Periods and of Eastern Iran and Central Asia. Vol. III: Sogdian) 85 — Sogd. *ryzy* “linen and woolen fabric,” *ryzcykw* “linen and woolen.”

(20) That is, “not bought.”

(21) Lit. “we only breathe.”

(22) Lit. “the servant of the deity of righteousness,” Avest. *Ašiš-vañuhi-* (AWb. 241–244).

(23) *Kr”cyh*.

(24) Or “in your Highness,” “in your Majesty.”

son of] Druvaspavandak,<sup>25</sup> has 5[.]4 staters [of silver] from me, and (43) he deposited them in safe custody (?), it is not allowed to hand them over, and you should keep [them] sealed from this moment on, (44) so without [my] permission... Druvaspavan[dak] ... [o Maaster] Nanaisvar, you should remind Varzak, (45) that he should take this [deposited] sum, and you [both] should count [it], and if (46) in the future one [of you?] will keep it, you should add (?) percent<sup>26</sup> to [this] sum and (47) write [it] down in the handover document. And you, [Nanaisvar], should give [this document] to Varzak. And (48) if you [both] decide that one [of you?]<sup>27</sup> will [no longer] keep [this sum?], you should take it (49) and give it to [the person], whom you think fit, so that this [sum] of silver (50) could grow. And, you should know, [that there] is an orphan..., [whose life] depends on the income [on this sum?]. And if (51) he lives and reaches full age,<sup>28</sup> and he has no other support except this (52) money, then, Nanaisvar, [if] it becomes known that Takut departed (?) to the gods,<sup>29</sup> (53) [let] the gods and the soul of my father [become] a support (?) for you. And when (the orphan) Takhsichvandak<sup>30</sup> grows up, (54) marry him, and don't send [him] away from you. (55) A posthumous reward (?) has left us (?), ..., for day after day (56) we expect murder (?) and robbery. And if you need (ready) money, (57) you, [Nanaisvar], take a thousand staters [of silver] from [this] money or two thousand. And Vanrazmak sent for me to Dunxuang (58) 32 [packs?] of musk that belong to Takut, so he can send it to you. When they will be handed (59) to you, divide them into five parts, and Takhsichvandak should take three parts out of them, and Pesak should take one part, and you should take one part.

*Verso:* (61) This letter was written,<sup>31</sup> in the thirteenth year [of the reign] of Lord Chirdsvan, in the month of Tokhmich.<sup>32</sup>

(25) Lit. "the servant of the deity Druuāspā."

(26) Sogd. *wrt* in the document from the Mug Mountain, Nov. 4, this word has a meaning "fine," "penalty," "percent on a debt."

(27) Apparently, "this one of you, who survives."

(28) Lit. "years."

(29) That is, "died."

(30) Lit. "the servant of the deity *Taxsič*."

(31) Lit. "made."

(32) Tenth month of the Sogdian calendar.

### *Translation of the fourth letter.*

Address on *Verso*: To Master, Lord Neveyart,<sup>33</sup> [the son of] Yodrazmak,<sup>34</sup> sent by his poor servant.

#### *Text of the Letter.*

*Recto*: (1) To Master, Lord Neveyart, [the son of] Yodrazmak, a thousand greetings, kneeling obeisance (2), the way the gods receive it. And, o Master, the g[old], that was delivered from you and from (3) Nanak,<sup>35</sup> [this] gold was sold for 800 [stators of silver]. And I, Vagichan, handed (?)<sup>36</sup> 323[ ] bronze [Chinese coins]. And I received a letter from you (4): “Buy vegetables for me.”<sup>37</sup> And I saw this letter. Write me, which (5) vegetables you ordered me to buy, and I will deliver [them] all, wherever you want me to.<sup>38</sup> And so far (?) it is not possible to get the wine [here], (6) for you to sell [it]. But I will probably be able to send the wine [to you]. It is not possible to get cups<sup>39</sup> here. (7) In Drutan [I] did not die. And, o Master, may you have no hardships. And this scoundrel<sup>40</sup> Evyamanvandak<sup>41</sup> (8), let him remember the copper,<sup>42</sup> (he) needs to be told about it. (On the right margin of the page:) (9) This letter was written on the 15th day of the tenth month.

### *Translation of the fifth letter.*

Address on *Verso*: (1) To Master, Lord and the Head of merchants Aspandat<sup>43</sup> [sent by] his servant Frikhutav.

(33) Lit. “the one who received a glorious path.”

(34) Lit. “fighting in a battle.”

(35) Hypocoristic, made from a two-stem name with the goddess Nanai in the first component.

(36) *ptkwntw* The meaning of this word remains unclear to me (I doubt that it is related to *ptkwn* |*patkōn*| “overturned,” “tipped over”).

(37) Or “greens.”

(38) Lit. “everywhere.”

(39) Or “blocks,” Sogd. *pty’δ* |*patyād*|, Middle Persian. *paygāl*, Modern Persian *piyāle*.

(40) Lit. “murderer,” “butcher,” Sogd. *pyš* |*paxš?*|.

(41) “The servant (of the deity) of benefactor spirit,” Old Iranian \**wahya-manyu-*.

(42) Or “the copper / bronze coins,” Sogd. *rwδk* |*rōde*|, Middle Persian. *rōy*, Parthian-Man. *rōδ*.

(43) “Created by the benefactor spirit,” Avest. *Spəntōdāta*. “The Head of merchants” — Sogd. *srtp’w*, *s’rtp’w* |*sartpāw*|, Chinese. *sabao* (adaption of Old

*Text of the letter.*

*Recto:* To Master, Lord Aspandat, blessing [and] obeisance. And the day [would be good] [for Frikhutav], (2) when he could see you healthy [and] well, happy, without diseases, [and] joyful. F[rom Frikhutav], your (3) servant. And [for me such a] day would be the best, if [I could] [see] you myself [and] (4) could pay you homage [being] near you, the way the gods [are] honored. And from “inside” (= from China) day after day (5) I hear worse [and worse] news, not better [news]. And what I could write about A[huromazdak], (6) how he went [to China] and what happened to him [ ]. (7) I turned out to be alone, and here I am in Guzang, and I cannot go anywhere,<sup>44</sup> (8) and there is no coffle here, which would [go] out of here. In Guzang there are four bunches of the “white,”<sup>45</sup> [ready] for shipping, (9) and 2500 [taels?] of pepper, [ready] for shipping, and a double bunch of (*n...y*)<sup>t</sup>, (10) 5 bunches of *rysk*<sup>46</sup> and half a stater of silver. When Gavgus<sup>47</sup> (11) left Guzang, I followed him and arrived (12) in Dunxuang. I was warned (?) that [it is dangerous] to wander in [China. If] ... Gavgus (13) found<sup>48</sup> a smooth road, I can carry the “black (?)”.<sup>49</sup> Many Sogdians are ready to leave [Dunxuang], but they cannot leave, (15) after all, Gavgus went [over?] the mountains. I stayed in Dunxuang, but (16) they (= the Sogdians who are in Dunxuang) are in great need. I [myself] depend on the mercy (?) of your Aprak, (17), since I serve ... in Guzang and [they ...] me, (18) and they made me [ ], (19) and they took my [ ] and increased [it] with our [ ]. And [ ] I am very unhappy. (20) [ ] I (21) heard that Kharstrang<sup>50</sup> [owes?] you

Indian *sārtha-vāha* — “caravan leader, merchant,” in the Chinese administration of the fifth–ninth centuries, also a rank of a functionary who supervised the representatives of foreign religions. See: É DE LA VAISSIÈRE, *Histoire des marchands sogdiens* (Paris, 2002) 141–143, 173, 208–210; X. RONG, *Sabao or Sabo Sogdian caravan leaders in the wall-paintings in Buddhist caves*, in: DE LA VAISSIÈRE, TROMBERT, *Les Sogdiens en Chine...*, 207–230.

(44) Lit. “go here and there.”

(45) It is not clear what merchandise is referred to in the letter.

(46) Unlikely “rice,” Sogd. *ryz'kh* | *rēzāk*, *rēzē*? |.

(47) Lit. “Goading bulls”?

(48) Lit. “saw.”

(49) *š'wt*, the meaning of the word is unclear. Cf. the names of the villages *Шāвкат-и боло* and *Шāвкат-и ноён* in the valley of the Lower Zeravshan (*šāwkat* “Black house” or “Black settlement”).

(50) Lit. “(having) the color of a wild donkey”? Sogd. *rnk-* — “color” or Modern Persian. *rang*, Old Indian. *rañku-* — “deer.”



20 staters of silver, and he (22) said the following: "I will bring them." He gave me the silver, I weighed it (23) and [there was only] 4 and a half staters. I asked [him]: "If he [sent] 20 staters, (24) why did you give me [only] 4 and a half?" He answered thus: (25) «Aspandat met me on the road and (26) he [gave] [them?] to me." [Kharstrang] also said the following: "[There were only] 7 and a half staters of silver. For 4 staters I (27) purchased 4 loads of *stk*.<sup>51</sup> And the "black" took away the silver, (28) moreover, they told me the following: "We do not have money." (29) They decided that it is better to make me unhappy, not them! [If] you (30) hear how Ahuromazdak caused damage to me, (31) also pay attention<sup>52</sup> to [this]. Sent by your servant Frikhutav. (32) This letter was written in Guzang on the 30th day of the third month.

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(51) The meaning of the word is unclear.

(52) Sogd. *ptywš* | *patyōš* |, "listen up."